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**A Study of the Consultant-Client Relationship: Examining Aspects of  
Legitimation**

**By**

**Stephanos Avakian**

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**Abstract**

This thesis provides an in-depth study of the consultant client relationship. It focuses on the phenomenon of legitimation which has been neglected in the prior literature. Legitimation is critical because it is responsible for signifying how and why knowledge claims come to be accepted or rejected between the client-consultant parties. The consultants' perceived value by the client is an outcome that is dependent on the economic and socio-political processes by which judgements are made. How legitimation takes place helps provides a new locus of understanding about the communication of business advice between consultants and clients. Such exploration helps generate novel insights for how value is created. Through the conduct of in-depth interviews with both consultants and clients, we managed to obtain comprehensive empirical data that helps challenge already held assumptions. Drawing on 64 interviews, with clients and consultants, and through the use of prior theoretical frameworks that are mainly drawn from the work by Suchman (1995) and Habermas (1984a, 1984b), we identify four modes of legitimation. Such modes are characterised in terms of their cognitive, pragmatic, moral and discursive nuances. We argue that each of the legitimacy categories indicate a separate set of conditions that need to be justified and which are driven by a distinct ideological character. Legitimation becomes a process in which implicit and explicit ideological values are mutually managed between the involved organisational actors. Our discussion helps open up a new field of understanding for the consultant client relationship that is relevant for both academics and practitioners.

## **Dedication**

To my parents Daniel and Maria that I much hassled during my schools years in Greece

Για του γονείς μου Δανιήλ και Μαρία που πολύ παίδεψα στα σχολικά μου χρόνια στην  
Ελλάδα

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Research Context

The study of the management consulting industry has witnessed increased attention over the last two decades (Ernst and Kieser, 2002b). This is not only because it has become one of the most rapidly growing industries in the world but also because of the complex economic, social and political inter-organisational and interpersonal dynamics characterising its practices (Alvesson, 1993; Schein, 1988). How consultants construct and deliver their services has been discussed in different contexts that often vary between academics and practitioners (Fincham and Clark, 2002). Practitioners tend to argue how the communication of information and knowledge is a transferable resource that can generate specific organisational changes (Maister, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2001; Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005). Such changes can result in the client organisation's maximisation of profit or improvement in performance. At the same, academics tend to question the knowledge-transfer process or whether the information and advice consultants provide is able to respond to the client's experienced needs (Alvesson, 1993, 1995a; Kieser, 1997, 2002a, 2002b) Authors are often divided in their views in trying to reconcile the positive qualities of the consultants' work with the broader interests of power and competition, where the maximisation of profits become the driving force (Salaman, 2002).

At one level, studies on the management consultancy industry are characterised for their macro-perspective. Authors examine the industry's rate of growth, and the key socioeconomic, political and technological stages that have managed to ensure its popularity over the years (Armbrüster, 2006; McKenna, 2006). Kipping (2002) argues for the evolution of management consulting practices and the institutional forces that often determine which firms will be able to survive in the industry. Also, that consulting firms are often bounded by their own systems of practice whose survival is often determined by the wider evolutionary and macro-institutional trends. For example, consulting firms that specialise in offering advice in the areas of strategy or Information Technology are confined to the specific developing trends in that sector. Their survival is partly dependent on adapting to changes in the industry and which can also determine the type of consulting services offered to clients (Kipping, 2002).



Authors also argue about the impact of growing popularity of demand for consulting-related services to be viewed differently from the management consulting profession only (McKenna, 2006). The rapid rise of professional knowledge-intensive firms concerns a wide array of services which move between the professions of engineering, accounting, and law. In this sense, McKenna (2006) argues how the rise of management consultancy needs to be seen as complementary to the rise of the advisory services where management is only a part. McKenna (2006) argues that we need to understand the broader influence between the macroeconomic and political factors in order to appreciate the rise of this new profession. The popularity behind the consultants' activities cannot be explained in the context of the advice generation and distribution mechanisms. Instead, they have to be seen within a wider socio-political trend, where, changes in the environment have given rise to the increasing need of advice. The increasing specialisation between products and services has augmented advice seeking as firms cannot just rely on their current set of resources or/and knowledge structures. Instead, they have to obtain specialised information, so that, their production of service manages to meet the changing trend of consumers' needs.

A complementary feature, to studies of management consulting practices, has to do with the popularity of particular management fads that have come to occupy the way practitioners think about their role in the industry (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). The literature on management fashion provides an extensive and important exploration for how consultants have become vehicle of distribution of popular ideas. The clients' seeking of advice is based on the belief that the purchase and adoption of management methods and techniques can help them deal with organisational difficulties. The rise of popular management fads is subject to a discourse of management concepts that derive from renowned academics and practitioners like management gurus (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Also, from other sources of publication that help reinforce and sustain the perceived popularity/value of what such ideas represent (Benders and van Ven 2001; Bender and van Bijsterveld, 2000; Heusinkveld, 2004). How popular concepts manage to attain increased attention has become subject to discussion in the literature (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Sturdy, 1997b; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001). The main arguments concentrate on the attractiveness of the cognitive

representative paradigm and which is well shaped within rhetoric and argumentation (Clark, 1995).

Studies of the presentation of management gurus' uses of speech narrative techniques are important instruments for helping us understand how specific ideas gain their popularity over time (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). The increased attractiveness of what such popular management ideas represent or promise to accomplish once they are exercised by the organisations has been associated with the increased popularity of management consulting firms. This is because firms integrate such ideas within products of services and adopt various features to creating specific business packages (Legge 2002). It is argued that the waves behind the popularity of such management ideas help maintain the clients' interest in the consultants. As long as consultants can justify their association with the exercise of popular ideas it is believed that they will maintain their attractiveness to future clients (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). This helps sustain their popularity and presence in the market and explain the grounds on which consultants come to often charge unprecedented high fees (*Economist*, 1997). Authors underline the ambiguity that governs the popularity of such management ideas (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). In the process of selling their service consultants are governed by strong elements of uncertainty for how the application of their ideas will generate the desired results. The often assumed match between the content of these ideas with the clients' needs is often superficially made in order to sustain the consultants' popularity in the market (Alvesson, 1995a). As a result, consultants argue for knowledge-expertise they do not really have.

Despite the above discussion little is still known about the consultant-client relationship (Salaman, 2002). Fincham and Clark (2002) argue how: "To date, detailed conceptual and empirical research into the work of consultants has been slight...Much, therefore, remains to be done if we to develop a more penetrating and nuanced understanding of this activity" (p.3). How consultants generate and distribute their advice to clients require further examination to address this research gap. The aim of this thesis is to address the above research arena by questioning the processes by which the legitimization of knowledge service occurs in the consultant-client relationship. Our specific research questions are:



- How does the legitimization of knowledge service occur during the consultant-client interaction?
- What are the principal arenas of social interaction that can accommodate the study of legitimization at a conceptual and empirical level?
- How does legitimization influence the receptivity or rejection of the knowledge service process produced between consultants and clients?

Studies about the consultant-client relationship are often consultant-oriented. How clients may feel about the consultants' activities is often explained from the consultants' *perspective*. This is partly because of the lack of gaining access to the client firm from which the experience of the individuals could be studied (Kipping and Engwall, 2002). Our study of legitimization is designed by incorporating the client side into the discussion and with trying to produce a balanced critique for how the client and consultant parties perceive each other's role. We believe that by incorporating the client into the discussion we can enrich and advance the current debate.

## **1.2 Chapters & Thematic Structure**

The development of the thesis is divided into three main sections which are compromised by more specific thematic units. The first part is dealing with the history, origins and current practices of management consultancy at an industry level. We provide a broad overview of the theoretical streams that have shaped the discussion on the topic. In this part we concentrate on the functional and critical perspectives that have partly shaped the discussion on legitimization. Our objective is to make explicit the nature of assumptions for how consultants produce their service and value to clients. The second part addresses the study of legitimization and provides a theoretical framework which can be operationalised. By drawing from the works of Suchman (1995) and Habermas (1984a, 1984b) we move to explore the following categories, (a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, c) moral and d) discursive, that help provide the thesis' empirical setting. The third part of the thesis discusses the analysis of our findings and how they correspond to the designated legitimacy categories. Our findings indicate how legitimization occurs at different social forms of interaction underpinned by different social and ideological constraints. For

example, the reconceptualisation of the clients' needs at a cognitive level possess very different constraints from moral legitimisation. This is because the consultants' service is highly dependent on the cognitive schemata from which competing claims of knowledge representation emerge. Forms of argumentation are contested on grounds of knowledge and interpretation. Clients might not be able to detect the actual empirical outcomes of the consultants' suggestions and yet may decide to accept their propositions. Examples of moral legitimisation are contingent on underpinning ideological beliefs and values for what is the right or wrong thing to do.

### *1.2.1 Chapter 2 - Origins and growth of management consultancy*

The second chapter provides an overview of the theoretical approaches that have shaped the discussion on the management consulting literature. Our discussion is divided into three thematic areas. In the first area we find that the emergence of management consulting practices grew out of the greater importance of management within a growing industrial world. The increasing pace of change and the making of technological advancements created a market for advice and specialisation (Child, 1969; Urwick and Brech, 1983). Management emerged from the deeper ideological belief of how corporations obtained a greater degree of control over their environment (Tisdall, 1982). Management sprung out of the assumption for how the use of control could help enhance the degree of efficiency and profitability in the business. In this context, the practice of consultancy has been seen as a complementary role to management (Kipping, 2002). The gradual legitimacy of management as a profession took place through series of social discourses that the industrial changes had created. In one sense consultancy gained significance because of the increasing instrumental role that management was believed to play for the life of the organisation (see Urwick and Brech, 1983). In the second thematic area we find that the birth and growth of the industry is discussed in relation to the specific economic and political changes that enabled its institutionalisation into the business world. In this section we refer to the work by McKenna (2006) and Armbrüster (2006) who discuss the macro-environmental forces. By drawing from McKenna's (2006) work we discuss how the imposed institutional changes led towards the emergence of the professional nature of consulting. The jurisdictional effects created new

boundaries that the accounting and auditing professions could not fulfil. The new government imposed regulations allowing the creation of business opportunities that consulting itself could not have foreseen. However, we also argue that McKenna's (2006) contribution needs to be seen in the context of the US legislation and not as representative of all consulting practices in all the different countries. In addition to the above we draw reference from Armbrüster's (2006) work who argues for the economics of consulting and how the industry's growth can be explained from the transactional cost economic theory. Consultants fulfil a specific economic need by customising a business service which clients find cost-effective to buy than to produce. Armbruster's (2006) argument has been representative of the functional nature of the consultants' work in representing an auxiliary resource to clients (Czerniawska, 2002). The availability of resources and efficiency in processing information as well as mobilising people, has allowed consultants to become popular service providers.

The third thematic area examines the management fashion literature (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). This approach has dominated the way authors discuss the nature of management consulting practices. This is because it argues for the distinct popularity of management fads as representing a set of ideology and business models that shape the consultants' identity and working scope. The consultants' personification of management fads to their relationship with clients becomes the primary lacuna from which value is exemplified. The management fashion literature has been primarily used by the critical approach in order to underline the symbolic and persuasive consulting techniques (Abrahamson, 1996). The consultants' claims of expertise are confined within business models that are re-distributed between actors. Hence, the consultants' alleged entrepreneurial thinking and innovativeness is often disguised in the marketing power of the popular fads themselves.

### *1.2.3 Chapter 3 - Functional & Critical Perspectives*

This chapter focuses on the consultant-client relationship as discussed from the Organisational Development/Function and Critical perspectives. Our exploration of the functional perspective demonstrates how authors think about the value of consulting in a positivistic way. Advice is thought to be conveyed through specialised knowledge that

helps clients deal with their organisational needs. Consultants help clients create solutions that the clients might not have the resources to produce internally. The consultants' legitimation of advice takes place on the grounds of the quality of problem-solving and through creation of ideas that have a measurable and specific outcome. Authors that support the functional perspective see the role of consulting as playing an instrumental relationship to the challenges clients face (Maister, 1993; Czerniawska, 2002). The legitimation of the consultants' work is thought to be based on the enabling process of the consultants' advice that can make a positive difference in the client. Important assumptions that govern the above discussion also concentrate on the consultants' ability to recognise the nature of the clients' needs and have knowledge for how to respond. The functional perspective assumes that the consultant is acting in the interests of the client and that the distribution of advice will have a direct relationship with the organisational issues faced.

The critical perspective questions the knowledge transfer process as represented by the above perspectives. Authors support the view that the generation and distribution of advice is governed by elements of inherent uncertainty (Sturdy 1997a, 1997b). The fulfilment of the clients' need takes place by means of the adoption of popular business frameworks that have come to occupy how consultants think about their role and service to clients. The popularity of the consultants' work is not necessarily corresponding to objective and transparent advice that merely meet the clients' needs. It is rather the consultants' association with popular management ideas that are widespread. This is what helps legitimise their value. Here, authors are also keen to underline how the consultant-client relationship is subject to a power relationship where competitive interests are at play. Consultants are not simply keen on delivering a service that meets the clients' needs but also sustain their business and generation of revenues/profits.

Authors argue for how the drive to satisfy such business interests often becomes a driving force for how consultants aim to convince clients about the value of their service (Sturdy, 1997a, Fincham, 1999). As a result, the organisational tools consultants employ are often driven by rhetoric and argumentation that aim to generate impressions (Clark, 1995). It is not clear to what extent consultants know that their distribution of advice will have the desired effect in the client. The perceived added-value by the consultant is rather

subject to peoples' interests and power relations. The consultants' added-value cannot favour or represent the same meaning relations for the different parties of the organisation (e.g. managers, employees, stakeholders) as the functional perspective often seems to indicate.

Following the discussion on the two overarching theoretical perspectives, we identify how the interpretation between each of the frameworks contains assumptions that are not questioned. The above discussion leads us to identify a research gap where the nature of legitimation needs to be made more transparent. We argue how the functional perspective bases its position in the making of assumptions about the consultants' role and the context of knowledge and advice. However, it fails to acknowledge the more particular complexities that govern this process. As Study (1997) indicates, little is known for how consultants deal with their own uncertainty for perceiving the clients' needs and what their course of service delivers (Sturdy, 1997a). The emphasis on the positive contribution of the consultants' work is based on assuming its positive receptivity in the client. At the same time the critical perspective fails to explain the mere specifics by which consultants legitimise their service to clients. Explanations about the consultants' popularity is often grounded in the consultants' association with management fads they try to make relevant to the client (Sturdy, 1997a). The discussion about management fads is used as an interpretive prism through which authors justify and interpret the consultants' activities. There is a distinct lack of empirical evidence that demonstrates *how* consultants commodify their ideas to clients (Salaman, 2002). Secondly, we find a distinct absence for incorporating the client dimension into discussions and how clients come to perceive and interpret the consultants' role towards them (Sturdy, 1997a). The recognition of the above theoretical and empirical gap has led us to the need to make transparent the legitimation process.

#### *1.2.4 Chapter 4 - Legitimation Theories*

This chapter examines the notion of legitimation and tries to identify a theoretical framework which is relevant to our study. Legitimation is used to characterise the notion of conformity, acceptability and integration. Firms endeavour to achieve legitimation in relation to the environment and their stakeholders (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). By drawing from the works of Suchman (1995) and Habermas (1984a, 1984b) we come to

identify a broad set of categories that we discuss in relation to the consultant-client relationship. These dimensions are the a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, c) moral and d) discursive. The first three categories are drawn from Suchman's work who tried to provide a more systematic exploration on the subject but which is also shared by other authors like Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) and Rescher, (1993). The use of Habermas (1984a, 1984b) provides a different and important complementary angle to the study by drawing attention to his theory of communicative action and the dialectic character of legitimation. We make limited use of Habermas' work at this point but we find his contribution to the subject useful. The above theoretical trends come to provide the wider framework for the analysis of the empirical data that follows in the later chapters and which we come to briefly refer below.

#### *1.2.5 Chapter 5 - Methodology*

In this chapter we examine the broader methodological epistemological paradigm we have used in the study. This chapter provides an overall discussion of the assumptions that we made about the topic and the particular stages we undertook for the collection and analysis of the empirical data. We discuss the adoption of the interpretive paradigm that is part of the qualitative approach. The emphasis is placed on understanding how meaning is generated between organisational actors. By conducting interviews the effort has been made to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experience as it is lived within their working environment. Our study has endeavoured to incorporate the client dimension into this discussion and not just management consultants. This has significantly helped to produce a balanced critique on the subject which acknowledges how clients may perceive their experience of consultants. Our analysis of the data relies on the use of thematic analysis and which makes use of the inductive approach through the displays of information and the creation of codes (Boyatzis, 1998). Even though thematic analysis is closely related to grounded theory it also contains differences for its application, and in particular with the flexibility it is used. Our use of the inductive approach is complemented by drawing from already existing theoretical frameworks with which we try to make sense of the data. Our interpretation of the thematic codes takes place in a way that suits our theoretical paradigm which has already been laid out in the previous chapter.

### *1.2.6 Cognitive, Pragmatic & Moral Legitimation*

Our examination of the legitimation theories begin with the typology suggested by Suchman (1995) and also shared and supported by Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006), Rescher (1993). By concentrating on the above dimensions our aim has been to deconstruct the application of legitimation. Also, to identify the distinct factors that help generate conformity in the client-consultant relationship. An important contribution that the above distinction makes is firstly by pointing to the different spheres in which legitimation takes place as a social reality. Also how these spheres contain distinct differences and can be found as co-existing and overlapping. Secondly, the personification of the categories to the consultant-client relationship helps validate the more particular practices used which help to support how they are manifested at an operational level. Consultant-client practices indicate the exemplification of the legitimate categories in the a) cognitive b) pragmatic c) moral and d) discursive dimensions. The operationalisation of the legitimate categories allows us to understand how and why consultants justify their service to clients differently.

### *1.2.7 Chapter 6 - Cognitive legitimation*

Cognitive legitimation is concerned with how organizational actors endeavour to convince members by drawing reference to propositions that can be supported/tested/validated on basis of their sound reasoning. In this category the argumentation used to convey a set of views is justified against the understanding of the other party. By making reference to 'cognitive' dimension emphasis is placed on propositions that are not immediately testable but whose credibility is determined out of the premises that logically support it. For example, an organization may propose the restructuring of a part of its operations in order to increase efficiency or productivity. The announcement of such initiative needs to be accepted or rejected by its audience on the clarity and relevance of the claims it is making. We find that the processes in which this occurs takes place through: a) the consultants' manipulation of information and knowledge to creating feasible solutions in the client. b) Through the consultants' process of redefining the clients' needs, by becoming a new point of reference for how the business assignment should be conceptualized/performed. c) In creating arguments of persuasion, by drawing from how previous experience and success records that can be

considered as a reliable benchmark for the potential and plausible similar success in the client (Werr and Styhre, 2003; Heusinkveld, 2004). In the consultant-client practices cognitive legitimation underlines the role of mental schemata which are not immediately testable, but yet reside in the subjective reasoning of its members.

#### *1.2.8 Chapter 7 - Pragmatic legitimation*

By making reference to pragmatic legitimation the argument shifts to the immediate and obtainable results, members of an organization perceive to obtain by supporting a proposition or course of action. The emphasis is on outcomes that are in alignment with the interests of the members and not in the sounding credibility on which the knowledge-claims are supported. Members of an organization may seek to support the introduction of change initiatives because the financial outcomes that could be obtained can be translated into promotion rewards or extra bonus. Whereas cognitive legitimation is supported on the factual validity of the evidence where knowledge-claims reside, pragmatic legitimacy is rather interested on the feasible outcomes that people believe to gain. In the consultant-client relationship pragmatic legitimation is exemplified in the clients' perceived competence to be able to produce specific results/changes. Clients are not so much interested in the reliability of the knowledgebase from which such managerial initiatives are produced. Clients are interested in the testability of outcomes consultants can produce and often work in close collaboration with the consultants in order to achieve it. We find that pragmatic legitimation takes place through the consultants' instrumental practices to manipulate new or existing information in order to produce perceived feasible solutions. Consultants are able to legitimize their service on basis of the efficiency by which they are able to mobilize resources and people. Clients often face issues of managerial stagnation because of the internal and interpersonal differences or competitive interests that often become an obstacle to decision making. Detached from the clients' history and culture consultants are able to undertake activities that produce specifically desired outcomes.

#### *1.2.9 Chapter 8 - Moral legitimation*

As an antithesis to pragmatic legitimation, moral legitimation concentrates on the exercise of ideological beliefs/principles, where the nature of values comes to determine



the possible level of conformity between members. This type of legitimation is not dependent on the fulfilment of personal interests by the individuals but on the pursuit to accomplish the wider social good (Suchman, 1995). For example, an organisation may seek to legitimize its practices towards the environment by complying with the laws, regulations and codes of business ethics. Such ethical values compromise practices of fairness, justice and equal treatment that do not have financial outputs but conform to individuals' moral belief-system. Corporations often find themselves in jeopardising their reputation and consumers' trust by displaying anti-competitive or fraud-related practices. As a result, a firm's congruence to the environment's ethical demands is regulated by adjusting its policies to ensuring that misrepresentation or manipulation is avoided.

In the client-consultant relationship moral legitimation has been discussed in the context of business conduct or code of ethics that both parties have to comply with. Authors argue for the importance of the ethical dimensions as consultants can often become vulnerable to clients by promoting aggressive marketing strategies or misinformation (Curnow and Reuvid, 2003). In large, moral legitimation has been discussed in the course of professionalism by which consultants show integrity and transparency. Our study indicates that moral legitimation is heavily integrated in the clients' domestic political or interpersonal differences where aggressive power relations lie. The consultants' externality and independence gain a moral sense of validity because of the clients' organisational state of affairs. Even though at first, the client members' interpersonal differences seem to be irrelevant to issues of moral legitimation the consultants' external credibility is often constructed because of what the clients want to achieve. In this sense, moral legitimation occurs because of what the consultants' assumed objectivity *means* against the clients' internal critical power relationships.

We find that moral legitimation is exemplified in two different levels. The first one has to do with specific outcomes that members want to accomplish in the firm. Here, lines of authority, differences of interests and power relationships are already made explicit. Consultants are used in a way of creating moral support for the decision making agenda promoted. The second level has to do with processes of decision making where issues of personal differences can make a difference to the life of organisational outcomes. Here, organisational actors make use of the consultants' externality and

independence in order to create impressions about their own credibility for not promoting an agenda that only favours their interests. The creation of impression remains critical and clients are keen on maintaining good interpersonal relationships as these can affect their own performance, or career progression in the firm. In general terms, we discuss the application of moral legitimacy in the context of what the consultants' externality means for the client, rather than from being dependent on the actual course of interaction with the client.

#### *1.2.10 Chapters 9 & 10 - Discursive legitimation*

By drawing from the work of Habermas (1984a, 1984b) our use of discursive legitimation concentrates on the dialectic side of the consultant - client relationship and the area of communicative interaction that helps sustain accounts of intersubjectivity. Legitimation is argued to occur because of the way the two parties mutually manage the understanding and relationship of the other party.

The need to appreciate the dialectic arena of interaction has in part been proposed by Sturdy (1997a). Sturdy argues that modes of interpretation are highly driven by what consultants can accomplish in the client without often appreciating how clients exercise an equally strong influence on consultants. Sturdy (1997a) argues that: "In locating the actions of managers, consultants and principals within organisational structures and capitalist economic and social relations, there is a danger of reducing them to pre-given systems requirements and of marginalising or neglecting the subjective and interpretive processes" (p.517). Sturdy (1997a) proposes that, consultants are as much in need of clients as clients are in need of consultants. Both parties have to find a degree of equilibrium of co-existence where clients are not the vulnerable party as often portrayed.

By drawing reference to language, preunderstanding, and how power and decision making are expressed in the relationship we find evidence of how conformity can be seen as an outcome of consensus. Our treatment of discursive legitimation is divided between the dimensions of language and pre-understanding in order to examine how meaning-making relations are managed between the two parties. Furthermore, we look into the relationship aspect and the use of power and decision making as encompassing the broader social arena of interaction. These are not limited to communicative issues of

collaboration, trust, and support. By treating language as a system of meaning-making relations, and not just a vehicle of vocal expressions our aim is to demonstrate how consultants and clients find themselves in dialogue where initially expressed beliefs/ideas are challenged/rejected/modified. Consultants are often asked to change the language used to communicate their advice to clients. Such linguistic turn does not connote a change of vocal utterances only but has broader social implications in terms of the consultants' attitude, approach and perceptions. By referring to the dimension of pre-understanding, our emphasis shifts to the presuppositions and assumptions that already exist within each party and are often made explicit at the time of the interaction. By looking at the transfer of power and the clients' distinct involvement in the decision making process of the consultant, we find that legitimation is achieved when consultants are not seen as the predominant party in the relationship. We see that the clients' expressed challenge and criticism towards the consultants, allows the consultants to reconsider and often change their approach to clients. This mutual alignment or misalignment is argued to be responsible for how legitimation occurs. We argue how our findings confirm some of the premises of the approach as routed in the theoretical system of Habermas (1984a, 1984b).

### **1.3 Research Relevance & Contribution**

Having provided an overview of the structure of the thesis and the order of its thematic chapters we move to discuss the broader relevance and contribution of this project to the wider literature. We identify that there are three particular areas our study makes a distinct contribution and we discuss each of these dimensions below.

#### *1.3.1 Breaking away from the homogenous treatment of legitimation*

Even though studies of the consultant-client relationship have concentrated on a diverse array of aspects that vary from organisational structure (Powell, 1995), the internal management of the consultancy firms (Brock et. al., 1999; Maister, 1993), to dynamics and uncertainty that characterises the relationship (Sturdy, 1997b) it is still evident how the treatment of the topic is treated in a homogenous way. Authors treat management consultancy practices as if they are encompassing similar types of features and tendencies (Salaman, 2002). Also, the generation and distribution of advice is argued to take a

similar way of distribution that can be commonly traced between firms. Fincham and Clark (2002) argue how: “While the industry is composed of many thousands of firms, it is primarily the giant international firms, and the major strategy and systems firms, that have been the focus of commentaries and research. While the ideas and concepts they develop are sometimes adopted from external sources, and reflect famous and familiar fashionable acronyms such as BPR, TQM, and KM, these are mixed with specialized and proprietary ideas” (p.4). Such arguments are produced partly because the research interest is placed on examining changes of the industry from a ‘macro-economic’ perspective. Even though our understanding of the evolutionary direction of the industry is useful, it often hinders our appreciation of the more distinct differences between organisational actors and the consulting practices themselves. For example, the rapid increase of smaller and different size of consultancy firms is argued to have helped sustain the continuing popularity of the consulting industry. Our understanding of such popularity however often takes particular patterns of interpretation and mainly focuses on the influential role of management fashion. Fincham and Evans (1999) have argued how little is known about its *consumption* by management practitioners. Also, how the conversion of popular management models is made in a way that is difficult to judge as to what extent they continue to be a representation of what a management fad indicates. As a result, assumptions about the sustenance of popular consulting practices assume an inherent association. However, little is still known for the way management fads are translated into praxis (Fincham and Evans, 1999). A key contribution by the thesis is breaking away from the homogeneity from which the consultant-client relationship has been discussed in the literature. Authors argue about the clients’ reasons for purchasing a consulting service interpreted from the consultants’ motives, goals, objectives (Salaman, 2002). However, the clients’ understanding of the consultants’ role and practices need to be examined against the experiences of the participants and not in relation to an already formulated set of interpretations. As Salaman (2002) argues, explanations about the clients’ receptivity of consulting fads need to be seen in relation to the pragmatic purpose that they serve in the client.

### *1.3.2 Enhancing the notion of legitimation*

A second contribution by the thesis is making transparent the context in which legitimation is discussed in itself and whose dimensions are rarely questioned in the literature. Engwall and Kipping (2002) argue that "...the process leading to the recognition of the consulting industry as a whole (and individual consulting firms) as 'legitimate' knowledge providers or carriers needs further clarification." (p.5). By concentrating on the study of legitimation we seek to provide a more systematic exploration on the subject than is currently used in the management consulting literature. The notion of legitimation plays particular significance in the consultant-client relationship because it is concerned with how and why specific knowledge claims are justified. Since knowledge is such an integral part of the consulting profession understanding the mechanisms in which it is conditioned becomes a paramount component of the nature of their service.

At present, discussions about legitimation differ by authors in support of the Organisational Development (OD)/functional and critical perspectives. Authors are often divided according to the assumptions that they make and which take a positivistic or critical spin of argumentation (Fincham and Clark, 2002). Such division is grounded in the belief that the consultants' information/advice/techniques have a corresponding affect with the situation/needs of the client. As a result according to the OD approach the basis of legitimacy is grounded on the quality of the content of the service (Fincham and Clark, 2002). On the other hand, authors that take a more critical view to legitimacy emphasise how perceptions of value are created at the time of the interaction (Kieser, 1997). The testability of the consultants' claims is not necessarily reflecting the attributes with which it is made convincing. In the thesis, we endeavour to discuss the notion of legitimation in way that is not simply serving the assumptions of the functional and critical perspectives. Our aim is to identify a more reliable account of legitimation that can be made relevant in the consultant-client relationship. Recognising the multiple character of legitimacy dimensions helps create a new context of discourse where the emphasis is placed on the theoretical premise of legitimation rather than the authors' interpretation of it. Drawing to the areas of: a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, c) moral and d) discursive legitimation, our interest is in discovering how conformity occurs at different and overlapping levels. We

find that a more in-depth analysis of legitimation can lead to insights of relationships that had not been realised before.

### *1.3.3 The co-existence between the functional and critical perspectives*

A third area of contribution is made by making transparent the discussion of the OD/functional and critical perspectives. Even though such perspectives are discussed as taking place within different camps the thesis demonstrates how the consultant-client relationship shares traits that are equally representable in *both* of them. We argue how the discussed approaches can coexist during the course of an assignment. As a result, consultants may be able to satisfy the clients' immediate needs through the instrumentality of information gathering and distribution, hence exercising a functional role to the consultants' needs. At the same time, we find how the use of ritual, rhetoric and persuasion are also present, and often, regulated by criticism clients exercise against the consultants. By allowing the incorporation of the two perspectives and without presenting them as alternative camps we endeavour to examine their complementary presence.

Furthermore, we argue how the functional and critical traits of interaction are subject to the decision making of organisational actors. It is possible that consultants help fulfil a particular organisational need while at the same time use rhetoric and persuasion tactics. The presence of the one dimension does not substitute the presence of another dimension. As a result, in contrast to discussing them as differing camps the thesis argues how we need to understand the above practices as co-existing. From this premise we also argue how the performance character of consulting practices co-exists in a kind of *tension* that is interwoven with political and personal interests. The choice that consultants make in order to defend the clients' interests or their own business interests, at the disadvantage of the client, comes to define the presence of the dynamics behind the critical and functional perspective. However, the use of rhetoric and persuasion are not inherent traits of the consulting practices. They are rather defined, shaped and emergent in the course of the interaction with the client. This course of behaviour is dependent on the decision making of the specific organisational actors as well as the challenge and criticism that they receive from the other party.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Approaches to Studying Consulting

### 2.1 Introduction

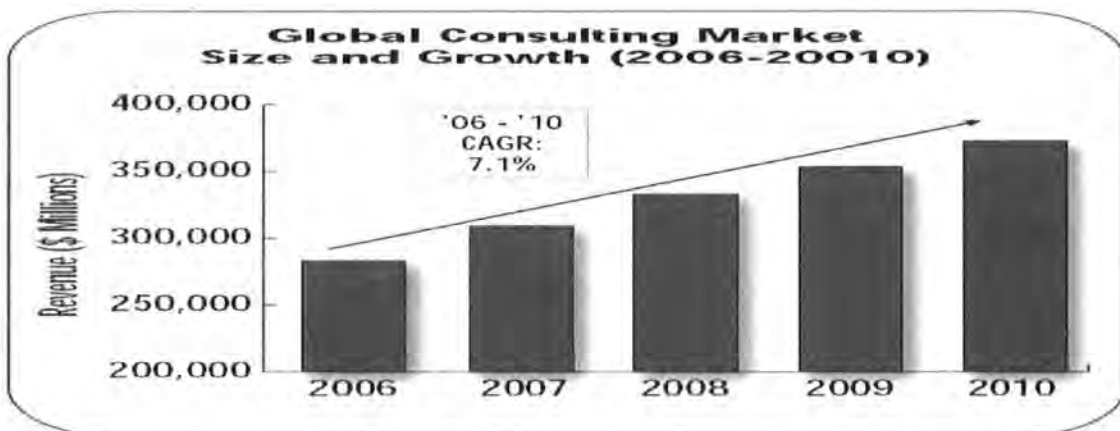
The study of the management consulting industry has advanced our understanding of the factors that led to its rapid growth. Authors have made insightful contributions about the nature of economic, political, technological and social factors that have led to the clients' increased demand for such services (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Kipping,, 2002; Kieser, 1997; McKenna, 2006; Werr, 1999). The industry enjoys a prominent position in the service sector and argued to be worth over \$300 billion (Kennedy Information, 2007). Despite the increased attention to the consulting phenomenon little is still known about the dynamics of the consultant-client relationship and how a knowledge service is disseminated and consumed (Clark and Fincham, 2002). The aim of this chapter is to examine those theoretical perspectives that have shaped the discussion in the literature. By understanding the principle prism from which consulting is discussed between authors our objective is to set out the context for the subsequent discussion on legitimation.

The first part of the chapter explores the relationship between management and consulting. It traces the early historical development of the industry's practices. It provides an overview of the definitions used to describe the terms and examines how the broader macro environmental and sociological trends shaped the future of the industry. The second part of the chapter examines the macroeconomic forces that are argued to have shaped the growth of the industry. In particular, the economic and political regulatory changes in United States that separated the territorial rights between consulting firms. By using the work by McKenna (2006) we look at political change as represented in the Glass-Steagall Banking Act of 1933 and the Sarbanese-Oxley Act in 2002. The third theoretical approach looks at the management fashions literature and how consulting firms play a wider role in the creation and consumption of management ideas. The emphasis is placed on how management fads came to dominate the way consultants and clients perceive their role and activities in the industry. The distribution of management fads provides an important arena of justification for the consultants' value which is often ambiguous to measure. Our study over the different theoretical approaches

will help provide a theoretical context from which we will be able to narrow our investigation on the consultants' legitimation of knowledge to clients.

## 2.2 The Management Consulting Industry

The study of management consultancy has received attention that is recorded in numerous publications coming from academics as well as practitioners (Fincham, and Clark, 2002; Ferguson, 2001; Ashford, 1998; Kubr, 1976; Maister, 1993 Argyris, 2000). Such attention is fostered by the rapid growth of the industry and the complex economic and social factors that have led to such an unprecedented development (Kipping and Engwall, 2002; Clark and Fincham, 2002; Sahlin-Anderson and Engwall, 2002). The dominance of management consulting is well documented in the literature having had an annual growth of 10-15 percent for the last fifteen years (*The Economist*, 2007; Ernst and Kieser, 2002a). From Figure 2.1 we can see how the industry continues to grow at a global level, forecasted to reach \$400 billion by the year 2010 (*Kennedy Information*, 2007). Fincham and Clark (2002) argue the rate of this unprecedented growth often means that academic research lags behind explanations. Hence, analysis takes place only after market trends have been established. Little is known about the more particular dynamics that are at play in the course of the development of consulting trends and growth.



**Figure 2.1** International Trend of Growth by the Management Consulting Industry  
*Source:* Kennedy Information (2007)



It is difficult to define the boundaries of consultancy as a term (Schein, 2002). The word 'consulting' is interchangeably used to describe the advisory process but the organisational environment and knowledge-pool between professions varies (e.g. engineering, law, accountancy, construction, etc) (Argyris, 2000). The homogenous treatment of consultancy is often problematic which fails to take into account distinctions for how the term is performed *differently* within professions. The failure to distinguish between identities of consulting helps towards the marketability of a plethora of services (Ernst and Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). Corporations tend to capitalise on promoting their acclaimed expertise in order to persuade clients or sustain profits and improve their personal careers. Fincham and Clark (2002) argue how the treatment of the term often fails in two categories that can be characterised for: a) the occupational homogenous character of the industry, or b) the generic skills and knowledge that are not distinct within management consulting only but represent a variety of practices in the wider spectrum of management services. The authors argue for how an occupational treatment of consultancy often indicates an almost "narrow professional" identity whereas in fact consulting is associated with a "market in knowledge rather than a static skills set" (p.4). The above idea is further supported by the way that the term is often assigned in publication and industry reports. Datamonitor, (2004, 2005a, 2005b) for example chooses to include marketing activities while opting out firms that operate in the accounting market which are often regarded as the largest consulting players<sup>1</sup>.

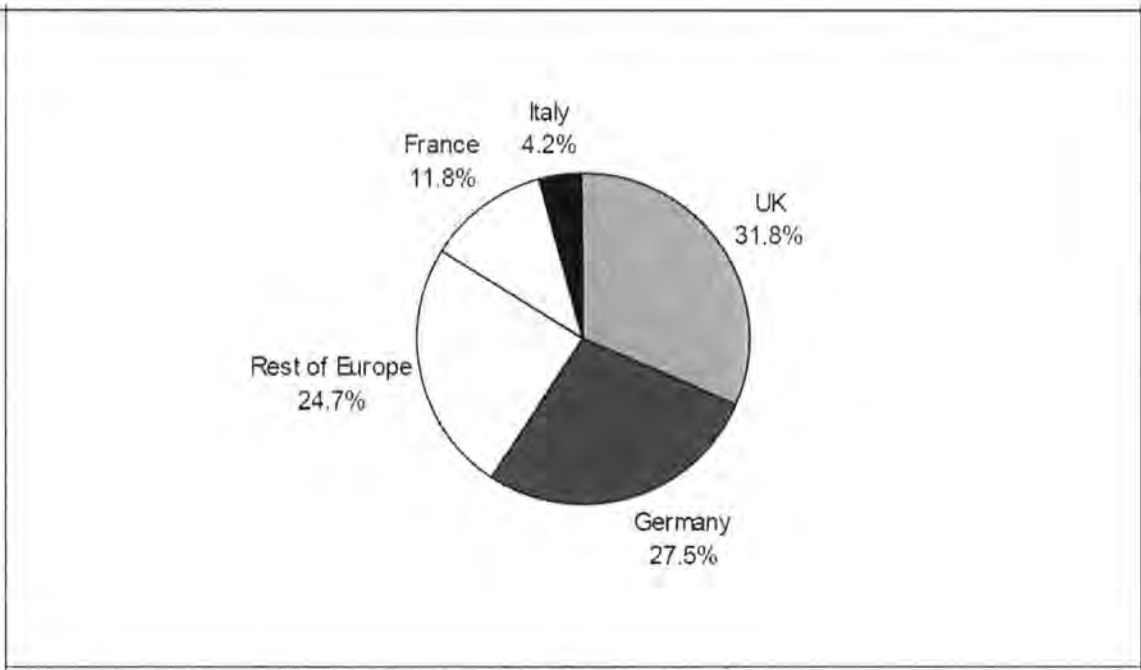
### *2.2.1 Global and European Industry Markets*

The penetration of the consulting practices into different countries has experienced a varied rate of growth. Such growth has been dependent on the state of a country's economy and the outside economic factors that may affect it. Datamonitor (2005b), for example states that: "The large growth in the European market for management and marketing consultancy occurred at the beginning of the period due to the introduction of the Euro and the associated expansion of business" (p.12). The current and future rise of consulting firms is dependent on socio-political structures of a country's economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Datamonitor (2004) states in the above in the following way: "The market does not include revenues generated through the provision of related services such as accountancy, which are also provided by a number of players operating within the market" (p. 7).

Even though North American and certain European countries, like Germany, France and England have experienced the more dramatic growth of this industry as illustrated from figure 2.2, existing and new consulting firms continue to emerge in other European countries. Datamonitor (2005b) states how: “Europe is expected to expand 10.7% over the next five years, undergoing progressively stronger growth” (p. 8). From figure 2.2 we can see the representative market share that the European countries hold. As the below figure illustrates UK has been one of the most important management consulting players within the European but also global market.



**Figure 2.2** Management Consulting Growth among European Countries  
*Source:* Datamonitor (2005a:11)

Other important players have been Asia Pacific, from which Japan is one of the strongest players, and also Latin America. Figure 2.3 illustrates the global market share as divided between the larger group countries' position.



**Figure 2.3** The state of management consulting globally  
 Source: Kennedy Information (2007)

Datamonitor (2005a) states that: “In 2009, the United Kingdom management and marketing consultancy market is forecasted to have a value of \$21.4 billion, an increase of 12.9% since 2004” (p.8).

### 2.2.2 Defining Management Consultancy

Central to our discussion and treatment of the management consulting term is its definition and meaning. There have been various efforts to characterise the qualities of management consulting but with an evident lack of a unanimous consensus that may encompass its attributes across different practices. This is firstly, because the term is often dependent on how firms and individuals choose to accredit themselves as ‘consultants’ without being restrained by any outside regulatory body (Glückler and Ambrüster, 2003; Clark and Fincham, 2002). Secondly, because the term is interchangeably used among different disciplinary practices (e.g. medicine, law, accounting, and engineering) that even though they share a different body of knowledge they use the same accreditation. In its core, consulting is used to characterise the ‘helping’ and ‘advisory’ aspect of any human relationship which is regulated by the broader knowledge-boundaries of that discipline (Schein, 1988; 2002). According to *The Oxford Compact Dictionary* the origin of the word ‘consulting’ comes from the Latin *consultare*, from *consulere* which means to ‘take counsel’ (1996: 210). To consult can variably mean: “1. seek information or advice from. 2. Refer to a person for advice 3.

Seek permission or approval from (a person) for a proposed action. 4. Take into account (feelings, interests, etc)” (1996: 210). The dictionary also defines the term consulting as: “giving professional advice to others working in the *same* field or subject” (1996:210) (Italics Added). Barcus and Wilkinson (1986) provide the following characterisation on the industry:

“Management consulting is an independent and objective advisory service provided by qualified persons to clients in order to help them identify and analyse management problems or opportunities. Management consultants also recommend solutions or suggested actions with respect to these issues and help when requested, in the implementation. In essence, management consultants help to effect constructive change in private or public sector organisations through the sound application of substantive and process skills.” (p.7)

Greiner and Metzger (1983) have characterised management consulting as:

...an advisory service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons who assist, in an objective and independent manner, the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, recommend solutions to these problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions.

The first positive attribute attached to consulting, and expressed in the above definitions, is the spatial proximity between consultants and clients. The consultants are distanced, or outside the client organisation and hence are assumed to contain an independent or objective-stand towards the client’s situation. This dialectic discourse between those who are ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the situated managerial problem becomes the first basis of differentiation which frames the consulting activity. Also, it correlates with those that experience the managerial related responsibilities or consequences with those that don’t. Furthermore, the assumption is not only that consultants are outsiders to the client, but also able to detect or analyse management problems of importance *for* the client. The conceptual correlation made between those that are inside a managerial problem with those outside and able to detect deficiencies assumes not only a spatial proximity but also a *qualitative* one. Consultants are able to help and detect existing or emerging managerial issues for the client and provide a complementary course of action. Powell (1995) examines the differences between the functional and business elements contained in the different definitions that describe the consulting role. Powell (1995) provides the following definition which aims to incorporate these differences and offers his own definition on the term. He states:

Management consultancy is a professional service in which help, advice and/or information, relating to the practice and process of management is exchanged within the terms of a mutually accepted contractual relationship for an agreed fee between two parties. Within this exchange, the provider of the service is external to the task at hand, bearing neither direct responsibility for the task result nor undue influence or control over key decisions relating to the task. The focus of all consulting interaction is upon effecting change in the part of the help-seeker's environment which relates to the task (Powell, 1995:104).

Powell (1995) seeks to incorporate but also differentiate the qualities of the advice giving process from being both a functional and a business activity. Powell (1995) argues how differentiating the functional and business qualities is important for appreciating the constraints in which it is expressed. The advice-giving process can be characterised as a provision of help where the one who provides it does not have direct responsibility of its outcome. When such practice takes place within a contractual relationship and agreed expectations, it becomes a business activity and is bound to delivering against agreed expectations. When a consultant starts having control or influence over the 'key decision relating to the task', he/she is not longer to be regarded a consultant as the definition implies but be placed on the same managerial level as the client (Powell, 1995). Kipping (2002) argues that the managerial body of knowledge from which individuals draw in order to consult is of paramount importance for understanding the achieved value. Taking counsel about a managerial course of action which may or may not be commercially traded is a form of consulting. However, the commercial character of consulting as a *purchased* business activity shapes the contractual relationship between the two parties and the consultants' degree of involvement in the client. As a result, we should be cautious in distinguishing between the normative meaning and attributes of what consulting means/should mean in itself, and the types of business constraints from which it emerges.

### **2.3 Consulting Origins to Management**

Regardless of the close proximity with which management and consulting have been given birth in the industry it nevertheless remains the result of complex economic and social forces (Kipping, 2002). One way with which we can understand the growth of this activity is by tracing its origins on the evolutionary development of management after the

second industrial revolution and within a growing capitalistic world (Urwick and Brech, 1983). The relationship between management to consulting has been implicitly discussed in the literature (Urwick and Brech, 1983) focusing upon the early significance of engineering and the scientific method (Fincham, 2002). The historical development of management carries a striking similarity to the development of consulting in that it concentrates on the use of knowledge as represented through methods and techniques which can coordinate or improve the performance of the corporation (Kipping, 2002; Fincham, 2002). In this part of the chapter we want to show how the development of managerial identity contains a close association with the development of consulting.

### *2.3.1 The legitimation of management as a profession*

It is argued that the management consulting role has its origins on the increasing importance on management with the emergence and impact of the second industrial revolution (Chandler, 1977; Clark, 1995; McKenna, 1995, 1997). The opening of new opportunities for organizations and the need for expansion, by taking advantage of the emerging technology, created new business challenges and opportunities. The emphasis placed on management was thought to be detrimental to managing the enterprise (Drucker, 1946). The belief in how a firm's state was not just shaped by the exogenous competitive forces but also through the managers' particular *intervention* helped towards the professionalism of management (Drucker, 1946).

The scientific study and understanding of the managerial role became part of the primitive context from which consultancy would later come to emerge as a business activity (Urwick and Brech, 1983; Kipping, 1996, 1997). The increasing importance of management is evident from the second phase of the industrial revolution. The concentrated manufacturing operations needed the development of better organizational structures and the creation of hierarchical managerial layers and new administrative positions. Hatch (1997) notes how the above industrial developments would become the main cause of attraction for Weber and Marx in writing about "the creation of a new middle class of managers, clerical workers, and professionals employed by large, hierarchical organizations" (p.23). During the growth of industrial development we are confronted with a number of influential approaches by Frederic Taylor, Henri Fayol, Chester Barnard, Harrington Emerson, and Henry Gantt for how the managers' roles in

organization increasingly *needed* to be viewed (Chandler, 1977; Hatch 1997; Scott, 1992). There is a concentrated effort through the work to establish and redefine the role and responsibilities between management and labour. The emphasis on the rationalisation of processes and the engineering approach to organizations as systems, where outside intervention could be detrimental to increasing efficiency, became some of the principles of their work (Hassard, 1999; Shaw, 1997). The study of organisational functions/operations outside their context of practice and the belief in the external human intervention to improving processes, helped establish management as an integral business activity (Watson, 2002). Hatch (1997) underlines how “Taylor’s method shifted control of work tasks from crafts workers to management” (Hatch 1997: 31). A shift that was significant for the development of the modern organisation in contrast to the old subcontracting role of the factory system.

Establishing the actual boundaries of managerial work and its legitimisation as a profession has not been an easy task. There is a historical and evolutionary process through which management gains gradual recognition for its qualities and contribution to the firm. This is clearly seen through Brech’s (2002) historical exposition of the evolution of management and the lack of instant gratification of what management entails. The common thread that runs between the above organization theorists is the search for finding new ways of helping managers increase ‘efficiency’ (Child, 1969). This concerns not only the employees’ treatment on the production line, but also the efficiency of the managers’ role in coordinating operations and effort in generating profits on a boardroom level (McKenna, 1995).

The engineering approach and assumptions pioneered in an era of reason provides us with a rich social context of ideas that need to be taken into account for understanding the later development of consultancy (Whitley, 1984; Urwick and Brech, 1983). Taylor’s ideas of scientific management became commercialised providing his service to organizations intending to implement his advice (Kipping, 2002; Tisdall, 1982). This represented one of the first instances whereby firms were willing to purchase business advice in order to improve their performance and work processes (McKenna, 1995; Kipping, 2002). Taylor’s work can be argued to have gained most influence on management thought and practice by promoting an engineering approach that has left its

traces in today's organizing frameworks like, Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and Total Quality Management (TQM). The development of the scientific management approach proved to be particularly influential because of its impact to redefining the role and nature of management by being rational and evidence-based (Hatch, 1997). The view of organizations as systems whose mechanisms and processes could be changed, improved and redesigned, provided the context for the emergence of more sophisticated methods and techniques (Watson, 2002; Hassard, 1999). The historical context in which management developed specific epistemological assumptions, about the relationship between the firm and the environment, influenced the achieved advances in management (Hatch, 1997).

## **2.4 Management Consulting Industry Trends**

### *2.4.1 Engineering and accounting approaches to consulting*

The legitimation of management as a profession was rooted in a modernistic approach to the firm. The corporation's controlled and planned intervention was believed to affect its behaviour in the environment (see Hassard, 1999). The growing importance to the scientific approach, even though closely associated with the work of Frederic Taylor, needs to be seen within the wider historical span of management's early development. Engineering and accounting approaches to management came to revolutionise how individuals thought of the corporation as a system whose functions could be altered to a desired result/behaviour. Individuals like Harrington Emerson, Henry L. Gantt, Charles E. Bedaux, Harold B. Myanard, Edwin G. Booz, James Allen, Arthur D. Little, James O. McKinsey and others, presented a wide influence for how organizations perceived their function. The normative belief was placed upon the intentionality of the organizational actors to achieve change through instrumental forms of intervention (Tisdall, 1982; Whitley, 1984).

McKenna (2006) argues that there exists an inseparable association between consulting to cost accounting and auditing activities in the United States. Jurisdictional changes in the occupational territories of the above professions were part of US' new "structure of bureaucratic professionals" (p.28). McKenna (2006) argues how this jurisdictional change unexpectedly favoured the growth of management consulting as a



separate profession. Kipping (2002) and Wright (2002), argue for how the development of the early engineering approaches to the firms led to the commercialisation of the business models that resulted in the use of ideas as an economic activity. The scientific approach to the firm shifted the view of the corporation into a new realm of understanding which moved away from the early paradigm of the industrial evolution. Kipping (2002) argues how the history of management consulting can be seen in relation to the wider environmental forces that helped create new competing trends in the industry (see table 2.1). Kipping (2002) goes to underline how the time-span of the industry between 1920s to present has been dominated by such distinct market trends. The ability between firms to align their services to them has meant their survival or extinction from the industry. The early scientific management approach to the firm was the first of these trends that would later be surpassed by the shifted emphasis on strategy and IT consulting.

**Table 2.1 Management consulting waves**

| <i>Wave</i>               | <i>Key issues</i>                       | <i>Overall duration</i> | <i>Major Expansion</i> | <i>Pre-eminent consultancies</i>        |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Scientific Management     | Efficiency of worker and production     | 1900s – 1980s           | 1930-1950s             | Emerson, Bedaux, 'Big Four' Maynard     |
| Organization and Strategy | Decentralization and portfolio planning | 1930-20??               | 1960s-1980s            | Booz Allen, McKinsey, A.T. Kearney, BCG |
| IT-based networks         | Internal and external co-ordination     | 1960-???                | 1990-???               | 'Big Five, EDS, CSC, Gemini             |

*Source:* Kipping (2002) Trapped in their wave: The evolution of management consultancies (p.38)

#### *2.4.2 Strategy & IT Consulting*

The emergence of a new “management consulting wave” for Kipping (2002), does not take place in replacement of the existing ones. Even though the competition between such waves can co-exist some can come to dominate the market over others. The development of strategy consulting firms emerged during the 1960, focusing on the role of executive management (McKenna, 1995, 1997). The rise of strategy began from the exploration of corporate models that could prove significant to the decision making at the boardroom level. The emphasis on efficiency and productivity shifted to the arena of corporate

knowledge and the role of executives. Fincham and Clark (2002) argue how McKinsey and other firms like Bain and the Boston Consulting Group “pioneered basic strategic concepts and brought the industry to public attention” (p.6). The expansion between consulting firms outside the United States and within Europe (England, Germany, France) had also meant the immigration of business models amongst new clients (McKenna, 1995). McKenna (1995) argues how the distribution of business models in the form of new organisational structures, which argued for decentralisation, new channels of power distribution and creation of planning and outsourcing, became popular in European markets. The creation of new clients helped sustain the presence of the pioneering strategy firms like McKinsey.

The consulting firms’ survival in a changing market has meant their own impasse for overcoming the limitations presented within their own industry trends (Kipping, 2002). Firms that used to operate under the early engineering-related consulting models faced a great challenge with the market shifts and the growing interest in corporate strategy at the boardroom level rather than shop floor (Wright, 2002, McKenna, 1995, Kipping, 2002). The turn to strategy consulting at the level of corporate governance, has signalled a new phase in the history of the industry’s growth. Even though McKinsey was one of the early firms to capitalise on this early market similar strategy consulting firms started to emerge. What fostered an even more increasing rate of growth of such firms originated in the fact that individuals which accumulated experience and knowledge from parent firms left and established their own firms<sup>2</sup>.

As the shift to corporate strategy signalled a new era for the consulting industry the advancement of IT systems equally proved to have similar effect. The arrival of technology opened a new window of opportunities as it helped create new line of services. This is particularly true for the large accounting firms (KPMG, Ernst & Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Deloitte) that heavily capitalised on this sector by combining their range of services to meeting a large spectrum of business needs

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<sup>2</sup> A characteristic example is the case of Bruce Hendersen who set up the Boston Consulting Group after left from working for Arthur D. Little in 1963 (Kipping, 2002: 33). Roland Berger, in 1967, and William Bain, in 1973, also left from Boston Consulting Group to set up their own firms: ‘Roland Berger’ and ‘Bain Consulting’. It is interesting to note how Roland Berger became a strong consulting player in Europe, and especially in Germany. Since 1967 the firm has 31 offices in 22 countries, and, in 2004 the firm said to employ 1,630-strong workforce, generating approximately 530 EUR million in sales”

(Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). Information System and IT services invested in the creation of electronic platforms for the collection and analysis of information, the automation of information handling processes and the modernising of a firm's own technological infrastructure, becoming more competitive in the market's buoyant changes (Grant et. al., 2006; Niehaves et. al., 2006). The popularity of IT systems fostered the view that they could play an instrumental role for how firms conducted their strategic operations. Performance measurement systems for example, could be used to assess the employees' quality of work. The use of advertising could make use of the World Wide Web. The collection/distribution of information resources could take place at a much greater speed than in the past (Grant et. al., 2006). Armbrüster and Kipping (2002) argue how a landmark of IT to consulting can be seen in the popularity of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems and how the demand for this service-line had grown rapidly in 1990 (p.23). The installation of the above systems was not only financially costly but also required long-term assignments. Even though IT systems might have required business knowledge that were different in nature from the traditional consulting operations, firms capitalised on this opportunity by expanding them (Grant et. al., 2006). Arbrüster and Kipping (2002) also argue how consulting firms heavily invested in this market because a large proportion of their income was generated from IT outsourcing service, whereby clients did not want to perform in-house.

## **2.5 Economic and Political Influences to Management Consultancy' Growth**

Even though, the growing demand for outside advice and the commercialisation of managerial initiatives for increasing efficiency has contributed towards the popularity of consulting practice, the growth of the consulting profession remains a startling phenomenon. This is particularly so during the distinctive early stages in its history where the rate of growth seems to bypass any possible explanations about changes of the firms' content or style of operations. The broader economical and political forces where management consultancy has existed have shaped its presence in the business environment.

In the previous section we looked at the internal adaptation of firms to the broader competitive trends. Here we come to look more specifically at the forces that have shaped its regulatory structure. We refer to the work by McKenna (2006) and his historical

analysis over the industry's growth. One of the primary ideas expressed in the author's argument constitutes the distinct and often unexpected regulatory changes that affected its future. Looking at the early activities of consulting, the exercise of advice is confined within political forces, where the competition of interests can affect the alleged soundness of advice. The growing trend towards advice and 'investigation mechanisms' is not solely part of the management consulting functions, but certainly co-existed within other professions from which legal, banking or accounting professions had shared an equally strong presence (McKenna, 2006).

#### *2.5.1 The regulatory changes that helped create the management profession*

McKenna (2006) argues for how a number of political regulatory changes in the United States, during the early stages of the industry, have had critical influences on the legitimation of the profession on the whole. Such changes took place in an unexpected way that radically transformed the industry. McKenna (2006) argues how the political and economic changes in 1933 through the "Congressional passage of the Glass-Steagall Banking Act [that] separated commercial and investment banking", is responsible for the establishment of management consulting as a profession (p.17). The forced division between the above sectors included the undertaking of consultative activities and 'investigations' that came to be later performed by management consultants. Regulatory changes have meant that the early investment and banking firms no longer would be allowed to operate in the traditional consulting realm. The emergent conflict about the lack of independence firms carry when serve any type of business interests, created a new market that management consulting would come to fill. As a result, the distortion of objectivity that was a growing fear among government sources had meant that a growing opportunity was situated in the presence of management advisors. The management consulting activities did not have a distinct identity and this helped make the process of placing trust in them easier.

Equally significant to the above was the creation of the Securities Exchange Commission. McKenna (2006) argues how it is this act that led to the jurisdictional boundaries and helped the creation of economic forces where the demand for such services sprung. McKenna (2006) argues how this needs to be seen in contrast to the

isolated and independent consulting interventions from individuals like Frederic Taylor Elton Mayo, Arthur D. Little, whose work is often attributed as a significant factor to the birth of the industry. Through the Glass-Steagall Banking Act of 1933 the government separated the commercial and investment activity by banks that monitored the work of accountants. It was believed that existing business interests interfered with the assumed transparency/objectivity with which the banks conducted their reviews. As a result, this early separation created a new market opportunity for management firms that did not have any prior business interest to corporations. Hence, their reviews could be more representative of their independence than the banking firms.

McKenna (2006) notes how a complementary aspect to the above feature was also the fact that management consultants provided a medium of information input and access to clients that the banks themselves were being restricted of. The increased demand for consultants helped bypass the immediate legal restrictions in a way that inside information could still be partly obtainable. The above area of activities led to a rapid increase of small and larger management consulting firms, some of which are still dominating the market (e.g. McKinsey & Company). McKenna (2006) goes to document the above growth through the work of individuals who established a corporate presence and used their networking and reputation in order to attract new clients that varied from small to prestigious corporations. His work explores a series of case studies that shows how the functions of the consulting firm was directly affected by the incremental regulatory changes introduced by the U.S Government<sup>3</sup>. Already existing accounting firms like Arthur Andersen, Marwick, Mitchell & Co. in contrast decided to stay in the accounting sector which at times, experienced a much slower growth than the newly established management consulting firms.

In contrast to the popularly held belief for the progressive and sequential growth of the industry the main premise of McKenna's argument is that: "Management consulting did not grow through a gradual process of linear evolution, but instead emerged from a competitive equilibrium shattered by regulatory change in the early 1930s" (p.17). As a result, the rapid growth of the industry is argued not to be attributed to its internal

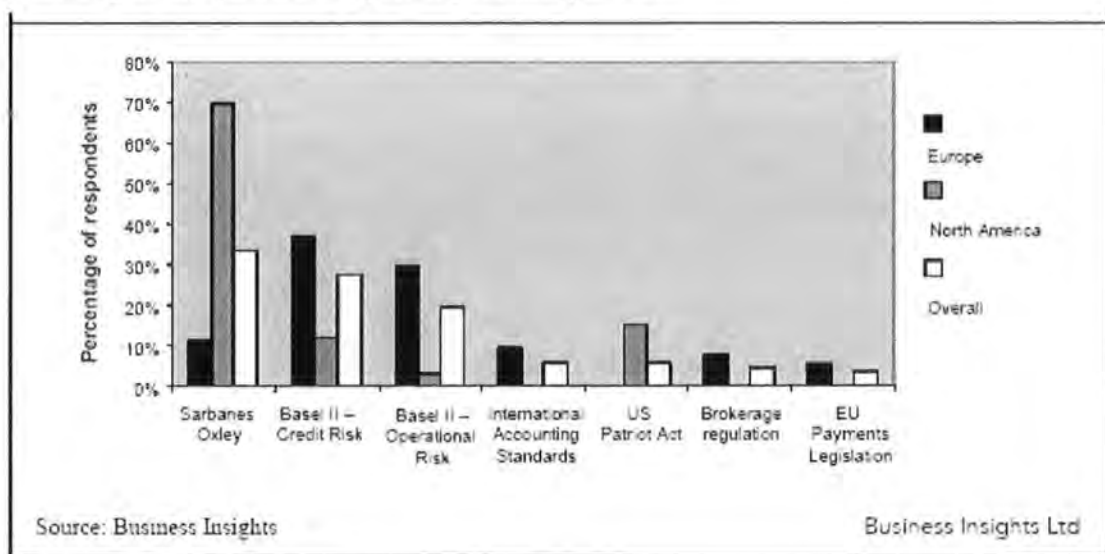
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<sup>3</sup> Following the Steagall-Banking Act McKenna focuses specifically in the case of George S. Armstrong and how his successive active of compliance to the changing government regulations helped the growth of his company that later came to dominate the market in the U S.

strategic plan or innovative ideas but the fact that it has been favoured by the political and economic changes of the environment. Even though the strategy consulting firms came to dominate the advisory market during the above regulatory changes, existing accounting firms increased their presence by offering a multidisciplinary service that varied between accounting, financial, legal and auditing services. Kipping (2002), documents how the early formulation of the large corporations took place by means of mergers and acquisitions of smaller firms. The role behind the large accountancy firms had been to ensure fair financial reporting and adherence to market regulation. Complementary to accounting activities, the above firms have also been engaged in consulting and auditing operations that helped restore earlier market loss.

McKenna (2006) argues how history repeated itself and how the destiny of the above firms was subject to new regulatory changes in the United States. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) was established on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2002 following the Enron and WorldCom corporate scandals (Furness, 2007). The Act which was signed by George W. Bush separated the involvement of auditing firms from consulting activities. It is thought to be one of the toughest measures since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, and it has received very mixed reactions from the business world (*Economist*, 2007). Corporations that have received public attention from similar scandals are: WorldCom, Adelphia Communications, AOL Time Warner, and Tyco Bristol-Myers Squibb, FastTrack Savings & Loans, Rocky Mountain Electric, Mirant Energy, Global Crossing, Halliburton, Qwest (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Moore et. al., 2006). The Sarbanes-Oxley Act was named after its sponsors Senator Paul Sarbanes and Representative Michael Oxley (Furness, 2007; *Economist*, 2007). The role of this new and radical legislation was made to protect investors by creating strict control measures on the accounting of public companies (Furness, 2007). A new obligatory system of procedures was designed and applied for all US-registered public companies. A key requirement of the Act is the separation of the auditing and consulting activities and the requirement for all firms to create independent committees to review their work. All internal trading have to comply with strict controls that are introduced by the government and implemented by external auditors (*Economist*, 2007).

Furness (2007) states how the two key business and IT impacts of the SOX for companies have to do with: a) the internal corporate responsibility for how financial reports are conducted, and, b) how the regulation compels the management of the firm to “attest to the effectiveness of internal controls. This in turn requires that processes used to develop, manage and report on information systems are consistent and accurate” (p.59, 60). New types of security measures were introduced over those that wanted to report internal types of misconduct in relation to the firm or their superiors (Hassink et. al., 2007; Masucci, 2004). As the *Economist* (2007) states, the SOX has been one of the more radical interventions by the US government to regulate corporations in its history. Five years after the legislation was introduced it is still debatable as to whether the Act has managed to restore public confidence in the American corporations. Companies have to undertake large costs in order to implement the Act and foreign companies have struggled to allocate such spending (*Economist*, 2007, Furness, 2007). Nevertheless, it is argued how this new Act helped provide security to the increased conflicts of interests between auditing and consulting firms and helped avoid the repeating of corporate scandals. In an industry report by *Business Insights* (see Figure 2.4), Fulmer (2007) refers to a recent study that shows how the Sarbanes Oxley (SOX) among other regulatory initiatives (e.g. Basel Credit Risk) were the primary regulatory drivers of increasing the corporations’ spending on compliance.



**Figure 2.4** Regulations that drove key mandatory spending in 2005

Source: Furness, V. (2007)

### *2.5.2 The restructuring of management consulting firms*

In the same way that the Glass-Steagall Banking Act in 1933 led to a restructuring of the industry, the separation between the consulting and auditing services followed by the SOX act, also resulted in changes between the large accounting firms. For example, in 2000 Ernst & Young sold its consulting division to the French IT and financial service corporation Capgemini. Even though the company has had strong presence in the IT systems, outsourcing and financial services, it integrated its consulting division forming Cap Gemini Ernst & Young.

On August 2002 KPMG sold its UK and Dutch consulting division to ATOS Origin while in 2004, ATOS Origin dropped the KPMG title to ATOS Consulting. In 2002 the consulting division by KPMG was renamed BearingPoint, Inc (Fazli, 2002). Following the company's change of name it moved to New York Stock Exchange and began trading there. Furthermore, after the successful merger and formation of PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2004 the company faced similar regulatory pressures that resulted in the selling of its consulting division to IBM for the approximate sum of over \$3.5 billion in cash and stock (Fazli, 2002). The strong presence of the company into the accounting and auditing markets and the undertaking of prestigious assignments by public sources, helped sustain its presence and growth among similar accounting firms (Solnik, 2006).

The experience of Deloitte Touché had a similar turn on its competitors as it separated its consulting division from auditing. By using a name that was associated with Deloitte's past acquisition of the management consulting firm called Braxton Associates, Deloitte made a similar move in 1984 (Baharuddin, 2002). The use of an existing brand is argued to have provided a reassured message of the company's intention to concentrate on the consulting activities. It made the administrative spending for changing the trademark easier and less expensive (Cirillo, 2002; Merx, 2002).

As the above discussion illustrates, the significant market changes of the accounting and consulting corporations was the result from the economic and political changes. Even though the internal functions of the companies might be able to explain their growth, the unprecedented impact of the environmental and regulatory forces changed the turn of the industry and helped create a new set of dynamics. As a result, the concentration of the management consulting activities and in contrast to auditing and accounting operations



presented a different type of competition that was to concentrate on the consultant-client relationship as the primary focus of service. Having said this it needs to be noted how the above consulting firms continue to represent other areas of service apart from consulting and which move into the area of legal advice or financial regulations. Apart from a small number of large consulting firms that concentrate on specific fields like Strategy (e.g. McKinsey) or HR (e.g. Penna Consulting) the majority of the consulting firms continue to operate in the IT and management consulting areas.

By creating more than one line of operations such firms tried to increase their agenda of clients. Also, to increase revenues while eliminating risk from not successful assignments. As Ambrüster and Kipping (2002) argue how the dominance of the consulting activities in the last two decades has had predominant concentration in the implementation of IT systems. This has dominated the way corporations endeavour to maximise performance and legitimise their operations to clients. The large accounting firms continue to be interested in the consulting market despite the diversion of their portfolio of services. This is because the consulting market continues to remain profitable. As table 2.2 illustrates between the years of 2005 and 2006 the four large accounting firms have considerably increased their revenues from consulting activities alone. The comeback to consulting is an indication of how the below firms believe in the current and future demand of this market. The separation between the auditing and consulting activities does not hinder their pursuit to expand in the market while regulating their services.

**Table 2.2** The large accounting firms and growth from consulting activities

|                         | REVENUE (BILLIONS) | GROWTH FROM 2005 |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| DELOITTE & TOUCHÉ       | \$8.85             | 17%              |
| KPMG                    | \$5.28             | 12%              |
| PRICEWATERHOUSE-COOPERS | \$3.73             | 20%              |
| ERNST & YOUNG           | \$2.38             | 2%               |

Source: Byrnes, N. (2007) 'The Comeback of Consulting', *Business Week* (4048):66-67

## **2.6 Economics of Knowledge**

Economic theories explain the *raison d'être* of management consulting enterprises and concentrate on their economic function. In using the instrumental work by Coase, (1937, 1960), Williamson, (1975, 1985) Armbrüster (2006) and McKenna (2006) argue how the rapid growth of the industry can be understood through its 'economic value' in the context of a transaction cost economic theory approach. The economic and 'added value' generated and sustained through the generation and distribution of information-gathering and analysis allows clients to acquire them than to produce internally. Consultants help serve a distinct economic need by concentrating on specialising their knowledge activities to areas that are perceived as important for clients. The above theory takes a particular context of illustration when tracing the development of the history of the industry during the 1990s, where the expansion of IT systems created a new market of services (Arbrüster and Kipping, 2002). The function that consultants performed through the creation of IT systems created a new phase in the industry. The installation of large IT systems (e.g. Enterprise Systems) would be closely combined with advisory services and concentrate on the organisational and strategic aspects of the firm. The market opportunities have been extensively documented and few companies currently concentrate on one discipline of function (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). Consulting firms experience large intake of employees in order to meet the increasing demand by clients. Also, in order perform the necessary internal and different technical operations. According to Armbrüster (2006) the internal operational costs consulting firms undertake in order to perform the management and IT related consulting activities, create economies of scope. The concentration of resources to performing a specific set of tasks helps reduce the associated costs. Furthermore, it allows the development of a service that clients need or would find more expensive to produce themselves.

In drawing from the Coasian transaction economic theories (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975, 1985) and in using the work by Canbäck (2002), Armbrüster (2006) argues that there are three distinct areas in which transactional cost theory gains relevance for consulting. These are: "a) the frequency with which particular task occurs, b) the specificity of the assets that are necessary to conduct the tasks, and c) the uncertainty of the task" by means of the ability to control the expected risk and quality of

the task. The popularity of the consulting firms can be seen in relation to the three distinct categories they serve. Armbrüster (2006) argues how clients require the consultants' intervention in occasions where the task does not frequently occur in the firm. The use of an external intervention is timely, temporary, and aimed at serving a need that the client might be able to fulfil but does not have the context of knowledge or resources to produce. In contrast, consulting firms have a much greater level of frequent experiences with particular assignments, and the repetition of the projects helps create experience that becomes a potential asset. Secondly, the use of resources required to perform a consulting-related activity is argued to constitute an important component in the demand for consulting. This is because clients lack such tangible and intangible resources and they are costly to acquire. Armrüster (2006) argues that "Consultants have specialized on tasks that would involve high internal coordination costs for clients, such as organization-wide changes or the implementation of information technology" (p.47). From this follows that the 'proximity' of resources and the making of considerable investments are responsible for how consultants acquire economic value through the trading of their services. Furthermore, examples are presented for how large accounting corporations are composed of huge physical and human resources, thereby helping perform large auditing assignments. Clients who may lack the acquisition of such resources encourage their temporary purchase from external providers rather than making expensive investments for generating them for a short time. Thirdly, in making reference to the uncertainty of the task, Armbrüster (2006) argues how clients use consultants in order to acquire assurance against unpredicted areas of risk. The clients' confidence in producing a particular outcome, without possessing the experience or resource, creates degrees of uncertainty that can jeopardise the course of the project. The acquisition of an external consulting service does not take place only because of the immediate product of service in itself, but also for corresponding to the wider complexities the project entails in its course.

Armbrüster (2006) makes reference to the "factors that cannot be fully controlled" (p.46) and how reliance on such external resource makes it a prerequisite that the consulting party will undertake the necessary course of action. Furthermore, the volatility by which a successful result is measured and the fluctuation of the required

resources can increase the cost of undertaking such activity internally. As a result, the clients' potential lack to measure or deal with the plurality of such issues for the author makes it likely that client firms will use consultants in the context of "trade-off decisions, requiring weights to the above decision-making criteria" (p.46).

Even though it can be highly argued for how clients come to believe that consultants will be able to deliver the desired quality they expect, the logic behind transaction cost theory indicates how clients need to rely on the *belief* that consultants will deliver the required result. McKenna (2006) uses the term "economies of knowledge" to justify the use of the above economic theory. Knowledge services is argued to have become a commodity that consulting firms try to serve. This is particularly so through the continuing explosion of the combined IT and management consulting, activities. The efficient customisation of processes that contribute to the creation of a knowledge service can be thought as the end product that clients desire to acquire. The competitiveness between the consulting firms is also argued to make it imperative for consultants to try to maximise their profits, on basis of the efficient customisation of resources. As a result, consulting firms are not simply dependent on the delivery of their service for maintaining profits but also on the internal efficiency with which the knowledge-generated activities are produced. The above argument makes particular sense when looking at consulting firms like Accenture which has concentrated on implementing large IT projects and requires large resources and lengthy and timely processes. Even though a lot of issues remain uncertain in making the above argument the focus remains on what consultants manage to deliver to clients that the clients would incur larger costs to produce themselves. The equilibrium that is achieved between these two economic factors, namely, a) cost and b) supply, are thought to support the reason for the continuing existence and popularity of consultants as knowledge brokers. As we will see in the following section, a lot of the assumptions that are made with the above economic theory remain uncertain for when applied to consultants. This is because the arenas of production of knowledge to the stage of delivery, and the produced outcomes that are believed to constitute a more efficient resource, should not be perceived as an inherent quality of consulting service.

### 2.6.1 Critique of transaction cost economic theories

Even though the above discussed economic theories have been helpful to our understanding of the expansion of the consulting industry, there is little known about the legitimation process of the consultants' activities. McKenna's (2006) work indicates the direct effect that regulatory changes have had on the formation and destiny of the consulting firms. Even though this is an important insight, the reference to the consultants' knowledge-activities provides a very generic description for what this managerial work has constituted or/and how it is changing. The investigation and analysis that consultants perform might have been shared with other consulting professions from different sectors. However, the rise of management consulting activities also provided their own distinct identity through models, tools, assumptions, and claims that express a normative character for how firms could control or increase their efficiency in the environment.

The influence that engineering had over the development of accounting as a profession correlates with how management was perceived. Reliance on managerial tools that identified parameters of strengths and weaknesses, the redesign of processes within the hierarchy of the organisation and the scientific management approach contributed to the rise of management consultancy as a distinct profession and in contrast to the legal, financial, or accounting professions. The fact that consultants may represent the qualities of knowledge brokers does not itself qualify for how the perceived value they managed to serve in the client took place. A positivistic approach to the consultants' work should not automatically define their function as a mere conduit to clients.

The design and delivery of knowledge service/brokering is an ambiguous process because of the complexities associated with what constitutes an organisational *need* against the desired *solution* (Alvesson, 2001). The rise of corporate strategy and IT consulting firms that grew during the 1980s and 1990s is partly dependent on the incremental belief on the significance of the executive level of the corporation on the firm's holistic performance (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002:20). Consulting is not simply concerned with investigations that accountants and the banking sector normally perform argued by McKenna (2006). It is also concerned with the need to promote a specific agenda of services that makes normative claims for how the client should perform and

why should perform so. As a result, the association between consulting firms to the reiteration of these ideas has been a significant component to the sustenance of the popularity of consulting firms.

The contribution of the transaction cost theory to our understanding of consultancy argued by Armbrüster (2006) is equally insightful to our understanding of the reasons behind its growth. However, and as Armbrüster (2006) recognises, the treatment of knowledge as a commodity which can be generated and sold can become problematic. This is because the correspondence between the three dimensions behind Coase and Williamson's theory can treat the consultants' services as clearly defined tasks with measurable outcomes. We agree with the premise of how clients use consultants in order to complement the internal lack of expertise and resources. What becomes questionable however is how the knowledge services consultants produce may constitute an efficient and cost effective resource. The types of investment and costing clients undertake in order to produce the knowledge resources, have often turned to be more expensive to acquire than to produce (O'Harrow, 2007). The outcomes of the consultants' activities against the client's needs also remain unclear, as the specificity of these needs can change or evolve in the duration of the project. It has been argued that the satisfaction consultants produce for clients, is dependent on the immediate organisational actors involved and the interests that they represent (Kieser, 2002a, Clark and Fincham, 2002) The uncertainty with which the consultant deal with the appointed tasks needs to be seen in the aftermath of implementation. Even though, consultants may be able to deal with the operational complexities in designing and delivering their project to clients, it also needs to be noted how clients remain uncertain about the functionality of the consultants' work. The presence of uncertainty is not simply a variable that needs to be appreciated for when consultants perform their activities but also in the context of the aftermath of their actions.

## **2.7 Management Fashion**

In this section we move to discuss the management fashion literature and its interpretation to explaining the growth of the consulting industry. This approach focuses on the relationship between consulting firms and the broader discourse of management

ideas. The growing interest in management fashion is documented by the increased significance of managerial trends in shaping how organisational actors and corporations construct their roles and practices (Clark, 2004).

The study of management fashion concentrates on the evolutionary trend of management ideas (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Huczynski, 1993, Jackson, 1996). Also in the need to understand the nature of input that different institutions play for determining how their popularity is maintained in the market. Management fashion is essentially concerned with the greater discourse that individuals and institutions engage for marketing their ideas to an audience (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Benders et. al., 1998). This is for promoting specific agenda tools, methods and techniques that can lead to financial rewards and increase their institutional power. Management consulting firms constitute important players in the production and promotion of management fads. This is because the essence of management knowledge takes the form of an ideology whose success or failure can only be tested at the time of its application (Clark, 1995; Kieser, 2002b).

In this theoretical trend, an important role consulting firms perform to sustain their survival in the market takes place through their role of customising management fads within their locus of services (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The legitimation of consulting practices is dependent on the pursuit of equilibrium with an audience's changing needs (Grint and Case, 1998). Furthermore, the survival of consulting firms is dependent on their ability to respond to market trends as they emerge overtime (Kieser, 1997; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), Total Quality Management (TQM), Enterprise System, (ES), the Balance Scorecard, and Knowledge Management (KM), are just some of the more popular cited management fads depicted in the literature. The emergence, popularity and decline of the above fads is argued to depend on maintaining their active interest within their audience. This is by means of publications, business school programs, and in the form of large consulting packages requiring the engagement of large resources of manpower over longitude periods.

The importance of management fads lie in their power to determine institutions to undertake large financial costs of investments in order to change operations or introduce activities in the hope that their performance will be increased. It is believed that the

firms' achieved efficiency will contribute to the increase of revenues and competitive edge in the market. What has attracted considerable interest amongst authors is the issue of how the popularity of such concepts have been sustained over time (Røvik, 1997; Benders and Van Veen, 2001). How they are translated within specific organisational operations and how the ideology that such management fads represent comes to be substantiated in the organisational life of the firms and its employees.

### *2.7.1 Where is management fashion coming from?*

The study of the birth and popularity of management ideas is not a recent phenomenon but has wider sociological roots that go back to the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983). In its core, management fashion is concerned with understanding the course in which specific concepts come to gain popularity over an audience. And the use of the word 'fashion' is made in order to characterise the changing and fluid character of such concepts (Gill and Whittle, 1992). As Abrahamson (1996) has widely argued on the topic the presence of management fashion signifies a deeper aesthetic and ideological significance that is concerned with the production and presentation of a reality to which management relates. The penetrative presence of management ideas in the life of the organisation constitutes them as a behavioural modification mechanism, rather than as a mere superficial aesthetic stimulus. By this we mean that the entertaining of such ideas do not have a cognitive representation only but can influence organisational actors in their decision making activity, the allocation of resources and the making of investments. As a result, tangible and intangible resources are mobilised for the implementation of management fashions that has a pragmatic cost to the firm and to the career of individuals.

The shifts between management fashions signifies a greater sociological wave in which the organisational actors' relationship with what management trends represent do not remain static but evolve. Abrahamson (1996) tries to contextualise the main stages/mechanisms under which management fashion evolves. He argues how the detection of management ideas by individuals and institutions are characterised by a deeper ideological spin which is relevant to the challenges managers face. Abrahamson (1996) makes reference to management fashion setters and refers to consulting firms,



management gurus, business schools, and media publications as representing the wider arena of their circulation and consumption.

What has differentiated Abrahamson's (1996) argument from similar studies is the emphasis on the systematic production of ideas that aim at particular service consuming outcomes. As a result, the invention of new ideas by management gurus is argued not to take place ad hoc. It is made to serve a wider business purpose and which has specific economic outcomes. Secondly, the communication channels in which such notions become contextualised/codified takes place in the form of rhetoric and argumentation. Here, the relationship is made for how ideas have a more pragmatic relevance to the life of the corporations. Making such claims convincing requires a sound argumentative discourse that makes legitimate and well-supported claims. Such claims do not appeal to the aesthetic taste of the audience only. The rhetoric of management fashion needs to correlate to aspects of the managers' organisational action where change and improvement can be believed as *feasible*. Finally, Abrahamson argues for how the popularity of management fashion is not only dependent on the early setters but on the participation and role of the wider institutions as compromised by consulting firms, publishing houses, the media and business schools. Such institutions help towards the circulative consumption and production of ideas (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2002).

Gill and Whittle (1992) argue for a similar transitory trend by placing particular emphasis on the swing aspect of management fashions. The authors argue for a five stage discourse where a) the management concept is invented, b) the management ideas are then communicated to its intended audience, c) potentially positive reaction by the audience allows for the integration of concept to their situation, d) in the course of accommodating the idea the organisational actors become distanced because of the possible lack of the initially assumed effectiveness or results, e) this leads to the decline of the idea (see also Clark, 2004). Heusinkveld (2004) argues how the initially perceived eradication of obsolete ideas needs to be revisited. This is because the existing management trends do not necessarily die out but continue to exist in different forms/practices.

The evolution of the newly appearing management fads is argued to follow a particular cycle pattern that is characterised for its increased popularity and decline. Clark (2004)

argues how the lifespan between the emergence, and the decline of new ideas, has become a lot shorter than in the past. By referring to the work by Carson et. al., (2000), Clark (2004) argues how “the introduction of a fashionable management idea or technique and the peak in its popularity has fallen from a mean of 14.8 years in the 1950s–1970s, to 7.5 years in the 1980s, to 2.6 years in the 1990s” (p. 2).

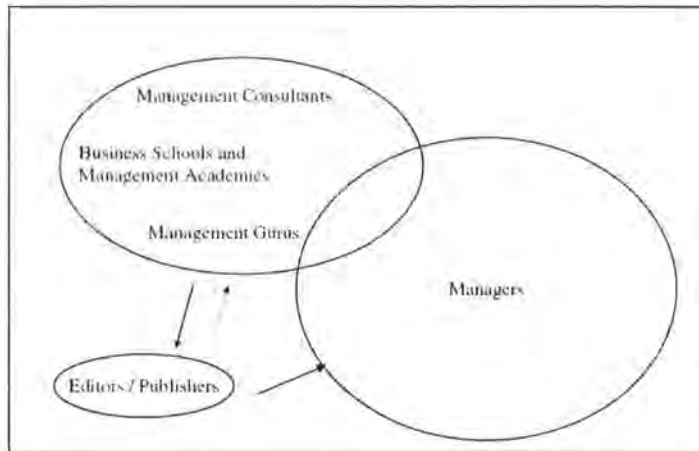
### *2.7.2 The circulation of management fads*

One of the research interests that the management fashion literature tries to address concerns the consumption of specific and widely popular ideas within different audiences. Management gurus are characterised to belong to one of the prominent groups of management fashion setters. This is partly attributed to the charismatic forms through which they communicate their ideas and their ability to maintain the interest of the specific identity of audience they serve. The senior position of participants that represent such an audience is an additional factor that enables the acceleration of their influence within the corporations. Each of the different management fashions is also represented by a group of distinct individuals that may have supported the expressed idea or/and contributed towards its popularity through publications. Even though differences are found in how a particular management concept is discussed between the works of such individuals, it is clear that they all share the fundamental premise that the concept represents (Legge, 2002). The rise of the Total Quality Movement, for example, was promoted by distinct management “quality gurus” (Legge, 2002) like Crosby (1987, 1992), Deming (1982), Feigenbaum, (1983, 1991), Juran (1988, 1995).

On a similar tone, the Business Process Reengineering movement is represented by gurus like: Hammer and Champy (1993), Davenport (1993), Davenport and Short (1990), Hammer (1990). Clark (2004) argues for the need to break away from the homogeneity with which the management guru notion is represented. The publication activities that the above respected individuals have gone in order to elaborate and justify their specific organisational concept have intimately involved the role of business schools and publishing houses. The popularity of the concept is not just dependent on its rationale related content, but on its receptivity by such other institutions that represent considerable influence upon their members or clientele.

The marketability of management fashions through media channels represented in business magazines, newspapers, and similar publication sources, contributes to the wider expansion of the concepts and their penetration to different audiences (Heusinkveld, 2004). Business Schools have come to incorporate material into courses and study material. The consumption of management fashions creates the stimulus for the need to innovate new concepts/tools/techniques that help maintain the existing interest. Greatbatch and Clark, (2005) argue how management gurus rely on the use of particular rhetoric and communication techniques to transmit their ideas and convince their audience. In a study conducted over the more current management gurus as represented in the works of: Peter Senge, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and Tom Peters the authors argue how the mechanisms of persuasion are carefully constructed to convey a message. The receptivity of an idea is the result of the audience's interests but also relies in the underpinning mechanism that such management gurus use (e.g. applause, humour, linguistic tools, etc).

It is important to qualify how the territories in which the management fashion setters operate is different. Figure 2.5 illustrates that there is a simultaneous interaction between the flow of management fads between institutions. However, the economic needs that each of the institutions tries to serve remains distinct. Even though management gurus might be concerned with the competency to initiate an ideological framework that can capture the attention of an audience their interest is about promoting their ideas to the public. It is the sensitivity of the communication channels employed which allows for the successful or failed diffusion of their ideas. This is why emphasis is placed in the crafting of their presentation, the clear articulation of their ideas, and in the careful construction of rhetoric arguments of persuasion. The popularity of the idea is maintained by the way in which it is entertained by the public. The potential creation of public discourses allows for the penetration of such concepts to be maintained.



**Figure 2.5:** The circulation between management ideas through fashion setters

Source: Clark (2004:3)

In contrast to publishing houses and similar media communication sources, management fashion setters are concerned with the economic activity of creating successful publishing outcomes that will generate profits or increase the popular image of the institution to the public. Clark (2004) argues how book editors are predominately occupied with the need to identify the type of authors that could generate “mass appeal” to the public (p.4). Such publishing houses are not necessarily concerned with the normative qualities of the management fad or/and its degree of alignment with the views represented in the public or academic communities. Certainly, what may constitute a well published book is not necessarily pre-known, and, publishers often have to rely on the eminence of the author and his/her institution. As a result, publishing media is argued to be mainly concerned with the potential positive receptivity of their publication to the intended audience.

Business schools endeavour to keep abreast with the surge of the next popular idea and demonstrate types of formal associations with management gurus and equally well known academics. For example, Peter Senge<sup>4</sup>, since 1991 has been the director of the Centre for Organizational Learning at the MIT’s Sloan School of Management<sup>5</sup>. Other

<sup>4</sup> Senge (1990) is the author of the best seller, *The Fifth Discipline* that has been regarded as one of the most successful management books among others (see Greatbatch and Clark, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See URL: <http://www.solonline.org/>

prestigious business schools like Harvard and Stanford have long tradition of maintaining strong associations with similar individuals and help promote their work. The marketability of business schools is dependent on their acclaimed leading role to education. Business schools often move to the design of courses and training related to the content of popular fashions<sup>6</sup>.

### *2.7.3 The consumption & circulation of management fads*

The significance between management consultants and management fashion is in the premise that consultants become a conduit for their consumption and circulation to clients. The consultants' identification with the promotion of a specific popular management trend creates an association that is not simply represented by the popularity or aestheticism of the ideas. It is rather their incorporation of its representation within the making of business activities in which business assignments are performed with clients. As a result, the consultants' distribution of specific management methods and tools which have been shaped by the evolutionary trend of specific concepts, results in the creation of economic outputs. The consulting firms' pursuit of maintenance of business profits or/and effort to maximise revenues through the customisation of popular business trends, defines as well as influences the identity of the consultants' work (Kieser, 2002b; Heusinkveld, and Benders, 2005). Our understanding of the consumption of business ideas within consulting activities constitutes a cornerstone appreciating the inner dynamics behind the rapid expansion of the consulting firms.

An issue that remains significant to our study of the association between management fashion and consultants has to do with the customisation and commoditisation of specific concepts to consulting methods and techniques. As highlighted earlier the consumption of the management fads correlates to the interests and identity of the targeted audience. The invention of the ideas is not in itself sufficient to explain the way that such ideas are further adopted, changed, and accommodated to such audience. The assimilation of the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Hull University has created a new MSc course titled Knowledge Management (see <http://www.hull.ac.uk/hubs/05/courses/msc/knowledgeman.htm>). Lancaster University has combined knowledge management to its Human Resource module. (see [URL: http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/masters/MAHRMandKM/](http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/masters/MAHRMandKM/)). Sheffield University also teaches Total Quality Management (TQM) as representing one of the course modules.

content popular fads represent is argued to take place by means of customisation, that is in equilibrium with the consulting firm's objectives, culture, or, clientele interests (Kieser, 2002b). In this context, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) make the case for how management consultants and similar Professional Service Firms (PSFs), engage in activities of "conversion" where the intended meaning behind the popular concept is customised to the interests of the organisational actors. The authors make reference to the notion of "colonization", and, the competition that such firms engage for promoting their own agenda over competitors.

The process of transmitting similar ideas to different clients by means of codification and customization contributes to the ever more prevailing presence of knowledge management fads. As a result, the invention and consumption of business concepts does is not driven by the innovativeness of new ideas but influence from the immediate economic needs they serve. Such economic needs create economic forces of production and consumption that play a determining role in the creation of a market which in some ways exists through the successful commoditisation of ideas to clients.

Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) express the above idea stating how: "the act of commoditisation makes the knowledge product imitable which, in turn, intensifies competition and stimulates demand for new management knowledge products. This creates a *cycle of knowledge production and consumption* that both stimulates and feeds consumer demand" (p.940) (Italics added). Kieser (2002a; 2002b) underlines how management fashions provide an underpinning context of the consultants' work that helps define their consulting activity, and also, their perceived identity towards clients. Kieser highlights the broader impact of management fashions to the pragmatics of the consultant-client interaction. That is, by means of providing an overarching operational context in which the clients' problems and uncertainties are shaped *within* the representation of business models/techniques. The ambiguity of the consulting role for offering solutions against specified needs gains a new nuance of relevance whereby uncertainty is reduced, abstract strategic initiatives are contextualised, and a desirable sense of control is maintained. From this follows how the significance of management fashions has a broader and direct connotation to the nature of the consultants' work because it helps regulate their practices and identity towards clients.

The immediate organisational needs that have to be addressed in clients take an interpretive form of expression through the exercise of management fads. This is because of the way in which acclaimed accounts of knowledge are not simply existent within abstract forms of representation or for how they may be invented by management gurus. Kieser (2002b) argues for how the consultants' work becomes an interpretive lacuna where specific ideas are given relevance. They are contextualised and translated into more treatable forms when expressed by management fashion setters. He states: "Managers find the cases of successful implementations, it furnishes them with a power line of argumentation...Simplicity enhances perceived control. However, this simplicity rests on the simplicity of the metaphors, and the principles. What the tent, network, or virtual organizations look like in reality remains unclear in spite of the numerous examples that are presented" (p.178). This is an important variable that helps sustain the relationship between the two parties, and, also provide specific parameters against which the consultants' value of work can be measured or/and assessed. The association Kieser (2002b) helps to promote underlines the important identity that the swings of such fashions represent in the life of consultants' work to clients. Furthermore, it helps illustrate and complement the rather generic treatment of the impact of the consultants' work as knowledge brokers which is represented in the work of McKenna (2006) and Arbrüster (2006).

The argument is made for how the consultants' consumption of management fashions creates new types of associations not only between firms but also between individuals. The organisational actors' invested interests for acquiring a specific business line of service can be made in order to enhance their marketability towards stakeholders. Also, the internal political interests between individuals can make them pursue the acquiring of such services in order to help promote their own careers or appear innovative towards their colleagues. Kieser (2002b) argues how: "One can assume that managers also have a desire to distinguish themselves in the eyes of relevant observers (top management, investors, or other managers who compete for careers) from other managers." (p. 172).

## **2.8 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an introductory overview over some of the different approaches with which the industry of management consultancy has been discussed in the literature. We have specifically focused on exposing the premises of the three different theoretical perspectives and which in part have dominated the way authors often discuss the reasons behind the rapid growth of the industry. The study of management consultancy concerns a wide array of social and economic factors. Consultancy is not only an important economic activity with specific financial outcomes but also includes interpersonal dynamics between individuals and the competition of personal interests that helps shape how business relationship evolves.

The first part of the chapter has looked at the relationship between management and consultancy. We have argued for the emergence of management as a profession within a wider sociological evolutionary trend. The compartmentalisation between work tasks and forms of organising changed. The ideological premises that have led to emergence of management as an activity is interrelated with the underpinning meaning of consulting and advice-giving (Urwick and Brech, 1983; Brech, 2002). Such context is established in the premise of how human intervention is required in order to maintain control and maximise the efficiency of the firm.

Shaw (1997) argues how our understanding of organisational intervention has been dominated by a normative understanding of intervention. In such paradigm the organisation is subject to the state of the environment where finding the right equilibrium is the route to success. According to Shaw (1997), the theoretical premise behind the Organisational Development approach to the firm has sought to establish “the need for congruence or alignment. This is “between different aspects of the system, between different systems, and, between the organisation and its environment” (p.129).

Acquiring knowledge for a successful intervention has been at the heart of development management and part of the early engineering approaches to consulting. Activities of management consulting initially started through the work of specific individuals that tried to understand and advance the organisational function of management to the firm. The need for specialised knowledge has become the consequential result of competition between firms and the capitalistic pursuit of



economic growth. The evolutionary rise of consultancy has been intimately involved in different types of professions and not just in management. As we discussed at the start of the chapter, the early founders of the small and few consulting firms originated from within the accounting, engineering, law, and other sectors (Kipping, 2002).

What characterises the above approach to consulting in contrast to other approaches is the broader sociological pursuit towards 'organising' in the wider frame of society (Weber, 1978). This trend has shifted away our understanding of the earlier forms of relationships between labour and capital (Hatch, 1997). Complementary to the above trend is also the search for specialised knowledge and expertise through which the managers' intervention could have responsible outcomes to the destiny of the corporation. As Fincham (2002) argues, consultants can be understood from an agency theory perspective that is underpinned by the belief and assumptions about the nature of management itself.

In contrast to the above theoretical approach we have also looked at some of the macroeconomic factors that are used to explain the growth of the industry. By referring to the work of McKenna (2006) we have seen how the political and economic changes in the regulatory environment of the industry had a detrimental affect towards its growth. The early separation between investment and banking activities, used to perform consulting operations came to end after the Glass-Steagall Banking Act in 1933 (McKenna, 2003). The forced new regulatory treatment and the separation of the territorial boundaries of the industry resulted in the increased market need for management consulting firms. The conflict between interests and the need for independence that underpinned consulting activities according to McKenna (2006), helped towards the professionalism of the industry. Furthermore, consultants became a conduit of knowledge to firms that investment or banking firms were restricted from accomplishing themselves.

The above argument illustrates the importance of understanding the trend of similar regulatory changes like Sarbanese-Oxley Act in 2002, followed by the large corporate scandals. McKenna (2006) illustrates how the institutional changes have had similar type of influence to the industry to the one in 1933 by separating the consulting and auditing operations. As a result, the competition between consulting firms has changed and

resulted in the restructuring of the industry while bringing a new wave of mergers and acquisitions. Our reference to Arbrüster's (2006) work and the transactional cost economic theory helps illustrate the value of the consultants' economic activity. In specific, discussions have been undertaken on how the increased specialisation of knowledge and the association between consulting to areas like the implementation of IT systems/financial services, has created a new agenda of services. According to this approach consultants endeavour to create economic value by undertaking research activities that may require large resources and which are not cost effective for the clients to undertake. The multiplicity of the consultants' services creates economies of scope where knowledge-related services are traded as a commodity.

In our exposition of the third theoretical approach to consulting we looked at the literature of management fashion and how consultants play an important role in the creation, consumption, and dissemination of ideas (Abrahamson, 1996). The relevance of management fashion to our understanding of the consulting role is made in its premise to have the power to influence the role and identity of consulting activities. The adoption of popular management trends does not simply become an ideological discourse but has pragmatic implications for how consultants design and deliver their assignment to clients. We have used the work by Kieser (2002a, 2002b) and Clark (1995) who argued how the translation of management ideas creates a set of organisational dynamics where the possible ambiguity in the consultants' work takes definable outcomes, thereby reducing the perceived uncertainty. Kieser (2002a, 2002b) characteristically argues how the adoption of ideas provides a self-rationalisation about the consultants' work which itself becomes a powerful vehicle of justification. As a result, the association between management consulting firms to the popular management fads has a 'pragmatic' economic value as firms manage to sustain their clientele.

## Chapter 3: Functional and Critical Perspectives

### 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the two main theoretical perspectives from which the consultant-client relationship has been discussed in the literature. Our objective is to identify the conceptual framework through which the knowledge transfer is interpreted between authors. We seek to explore the assumptions for how knowledge becomes a transferable resource. We want to argue that an understanding of legitimation is crucial for appreciating how congruence and conformity for new/different knowledge claims take place.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the Organisational Development (OD) or functional approach which argues that consultants perform an important advisory role by delivering information and knowledge. This approach emerged from the 1950s where increasing attention was paid for how external interventions to the firm could help improve its organisational functioning and performance (Clark and Fincham, 2002). Successful intervention became a rationalised process in which performance could be improved or changed through the application of business models (Shaw, 1997). Studies about the management consulting intervention shared specific assumptions where knowledge is believed to be a transferable entity (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Golembiewski, 1993).

The second part discusses the critical perspective that grew from questioning the normative assumptions associated with the knowledge transfer process. The critical perspective argues that the consultant-client interaction is situated within specific competing power and business interests that influence how information and advice are communicated between the two parties (Sturdy, 1997a, 1997b; Fincham, 1999; Clark and Fincham, 2002). For the critical approach consulting is based on the commoditisation of management ideas which are shared and re-used by consultants. Management fads do not necessarily contain the assumed creativity, objectivity, transparency and genuineness, as described by the functionalist perspective. The notion of value is a creation of social construct which is engineered by different persuasive activities of rhetoric. Consultants

are pursuing to convince clients of their potential value by constructing an 'image' or 'impression of value' that is difficult to define, measure, or testify in practice.

The third part of the chapter provides a critique over the functional and critical perspective. It argues that an understanding of legitimation is highly relevant for understanding the processes in which congruence and conformity takes place. The study of legitimation is not adequately explained by either of the above perspectives and interpretations about legitimation are dominated with beliefs of what the consultants are able to accomplish in the client. However, the question of how clients may accommodate, respond or criticise the consultants' service has been neglected. The study of legitimation creates the space for systematising the consultants' accommodation of knowledge in the clients. The effort to deconstruct the application of legitimation helps make transparent the different social arenas of interaction where legitimation can be exemplified under different conditions.

### **3.2 The OD literature on management consulting**

According to this perspective consultants bring skills and knowledge clients either lack, or already possess, but demand complimentary strengthening towards (Curnow and Ravid, 2003). Consultants make an impact through their intervention that has measurable results and are not superficial. This can take place by fostering the operational processes that need to take place so that decisions can be made productively. By proposing possible methodologies that will enable the client achieve a desired performance outcome consultants demonstrate their competency as organisational actors (Barcus and Wilkinson, 1995; Buono, 1997). Consultants develop linkages with specific industries/markets from which they draw specialised information. The social, economic and technological changes constitute the principle environmental trends that consultants take advantage of (Sarvary, 1999). It is argued that consultants produce value by distributing information clients do not have, or it is expensive for them to produce internally (Armbrüster, 2006). As a result, the consultants' knowledge service to client is based on their economies of scope where their specialisation of industry trends becomes a transferable knowledge commodity (Armbrüster, 2006). This approach looks at the

external transfer of knowledge where the production of the right information is necessary for the decision making in the client.

For the functionalist approach the theoretical and central point of argument can be understood through the association between: a) the knowledge that resides in the environment, and, b) how accessible this is made to the clients' situations/needs. In its most basic conceptual premise the functional perspective argues how consultants fulfil the role of knowledge deliverers against the clients' organisational needs (Chrisman and McMullan, 2004). As a result, consultants have been depicted as 'change agents', 'problem solvers' or 'knowledge brokers'. The fact that consultants are external to the client firm is believed to enable the effectiveness of their intervention (Chrisman and McMullan, 2004). As a result, consultants make use of their knowledge in order to provide solutions that work in the client.

The multiple and complex character of what can be regarded as an 'organisational problem', and what can be regarded a 'desired solution' makes it immensely difficult to make the necessary qualifications for what each of these territories represents. Despite how author have chosen to discuss the way consultants make their intervention to clients in the OD literature, there clearly is a homogenous treatment about the intervention process that has a detectable impact on the client's situations (De Jong and Van Eekelen 1999; Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005). Even though authors have drawn distinctions for how consultants operate differently during specific stages in the assignment there is a shared consensus of how consultants provide information and knowledge to clients. Such knowledge helps clients adapt to change or optimise their performance (Chrisman and McMullan, 2004).

It needs to be noted how the growth of the above theoretical trend is part of a broader discourse that is grounded on the attributes of knowledge as an *intangible* resource (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et. al., 2004). Studies about the consultants' intervention to clients originate from an instrumental trust and growing appreciation for what knowledge represents in the first place. Nachum (1999) argues how in the work of consultants "professional knowledge is their core resource, and it is both the input and output in their production processes" (p.923). In exploring the different characteristics of knowledge as an asset and as a process Empson (2001a, 2001b) argues that knowledge represents a

highly valuable organisational resource. What makes it valuable is that it contributes to the competitive advantage of the organisation in the same way as any other tangible resource. Furthermore, the mechanisms behind the creation of knowledge gain further importance because they do not only assist in the innovation of knowledge but also its management (Donaldson, 2001).

The growing interest of the functional perspective departs from the above theoretical premise that views the work of consultants as knowledge carriers to clients. In this sense, client can take advantage of the changing economic or technological market trends by acquiring the consultants' services (see Chrisman and McMullan, 2004). Sarvary (1999) states that: "consultants live and breathe knowledge management because they sell business solutions and knowledge itself" (p.97). Sarvary (1999) argues how the kind of knowledge clients receive from consultants does not consist simply of conceptual information but of a unique synthesis of experience with knowledge that the consultants have accumulated over time from different assignments and with different organisations (Sarovary, 1999). Karreman et al., (2002) argue that one of the reasons knowledge creation has received so much attention from Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIF), is because of "the assumption that this kind of [knowledge] work, and this kind of environment [of Knowledge intensive firms], contains unique essential qualities" (p. 71).

### **3.3 Consulting knowledge & industry trends**

The value of consulting is not inherently attached to the deployment of new ways of managing or in the incorporating of new organisational structures. The value of consulting is maintained in its perceived possibilities to improve organisational performance. This is legitimised in the marketing of consultants' services and the use of success stories. Technological and sociological advances that have enhanced our understanding of human behaviour and its relationship to organisations, have created a wide array of business opportunities. McKinsey articulate the above integration in the following way:

The key to our client service is our ability to integrate our know-how in functional areas with our deep industry knowledge – on a global scale. To support client service, we're organized into industry and functional practices. Our practices develop

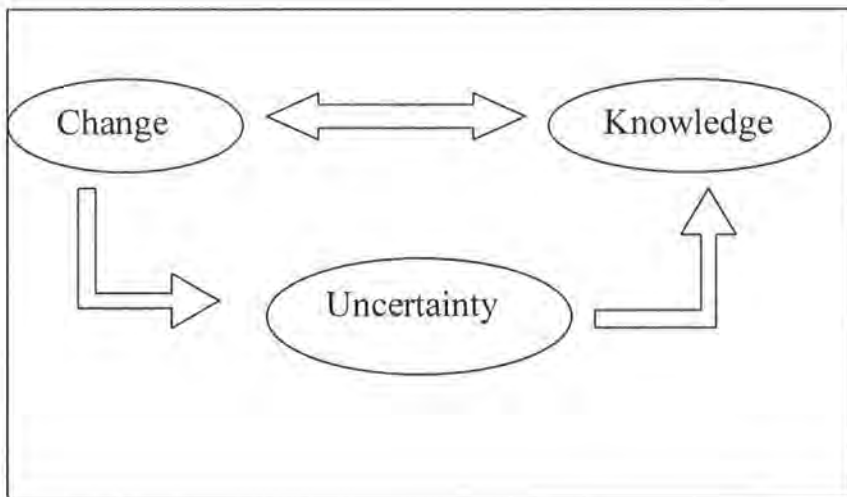
business knowledge and insights that create a critical mass of expertise to provide superior client service (www.mckinsey.com).

Acquiring knowledge for how firms need to adapt to the above changes has been responsible for the need of specialised knowledge that fostered the demand and supply of this market. We argue how the essence of the functional perspective is one of ideological position to representing itself as a *conduit* of knowledge. Put differently, knowledge is used in order to deliver results in the client. Even though the consulting firms' acclamation for possessing such expertise has been ambiguous, the ideological pillar-stone which has encouraged the reiteration of the functional perspective is based around the belief that consultants can prove competent organisational actors. They can complement the knowledge-gaps their clients face. We come to illustrate how the above theme can be exemplified by looking at the areas of organisational change and IT. These are only a few of the areas that have occupied the literature and others include deregulation, globalization, and outsourcing.

### **3.4 Knowledge & Change**

The issue of change has been a central concept in management consultancy discussions (Biegun, 2002; Asch and Salaman, 2003; Crucini and Kipping, 2001; Heracleus and Langham, 1996). Because organisations are subject to the external environment that constantly changes and in order to survive they have to adapt effectively (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999) (see Figure 3.1). Hence the introduction of new skills is necessary not for outperforming competitors. Clark (1995) points that: "organisational environments were classified on a continuum ranging from stable at one extreme to turbulent at the other. Within a stable unpressured environment the *need* for consultants is significantly *reduced*" (Clark, 1995) (Italics Added). The assumption is that consultants know how things run in an organisation and can have access to the causes for its current performance. If the consultants have the knowledge to change these processes through advanced methods of collecting information, they can consequently have a determinable effect on positive performance (Czerniawska and May 2004; Deakins and Makgill, 1997). Fincham (1999) argues that: "change techniques are developed as proprietary

systems, in order to substantiate consultants' claim to be able to pass on to clients the capability to change" (p. 336). In other words, consultants systematise knowledge and emphasise their techniques not necessarily because clients need change, but because they want to sell or persuade the clients. That is, firstly, for the need to change and, secondly, that they would be of assistance in implementing such change initiatives. Schaffer (1991, 1992, 1997, 1998) agrees with Fincham (1999) arguing that successful change programmes begin with results for what the *client* is capable of doing and not for what the consultants recommend. On a similar tone, Lowendahl et al., (2001) argue for the interrelationship between the process of knowledge creation and the value creation for organisations. In particular, they argue that the ultimate benefit in the process of knowledge creation is to help their clients create value for themselves.



**Figure 3.1** Demand for consulting knowledge as resulted from change and uncertainty

### 3.4.1 The functional consulting approach to change

Acknowledging the swift predictable as well as unpredictable social, technological and economic changes has placed increasing pressure on firms to learn how to evolve or respond (Lawrence and Lorch, 1967; Duncan, 1973; Grant, 1996a, 1996b). It has widely been argued how change is a complex phenomenon. The system approach to the firm is not sufficient to accommodate or explain a strategy response to change (Shaw, 1997;



Tsoukas, 2005). As Mitzberg (1973, 1976, 1990, 2004) has extensively argued in the strategy literature, organisations find themselves in a continuing flux of change where identifying patterns of action unequivocally become an emergent activity rather than a pre-planned activity. To our view the dilemma in which consulting finds itself in the above debate has to do with having to deal with the ambiguity of change, where the making of normative claims can prove futile. But also, where the process of rationalising the causes and course of change is necessary if organisational actors can ever know what type of action is required in a given management situation (Lawrence and Lorch, 1967; Galbraith, 1973). The immensely diverse character of needs that corporations experience makes difficult to draw relations for how the relationship between advisory interventions to change are being discussed. Nevertheless, the thread behind the functional approach is one of positioning itself to a prominent role in the knowledge arena. By identifying clear course of actions as based on robust understanding of the competitive dynamics of the industry, organisational actors can enhance the quality of their decision making. Hence, the creation and channelling of information/knowledge/experience can be significant to the making of the right decisions or for affecting performance. This is a premise that is not disputed by the wider management literature on change and strategy. On the contrary, it is a premise widely supported between authors and who publish outside the immediate consulting literature (Lawrence and Lorch, 1967; Thomson, 1967; Galbraith, 1973; Barney, 1991; Scott, 1992; Von Krogh and Roos, 1995).

From the above argument follows, that the strength of the functional approach is maintained in its capacity to demonstrate how the consultants' managerial interventions are not simply driven by superficial efforts to make knowledge-claims. The consultants' knowledge distribution corresponds to the reality of the client organisation. The consultants' competency to create value is not restrained in the need to maximise profits but in their proficiency to generate workable solutions that have a contingent effect to the internal/external environment of the client. The means by which authors have supported the above position has been by arguing for the legitimate qualities of knowledge consultants generate for clients (Block, 1999, 2003; Biswas and Twitchell, 1999). The fact that consultants may have an acute understanding of the current and evolving industry trends enables them to translate such an understanding to action plans. The

emphasis is placed on how the consultants' generated advice becomes a product of information assimilated through experience (Czerniawska and May, 2004; Kakabadse et. al., 2006). Hence, consultants do not simply sell information and rules at a cognitive level only but also insight and understanding, as a result of their experience in dealing with similar projects. This can help explain why authors argue how consultants can demonstrate insight that clients can testify from their own reality of the working environment (Czerniawska and May, 2004).

It needs to be noted how the knowledge creation and dissemination paradigm is not an activity simply confined within the management consulting industry. Mechanisms of knowledge production are also shared by other institutions from which business schools play an equal prominent role (Pfeffer and Tong, 2004). Business Schools that share a distinct sense of prestige have been at the forefront of the production of knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996). Nevertheless, the relationship between large corporations and their collaboration with business institutions has been evident in the literature and often criticised (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Cheit, 1985). The position that knowledge is an important prerequisite to the function of any organisation is not an idea just promoted by consulting firms. It is rather a general belief shared between authors representing both the academics and practitioners world.

Management consultants do not belong in the academic educational arena and their support over their knowledge practices has been discussed with caution. This is because consulting is thought to constitute a business activity that has invested interests in winning/persuading clients. It is not simply pursuing to advance the body of knowledge in a systematic and methodological sense, - a premise that the academic institutions are argued to represent more strongly<sup>7</sup>. What then differentiates the functional approach to consulting can be characterised as a broader ideology of managerial intervention which is promoting a positivistic approach to knowledge and its application. In the context of change, and as it is represented in the various social, technological, and economic trends

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<sup>7</sup> Business schools have managed to avoid criticism about the business interests that they entertain through their perceived role as forerunners of knowledge production. However, this is area where research is yet to be made.

what drives the functional approach becomes the business assignments where consultants show that can generate information and knowledge that clients lack.

### **3.5 Information Technology**

A complimentary dimension to the above and responsible for the rapid growth of the consulting industry has to do with the arrival of technological innovations that came to revolutionaries how corporations thought about the internal and external design of their operations (Arbrüster and Kipping, 2002). The arrival of new Information Technology (IT) innovations helped create a new market (Arbrüster and Kipping, 2002). This was not capitalised by consultants with simply shifting their advisory focus to technological solutions, but by combining the potential areas of service with already existing business advisory services. Morten and Nohria (1999) argues that during the last decade the growth of information technology systems partly replaced human labour with automated systems, and revolutionised the way companies operate. With IT's growth new tools were created to build knowledge capital. The growth and globalisation of companies by which managers can access benchmark characteristics of performance across the globe helped knowledge become a *key* precondition to a company's competitiveness. The opening of a host of business opportunities helped consultants position their intermediary advisory role as a promising means to performance maximisation. The opening of new opportunities for how clients could advance their manufacturing or service operational procedure through the use of technologies allowed the consultants to present themselves as 'experts' in breaching the above knowledge gap. As Arbrüster and Kipping (2002) argue, the development of technological advances was not confined in the technical specificities of such territories. The synthesis between technology and business practices created a new array of services where the maximisation of efficiency and performance in the client became the selling pitch.

The delivery of IT systems within the strategic scope of a client organisation created a new scope of knowledge initiatives. Hansen et. al., (1999) argue how "the foundation of industrialized economies has shifted from natural resources to intellectual assets, executives have been compelled to examine the knowledge underlying their business and how that knowledge is used" (p. 106). Clients have increased their use of such consulting

services because it is less costly to acquire or outsource rather than produce them. A complimentary dimension to the above has to do with how IT systems have changed the way in which information is disseminated, stored, retrieved and broadly manipulated by organisational actors (Morten and Nohria, 1999). The representation of information has changed from the way it has been traditionally stored. The timing of its codification and retrieval has opened new dimensions to its incorporation for decision making. The service industry sector has benefited out of IT systems (Morten and Nohria, 1999). Financial and management advisors can have immediate access to knowledge resources of a client from the experience of other consultants. This can be used to foster the quality of the service produced in the interaction, hence ensuring a potentially greater level of satisfaction.

### *3.5.1 The functional approach to IT systems*

The consulting firms' incorporation of IT systems helped revolutionise the growth of the industry during the 1980s and 1990s. Czerniawska (2002) mentions how "The late 1990s saw the emergence of a whole new generation of consulting firms – firms like IXL, Sapiient, Scient and Razorfish – all of whom were growing phenomenally fast, even by the generous standards of the conventional consulting industry" (p.1). Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (2002) argue that: "Whether in relation to corporate strategy, BPR, or just about any other area of practice, information technology has long constituted a lucrative vein of work for all sort of management advisors" (p.116). This is because new business opportunities opened for clients about what can be achieved under the incorporation of such mechanisms. Whereas the consulting market was dominated by firms specialising in the management-related services already existing accounting firms also provided consulting services. The creation of new consulting services was based on the adaptation of technology and combined with existing accounting or auditing services (Fincham and Clark, 2002). The existing clientele helped ease their entry into the market and proved a challenge to strategy-related consulting firms (Fincham and Clark, 2002). Armbrüster and Kipping (2002) argue for how the nature of competition changed and the market was no longer occupied by the traditional strategy and management-related service firms. The authors argue how the accounting firms have successfully managed to enter into the

consulting arena in order to expand their portfolio of business. As a result, the initially distinct territory of management and strategy consulting has now become blurred with technological interventions. Czerniawska (2002) argues how strategy firms equally capitalised on the creation of technology services and that "...by early 2000, the level of e-business work undertaken by such [strategy] firms was typically between 35 and 40 percent" (p.2).

At one level, the consulting role can be seen as one of positioning their activities for fulfilling this techno-managerial gap in the client. At a second level, it can be argued how consultants have not simply acted as technology bridges only but played a distinctively important role with *translating* the unrealised IT possibilities, within the capacity and organisational capability of the client. Even though, at first, it seems that consultants may fulfil an information brokering role their intervention is more instrumental for how the client recognises the realisation of such technology prospects to organisational needs. This is on the ground of eliciting the client's perception of needs in relation to the potential and desired anticipated outcomes as extracted from the use of technology.

The business links consultants manage to create through the delivery of IT services expands beyond the technicalities of the assignments to creating long term advisory *relationships*. Consulting firms want to capitalise on the management side of their IT-related activities because helps sustains their business in the long term (Czerniawska, 2002; Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). Furthermore, the clients' perceived quality of the service is not simply judged by the immediate and temporary requirements of the project. The clients' perceived quality of service is dependent on how consultants deal with unexpected emerging issues surrounding their adaptation of IT systems. As a result, the consultants' support to clients becomes a distinct quality of future service (Czerniawska, 2002). Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (2002) refer to the above issue by arguing: "More specifically, technology companies have to be able to offer knowledge, experience, and business advice as a sort of envelop or overall package within which their products are sold and operated" (p.116). Bessan and Rush (1995) support argue how the "[consultants'] input can be direct, offering transfer of specific technological competence, but they are often involved more in a wider and more flexible interaction in the process

by providing a number of information opportunities and (often poorly articulated) user needs" (p.101).

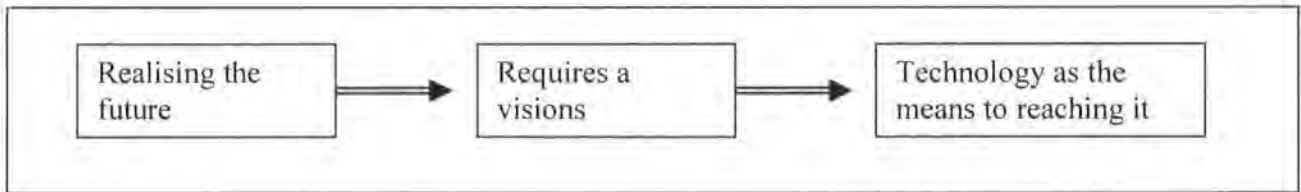
The size and structure between IT systems has varied between consulting firms. Accounting firms have managed to increase their market share in a short period of time because of the use of existing resources and ability to financially invest in such new areas (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). The use of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) became the more dominant IT system through which traditional and accounting firms entered into the consulting arena. Different scale software systems also include: Customer Relationship Management (CRP), Projects in Controlled Environment (PRINCE), Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBK) and Software Configuration Management (SCR). From the above software systems ERP has been the more dominant and widely distributed package among consulting firms.

Niehaves et. al. (2006) argue how "IT related and especially ERP consulting compromise approximately 29% of this market" (p.5). Grant et. al. (2006) state how: "By the late 1990s one estimate suggested that, in the United States, almost 60 per cent of large companies and 40 per cent of small and medium-sized companies had deployed ERP systems. In 2003, it was estimated that 30,000 companies around the world had implemented ERPs... "The significance of the ERP 'industry' is such that the worldwide market for these applications grew to US\$79 billion annually by 2004." (p. 3). In making reference to the above IT systems our aim is not to make extensive reference to their similarities and differences. Our objective is to discuss the logic behind the consultants' endeavor to enter into this market. Our aim is to make explicit the assumptions behind this functional approach to consulting where the 'logic' behind the distribution of technology is to enhance organizational performance.

It is important to note how the successful marketability and acquisition of such large and costly systems by clients is not situated in the technical features that the systems are thought to encompass in themselves. It is rather the assumed potential outcomes that can be accomplished in the client, and which make reference to specific organizational results, which include the reduction of operational costs and the increase of performance. The clients' course in realizing the positive possibilities of such systems needs to be seen in the locus of the consultant-client relationship through which they are marketed. As a

result, the consultants are not simply playing the role of technology distributors but rather become a *point of reference* for how the assumed and imaginary possibilities of such systems can become a reality for the client. From this follows that embeddedness of IT-systems becomes a service activity. The translation of the clients' managerial needs against the represented technological solutions becomes a socially constructed process. Perceptions of the quality of this service process are situated within the immediately involved actors rather than on the designation of technical features represented in the systems themselves.

Armbrüster and Kipping (2002) allude to the above idea by making reference to how: "ERP systems have not only generated demand for the implementation of this software, but have also triggered a number of different advice services in order to restructure and prepare client organizations for these systems" (p. 23). The theme that emerges from the above discussion is how the substantiation of the technological benefits for the client is in some ways dependent on the meaning-making relations crafted with the consultants' involvement. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (2002) present a clear argument in support of the above proposition in stating how consultants become a point of reference for *how* the futuristic capabilities of technology are translated in the client's present situation. The authors argue how consultants become the medium through which the clients' uncertainty in reaching the technological expectations, are realised: "What these forms of vision of the future have in common is that they aim to provide a 'window on tomorrow' which is framed by extrapolations from the here and now and therefore rely on the credibility of what is already known" (p.120). As figure 3.2 illustrates, the logic behind the consultants' IT-related services begins from the evolving notion of how the corporations' need to realise the future and how this is dependent on their manipulation of technology. However, the personification of such technology to the culture and organisational capabilities of the client becomes a socially constructed phenomenon. As a result, the consultants become instrumental in the client's sense-making process for what is to be realised and how.



**Figure: 3.2** The consultants' mediating role to becoming a point of vision realisation for the client  
*Source:* Adapted from: Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (2002:120)

From the above follows that the consultants' role becomes instrumental in the process of creating perceived business added value in the client. This is not because of the consultants' position to distribute the new and changing technology-related services, but in their presented opportunity to also shape how the clients perceive their adaptation to it. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, (2002) and Arbrüster and Kipping (2002) argue for how the course of realising new possibilities helps for the client creates new business services for the consultants. Consultants become a knowledge bridge of fresh ideas, orchestrations of plans and implementation, where the unrealised but existing technological opportunities become feasible and translatable. Hence, the consulting role is discussed in a positive nuance of value-creation. As a result, consultants help serve the clients' technological and managerial needs in a way that is most profitable for the client. Examples of the above argument are expressed around business cases where their production and operational costs were reduced against increases of efficiency/output (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003).

### 3.5 The Critical Perspective

Whereas the functional approach proposes a clear alignment of correspondence between consulting knowledge and the clients' needs, the critical approach sees the above relationship as highly problematic. This is not because of the unreliable qualities of the knowledge proposed by the consultants, but for the way in which they are *made* to correspond to the clients' specific organisational needs. As Table 3.1 illustrates the two perspectives are characterised for differences in relation to the a) knowledge base, b) process and c) outcomes & dynamics for how the client-consultant relationship takes



place. Abrahamson (1996) argued for the role of management fashion setters as compromised by well respected institutions (e.g. business schools), management gurus (e.g. Tom Peters, Rosabeth Mosses Kanter, Peter Senge, Gary Hamel), or/and the other media publishing houses (e.g. business periodicals, management books, magazines) (see Greatbach and Clark, 2005). The association between the consultants' services with the above managerial trends indicates a kind of interdependence, where the consulting identity becomes interwoven over time with the evolution of such ideas (Heusinkveld, 2004). Furthermore, such fashionable ideas concentrate on identifying organisational behaviour qualities/trends that are responsible to increasing the clients' effectiveness/output. Clark and Fincham (2002) state how such management fashions "have a life of their own and increasingly seem to define managerial subjectivity and identity (p.19). As a result, consulting firms come to personalise the general management principles characterising such ideas to formulating their own methods and techniques, within their own agenda. In this sense, consultants become part of a broader knowledge circulation process that contributes and influences their own management methods in their interaction with clients (Clark, 2004).

Ernst and Kieser (2002a) argue that the distribution of popular ideas has stood central to the rise of consulting firms. Consultants are mostly found in the re-distribution of management practices rather than pioneering original ideas themselves. Czerniawska (2002) also characterises this process as "the bandwagon of ideas" (p.43) where consultants become repeat already existing techniques rather than innovators of new ones. If management consultants are heavily influenced by the trend of management fads it follows how they are not as independent and genuine innovators of solutions as they are often depicted from the functional literature. As a result, qualities of independence and objectivity subsequently become 'channelled' of what the latest management fads proclaim as being important or necessary.

The growth and decline of such popular ideas within a specific course of time has been subject of debate in the management fashion literature (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). Authors tried to examine the reasons behind the origin, succession and decline of fads and their accommodated popularisation between firms (Gill and Whittle, 1992). Abrahamson (1996), Abrahamson and Fairchild (1996) argue

how management fads are methods/techniques and practices that have gained acceptance and legitimacy over a period of time through their application by organisational actors found in middle and senior managerial posts. Some of these popular trends have been: Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Total Quality Management (TQM), Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Customer Relationship Management (CRM), the Balanced Score Card (BSC).

**Table 3.1** A representation of the differences between the two theoretical approaches

| <b>Functional Perspective</b>  |   | <b>Critical Perspective</b>    |   |
|--------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Knowledge Base</i>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry Knowledge</li> <li>• Technical skills &amp; expertise</li> <li>• Management Tools</li> <li>• Information Gathering</li> <li>• Consultants' Experience</li> </ul>                                | <i>Knowledge Base</i>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management Gurus</li> <li>• Business Schools</li> <li>• Publishing Houses</li> <li>• Consulting Firms</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Process</i>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge Solutions</li> <li>• Business Models</li> <li>• Problem-Solving Process</li> <li>• Consulting reports</li> </ul>   | <i>Process</i>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge commoditisation packages</li> <li>• Re-use of similar ideas</li> <li>• Popular Management Ideas</li> <li>• Consultants' past reputation</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Outcomes &amp; Dynamics</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management Solutions</li> <li>• Clients' independence from consultants</li> <li>• Clients' expansion of knowledge resources</li> <li>• Measurable outcomes</li> <li>• Performance improvement</li> </ul> | <i>Outcomes &amp; Dynamics</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impasse to measuring value</li> <li>• Change of power relations</li> <li>• Clients' dependence on consultants</li> <li>• Ambiguity of the received knowledge</li> <li>• Client manipulation</li> </ul> |

### **3.6 Theoretical underpinnings**

For the critical perspective, recognising the consultants' association with management fads helps realise the consultants' dependency on the evolution of such business ideas. Whereas, for the functional perspective consultants realise solutions that are mainly generated by their own expertise of the field, this understanding shifts to how the consultants are themselves conditioned by them. The image of consultants as consumers

of management fads is closely associated with their own creation of identity. The consultants' expertise becomes dependent on their competency to translate the premises of management fads within their own client interactions. From this point of view expertise becomes a self-constructing process and it is a mere outcome of reiterated existing knowledge.

A second dimension that the critical perspective emphasises has to do with how the consultants often have to rely on the qualitative attributes of the marketed services, they sell to clients. The straightforward relationship between the clients' organisational problems and the consultants' solutions becomes blurred. The application of consulting knowledge is marketed as 'expertise'. However, it is the involved organisational consultants that have to demonstrate the relationship between the relevance of their knowledge to the clients' situation. Hence, authors in support of the critical perspective argue that value needs to be understood as a socially constrained process which is dependent on the immediate involved organisational actors (Sturdy, 1997b). The roles, interests, expectations or demands of the involved individuals will determine the creation of the desired solutions. As a result, the notion of expertise does not longer reside on the factual qualities of the consultants' knowledge only. The legitimisation of the consultants' ideas is equally dependent on the socialising aspects of the relationship between the two parties (Røvik, 1996). How knowledge is conditioned within the situated expectations/interests of the people involved is responsible for the perceived quality of service (Werr, 1999). The value of the consultants' knowledge is dependable on their interaction and communication with which impressions are created. From this follows, that value and expertise are context-dependent on the relationship of the organisational actors that project them over the business assignment (Fincham, 1995; 1999).

A third dimension of the critical perspective has to do with the exercise of power between consultants and clients (Alvesson, 1993, 1995a, 1995b). In particular, the ways in which clients become vulnerable to the consultants' aggressive and persuasive rhetoric techniques that help convince clients (Kieser, 2002a). The above proposition is supported on the premises of ambiguity with which the consultants' knowledge services are maintained (Alvesson, 2001). When being in a state of need clients are seeking to find assurance and reduce levels of personal and organisational uncertainty. Consultants are in

a position to exercise influence, and often sustain levels of uncertainty in the client against which they seek to exemplify the value of their service. A fourth dimension has to do with how consultants are simply used by clients as a means to legitimising their own political interests in the firm (Legge, 2002). The clients' need for accreditation by their colleagues/ superiors allows managers to engage in expensive consulting practices. Corporations value individuals that have had experience on management projects. Individuals capitalise on such opportunity for their interests. Consultants help alleviate the responsibility for decisions taken by organisational actors that helps deviate the focus of attention from specific individuals to the consulting firm (Kieser, 2002a).

### **3.7 Management fashion setters and consulting**

Having provided a brief summary of some of the propositions by the critical perspective we now move to discuss how the above underpinnings are supported from the literature. Below we come to examine why consultants are believed to be part of a broader knowledge discourse from which they come to develop their knowledge services. We focus on the case of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) as representing a management fad that has been influential for the consulting industry. After this we come to illustrate how consultants personalise the qualities of the above fads in their own business services.

#### *3.7.1 Popular Ideas: A scattered knowledge-pool*

A principle issue concerning the ways of popularising management fads has to do with the *origins* of the ideas, as well as ways of their communication to academic, practitioners and wider audiences. In the literature, it is argued that four distinct groups can be identified as responsible for the initiation, but also, evolution of such popular ideas. These are (1) Management Gurus (2) Business Schools (3) Publishing Houses, (4) Management Consultants (Huczynski, 1993; Clark, 2004; Kieser, 2002a; Heusinkveld, 2004). Fincham and Evans (1999) argue that: "the genesis of many of these ideas can be traced to collaboration between academic, consultancy, and corporate interests – ivy league universities, major consultancies and large corporations – which fed into

organisational change paradigms particularly around the mid-1980s” (p.35). Management gurus are renowned for their impact of ideas to the management community by promoting a particular philosophical understanding of how firms need to be viewed, and, what defines their success or failure in the environment. Clark, (2004) distinguishes between the different types of management gurus into “academic gurus (e.g. Charles Handy, Gary Hamel, Michael Porter, C. K. Prahalad); (2) ‘consultant gurus’ (e.g. Peter Drucker, Michael Hammer, Tom Peters); and (3) ‘hero managers’ (e.g. Lee Iococca, Luis Gerstner, Jack Welch)” (p. 108). Clark (2004) argues that gurus should not simply be viewed as unified group of people that share a common consensus of ideas. This is because they serve different communities but also help translate and personalise such ideas into those communities differently. Studies have been made on analysing different techniques (e.g. applause, humour & laughter) that gurus use for maximizing their impact to their audience as a means to influencing them accept/buy-in their ideas (see Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Because of the intangibility of the ideas management gurus promote, the audience’s perceived image of them is an essential pre-stage to considering or accepting what they proclaim.

Huczynski (1993) argues for the way consultants manage to achieve and maintain their manipulation of images and persuasion techniques as becoming paramount for their later publication of ideas more widely. Prestigious business schools and distinct academics also act as a resource of management ideas.<sup>8</sup> Publishing houses are also an important group of idea distributors who are in search of detecting potential authors that might have a wide selling-impact. Publishers depend on maintaining financial revenues from producing books and magazines that can have mass appeal on readers (Heusinkveld, 2004). Finding potential ‘Best Sellers’ is critical for publishers, and as Clark (2004) states: “book editors are key gatekeepers whose decisions can either facilitate or block the career of a would-be gurus and idea with potential mass appeal” (p. 108). Management consultants play an integral part for the co-evolution of popular management ideas through their circulation into business assignments.

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Mitzberg and Michaels Porter’s work on strategy are an example of this. Porter’s popularity is highly associated with the strategic frameworks of ‘five forces’, SWOT analysis and ‘value chain’, which have become widely accepted, favoured by practitioners, and often incorporated into business courses material.

In contrast to management gurus consultants play a critical role in translating ideas into techniques which for Fincham and Evans (1999) may help extend their shelf-life, “because they commodify knowledge in distinctive ways, enabling it to be sold as solutions to specific problems as opposed to more generalised managerial advice” (p.33). According to Heusinkveld (2004) “this process results in the development of a specific repertoire that supports the commercialization and implementation of a concept” (p.45). In this context, the application of a management concept provides consultants a new array of opportunities, alternatives as well as difficulties for enriching what the initial concept proposed. It is necessary to acknowledge the different audiences for which the idea is targeted when a concept is initiated. Also, how it is adopted and personalised by consulting firms and business institutions while expanding on its qualities or adding on its futures. There is not unified transfer of the idea between the different audience groups as if there was a unified understanding for what the idea means in its entirety and how needed to be applied. As a result, the consulting work comes to play an influential role in *customising* theoretical managerial concepts into business frameworks and techniques, which are then applied to client assignments. This is expressed by Fincham and Evans (1999) arguing that: “the process concept has been widely diffused, and there are inherent difficulties in picking out one ‘master idea’ form such a complex milieu” (p.35).

### 3.7.2 Ideological underpinnings

The process of understanding the knowledge development process in the context of management fads concerns the deeper ideological underpinnings of the idea communicated. In looking into the popularity of BPR for example we see that there is a clear epistemological reliance on the possible positivistic outcomes achieved through human intervention. It is the belief in the individuals’ successful intervention over the life of a business process that trust in the BPR concept gains momentum. From a management guru’s perspective his/her breakthrough contribution is making the hidden conceptual correlation, between organisational process and successful intervention, explicit. In developing their ideas management gurus are not concerned with the operational difficulties that might be faced by practitioners, but with the outcome of behaviour that might be realised as a result (Fincham and Evans, 1999). It is necessary

we acknowledge the modernistic assumptions governing the development of the ideas, on a conceptual level from which consequent knowledge-claims emerge. In BPR or TQM, such assumptions begin with the realisation of a purpose for a firm's desired organisational state and move backwards to rearranging operations that will deductively lead to that state (see Zbaracki, 1998). If management gurus, or consultants, start to doubt this logical process and the qualities of human reason to plan and successfully implement then the BPR ideology also starts to fail. This is because of the increasing uncertainty over its meaning and application. Looking at the management practitioner audiences the re-engineering of "core-processes" has been portrayed as an absolute necessity to any prior expectations for enhancing performance (Creplet et. al., 2001, Cross et. al, 2001).

Kieser (2002a, 200b) Huszynski (1993), Fincham and Evans (1999) Clark and Salaman (1996) argue how consultants strive to create a reputation of expertise and need the client's trust in allowing them to deploy a BPR practice. The authors argue for how consultants may not have detailed knowledge for how this is achieved. As a result, they need to construct a methodology that justifies their course of action convincingly for the client (Werr, 1999). Heusinkveld (2004) in using Visscher, (2001) states how "in practice, consultants have to put forwards structured plans for client while they often know little about the specific problem situation.../" (p.45). The management consultants' knowledge-service for implementing BPR initiatives successfully, compliments the clients' managerial uncertainty. Hence, consultants aim at establishing an acclaimed expertise based on rhetoric for what they can achieve.

A complimentary issue to the above concerns the timing from which such ideas emerge. Also how they are being capitalised by consulting firms. The deployment of popular ideas correlates with their competing state between the consulting players and for getting to potential clients first. Czerniawska (2002) notes how: "from the perspective of consulting firms, ERP related consultancy was an object lesson in the importance of establishing early footholds in new knowledge markets as they emerge. As the market for ERP consultancy suddenly burgeoned, only a minority of consulting firms recognised the potential. Those that did were quick to recruit the few trained ERO consultants available and to win assignments with clients which helped them to build up critical mass, in terms of both numbers of people and intellectual capital" (p. 55). The relationship of discourse

between the consultants within the given management fad fulfils an important twofold purpose: Firstly, it helps consultants sustain their managerial identity as business advice-givers. This is by demonstrating a knowledge possession for what could be relevant for the clients (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). Secondly, it helps consultants find a paradigm/point of view for conceptualising and contextualising the client-situation, and their course of action through the deployment of their idea(s) (Legge, 2002).

### **3.10 The Commodification of Management Fashion Ideas**

Even though emphasis has been placed on the management fashion setters, it is the management consultants that have to operationalise them in their interaction with clients (Fincham and Evans, 1999). The consultants who need to apply management ideas to specific client situations is distinct from how they were initially communicated by the fashion setters. Consultants achieve the operationalisation of management fads through their adoption and conversion into methods and techniques. Such techniques provide tools and methodologies from which the consulting intervention is designed. This process of ideas-conversion is discussed in the literature as knowledge-codification and commoditisation (Suddabby and Greenwood, 2001). Codification refers to the process of making forms of tacit knowledge and experience explicit and codified (Nonaka, 1994). Such accounts are stored, accessed and used by other consultants. Commodification refers to the commercialisation of such ideas in the advice-market as products that become commercially traded in client assignments and whose advertising and marketing techniques help them become attractive to client firms (Carter and Crowther, 2000; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Our discussion of codification and commoditisation in the overall scope of the thesis concerns the critical perspectives' justification for how the consulting knowledge stages are generated and developed.

#### *3.10.1 The economics of codification and commodification*

The study of knowledge-commodification indicates a burgeoning of knowledge-flow that expands not strictly because of meeting the clients' needs but because of the consultants' own need for survival in the consulting market. In this sense, and in contrast to the functionalist perspective, the evolution of consulting knowledge occurs and is promoted



within a different stream of business demand where the client's satisfaction/needs are not the only predominant scope. The methods by which consultants achieve the above selling of business services takes place through the operationalisation of ideas into management methods and techniques<sup>9</sup>. Ernst and Kieser (2002a) argue how commodified concepts allow for the rationalization of the consulting work whose potential value for clients would be otherwise more *difficult* to detect. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argue how commodification can be thought to occur in a three stage process: (1) Codification (2) Abstraction and (3) Translation.

Codification is a term fostered by the categorisation of the different types of knowledge into codified/explicit and tacit/implicit as initially argued by Nonaka (1994) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). It also refers to the articulation and storing of otherwise implicit self-contained or inarticulate-able accounts of experiences/knowledge. By codifying ideas into manageable forms the consultants initiate the first stages of their use as a potential resource for the firm. The abstraction stage refers to the conversion of popular idea into metaphors, schemes, diagrams, that may be applied in particular client-situations. At this stage, consultants come to design business frameworks/methods in a way that they are inclusive enough to accommodate the clients' particular managerial problem, but also exclusive enough to be seeming 'unique' for the clients' specific case.

The translation process concerns the interpretative role in applying such abstract ideas to particular organisational contexts. The semantic movement in *meaning*, from a) the generic application of the codified knowledge to b) the particular situation imbedded by the consultant is an important part of this process according to Archer and Bowker (1995). This is because the consultants need to demonstrate the relevance of their knowledge to the clients' specific organisational problem and culture, without theorising in abstract. The consultants' attempt to *abstract* any managerial knowledge and codify it shows a close association between: (1) their assumed 'expertise' to be able to determine the types of formulas required and (2) their assumed capability to make them *applicable* to the specific needs of the clients in the form of a 'sold package' (Macy, 2002). Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) outline a number of advantages achieved through the knowledge codification and commodification process. Such advantages concern the ease by which

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. Boston Box, McKinsey 7S, Porter's Value Chain, and Five Forces

the production and support of the management ideas are initiated within the internal function of the consulting firm. Also, it helps the standardisation of processes in the execution of frameworks by using less-experienced consultants which may require lower fees. Commodification helps the branding aspect of the consulting firm and its marketing attractiveness in the client with possessing the latest management fashion trend.

Kieser (2002a) argues that “commodification means that consultants transform unstructured problems and problem solutions into standardised problems and solutions” (p.168) Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) describe the term as: “the process by which managerial knowledge is *abstracted* from context and reduced to a transparent and generic format that can be more easily leveraged within [professional service firms] PSFs and sold in the market place” (p.934) (Italics Added). In this product, consultants encapsulate certain managerial models or techniques that will enable them to deal with the various organisational problems of the client.

The attempt to commodify managerial knowledge is related to the notion of contextualisation so that it can be used in many cases, for different clients, with similar problems, and with the assumed expectation of similar anticipated results (Lowendahl et. al., 2001, Scarbrough and Swan, 2001). Lowendahl et. al., (2001) argue that when the consultants’ knowledge to clients is imitable by other consultancy firms, it means that it represents only ‘generic’ knowledge and not ‘particular’ knowledge. Knowledge needs to represent a unique and hard to imitate resource of greater competitive advantage than its competitors. If this is not the case, it cannot be regarded as a source of competitive advantage, but only as a generic resource that does not necessarily have competitive value. This formulated knowledge is applied and sold to the clients in what are often termed as, “packages” or “packages of change”. The most common ones have been TQM, BPR, Customer Relationship Management (CRP), Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), and Lean Management (LM). There is not particular consistency for how the terms are used by consulting firms to describe such practices. Consulting firms tend to adopt their own terminology in using similar titles to the above ideas. Authors have also argued for the positive outcomes of knowledge codification especially in the context of knowledge sharing (Hansen et. al., 1999). Having discussed the theoretical premise of the functional and critical perspectives the following section goes to discuss the perspectives’

lack of exploration for how the process of legitimation takes place in the consultant-client relationship.

### **3.11 A Critique of Functional Perspectives**

#### *3.11.1 Homogeneity of consulting knowledge*

In the principle theoretical premises of the functional perspective weight is placed on the consultants' competencies to knowledge creation. Such knowledge can be drawn from the wider internal or external environment, but helps meet specific organisational needs in the client. The functional approach argues for how consultants manage to legitimise their knowledge to clients because of the qualities of such knowledge solutions/attributes. Consultants may become a conduit of information and knowledge under a positivistic trend of interpretation. Hence, aspects of legitimation are characterised for what the consultants can achieve for the client. The issue of application and accommodation of such knowledge however, has been heavily under-explored in this literature. The emphasis is on what the consultants can achieve for the clients. The clients' reaction to the consultants' knowledge is important before we can be able to appreciate the way in which this process is achieved.

The methodological soundness through which solutions are developed or the acute understanding that consultants demonstrate over trends of a particular industry, may become definable features that characterise the consultants' quality of work. In this sense, the value of the consulting knowledge is discussed in its problem-solving capabilities that are often taken as granted. The success or failure of the consultants' work is not so much discussed in its interactive dimension with the client, but in its knowledge-architecture where managerial ideas are believed as instrumental for enhancing performance. Legitimation cannot be evaluated for what consultants can produce for the client, but for how ideas, information and knowledge are accommodated in the distinct organisational dynamics and culture of the client. The limitations of the application of consulting knowledge in the client are rarely acknowledged from a client's points of view. Instead, we find how the consultants' realised failure to deliver value comes to be explained in the literature from the context of the operational structure within which an assignment is

delivered. As a result, the success or failure of a consulting intervention is emphatically discussed in relation to the consultant.

In examining the popular distribution of ERP systems we find how consultants supported the value of their services on the possible accomplishments of such IT software system. ERP was marketed for its instrumentality to coding and storing information from all levels of the organisation (Niehaves et. al., 2006). It was promoted for its capability to help enhance organisational efficiency regardless of the corporations' structure and culture (Grant et. al., 2006). Czerniawska (2002) argues how consultants used technology as a market opportunity to enter into the business management arena. She states: "...technology consultants, who had previously found that the level in an organisation at which they had their key relationships was inexorably declining, found themselves talking to the CEO and IT director. And they used this opportunity to sell to clients a far wider range of services (notably strategy, branding and marketing) than would have been the case in the past" (p.3). The marketability of the consultants' intervention to supplying such systems for achieving results was to a good degree built on the assumed accomplishments of ERP.

In a study by Grant et. al., (2006) we find how the notion of technological determinism became increasingly *problematic* in its adoption by a number of corporations. Grant et. al., (2006) argue that the firms' internal environmental and micro-structures are as critical for the successful application of the firm as the assumed capabilities of the system itself. Even though consultants took advantage of the clients' growing interest on this expensive system, they were also met with disappointment by clients. Grant et. al., (2006) go to argue how consultants align their services within the *assumed* capabilities of ERP in order to maximize their perceived value. However, consultants fail to qualify the limitations of their intervention on pursue of persuading clients. The same idea is also supported by Czerniawska (2002) who argues how "lengthy ERP implementations...severely tarnished the reputation of this sector [which] e-business helped to repair it" (p.3). Niehaves et. al., (2006) also argue how the study of the application of ERP systems has been concentrating on a techno-system view where organizational actors are seen as 'external' to the project. Niehaves et. al., (2006) argue that a "socio-technical" approach is required that incorporates the interpersonal and

political dimension between actors. The value of the application of ERP has created over-reliance over the system itself, and has undermined our understanding of the role/influence between actors, at a social level.

### *3.11.2 Expertise Knowledge*

A complimentary critique to the above is also made around the notion of consulting 'expertise. From the functional literature we find how authors argue for the knowledge contribution consultants make and how it is based on their specialised knowledge (Sarvary, 1999; Curnow and Reuvid, 2003). The value of consultants is dependent on their ability to provide a knowledge service that is absent in the client (Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005). Considerable discussion has developed for how consultants legitimise their service on basis of their specialised knowledge. Even though the notion of expertise encompasses a set of positive competencies for the consultants, at the same time it can become a linguistic construct that is rhetorically based (Fincham, 1999). In this sense claims of expertise can originate from a self-constructed identity whose correspondence with the clients' reality of organisational experience remains vague. Even though the use of an 'expertise' title can be attractive for the consultants' services there is little discussion for the criteria by which expertise can be qualified as an attribute.

The discourse that emerges from 'expertise' becomes an activity that is dependent on the consulting firm's discretion of use. Even when authors make reference to the clients' vulnerability in trusting the consultants' expertise, such discussion endeavours to create a set of logical steps that both parties need to be made explicit. Authors in support of the functional literature rarely challenge the consultants' self-claims of expertise (Lynch, 2003; Rassam and Oates, 1998). Barker and Currow, (2003) argue for the clarity with which the business contract is specifying the consultants' responsibilities against the client's expectations. The assumption is made that consultants are responsible for avoiding the clients' manipulation to their service (Barratt, 2003; Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Reuvid and Mills, 2003; Shays, 2003).

A complimentary dimension to above has also to do with how the increased competition between consulting firms has created a market-need for differentiation. In a consulting market where advice has become commodity the need for specialisation

becomes a competitive advantage against competitors. This idea is also expressed by Czerniawska (2002) arguing how: “- the pressure for specialisation comes from external sources: the need to be able to deliver added value services and to demonstrate a differentiated positioning in the market place. Specialisation is one of the primary means by which consulting firms distinguish themselves from their competitors” (p.75). From the above follows that expertise can serve the competitive interest of the consultant rather than the client. O’Shea and Madigan (1997) argue that such an approach to expertise becomes ‘irresponsible’.

### *3.11.3 Underlying consulting interests*

A third area of critique is made in reference to the consultants’ underlying interests for producing and delivering a knowledge service to clients. The consultants’ intention to helping the client is often interpreted under positivistic presuppositions (Alvesson, 1993; Kieser 1997, 2002a, 2002b, Kipping, 1997; Heusinkveld, 2004). Authors argue how the dissemination of knowledge aims at complementing the clients’ needs (Lippitt, and Lippitt, 1986). The consultants’ way of responding to such organisational needs is made in an almost altruistic sense where it is assumed that the clients’ needs drive the business assignment. In contrast to the above normative approach however, it is clear how the creation of advice is intertwined with the production of business profits. The above has been documented by various authors like O’Shea and Madigan, (1997), Miklithwait and Wooldridge, 1998; Pinault, 2001; Kihn, (2006). From the work of the above authors we find how consultants almost define the quality of their work through a business assignment from the billable hours that they charge in the client. Even though, the consultants’ underlying business interests are recognised in the functional literature they are not discussed for their instrumentality to influence a business assignment. The outcome of the above argument implies how the consultants’ legitimation of knowledge is partly based on their intentions to help clients irrespectively of the business interests. Authors argue for how consultants need to be cautious for making promises that they cannot fulfil (Coulson-Thomas, 2003). Also, how the consultants’ negative reputation might impact future assignment hence trying to discourage such behaviour (Hagenmeyer, 2007). The consulting process is under-discussed in light of the invested business

interests that actually impact the business relationship. As a result, the above approach provides a dualistic critique over the consulting process where business interests can be managed from personal interests as if they were separate entities. We argue how the above view to legitimation is not adequate because it mainly concentrates on what the consultants believe that can achieve for the clients. We propose that a study of the consultants' legitimation needs to incorporate the client perspective into this equation. In particular, to examine how clients view the way in which consultants are thought to distinguish or not distinguish their business interests from the clients' interests.

### **3.12 A Critique of the Critical Perspective**

For the critical perspective the locus of the consultants' value of service is fragmentally represented in the meaning-making relations between actors. Value does not constitute an explicit, definable, and equally represented outcome. The consultants' activities can produce accounts of value that may meet the organisational actors' needs very differently. For the critical perspective it is required that we endeavour to understand how the legitimation of the consulting service takes place within an area of inter-competing interests (Kieser, 1997). Here, power, rhetoric and manipulation are imminent qualities and can impact the creation of impression for the consultants' service. In examining the above critical approach we find how the interpretations generated between authors are partly driven by a number of assumptions that reside from the theoretical implications of management fashion. The view that the consultants' legitimation is intimately associated with practices of rhetoric and argumentation place emphasis on what the consultants can achieve for the client. However, little attention is paid for how accounts of rhetoric are conditioned within clients or how clients may react to the marketing seductive techniques. As a result, the making of conclusions by the critical perspective partly originates on the implications of the initially accepted theoretical assumptions. One of the consequences of the above form of argumentation however, might be to fail to appreciate the consultant-client relationship as it is experienced between the organisational actors themselves. The making of conclusions that are driven by theoretical assumptions is edifying, but it can also be misleading if it tries to fit its interpretation onto consulting practices. For this reason we believe that a study of

legitimation is required that sheds new light on the topic as it is lived by the organisational actors themselves.

Sturdy (1997a, 1997b) was one of the few authors to initially argue for the above realisation by proposing how consultants become equally vulnerable towards clients. Consultants often try to eliminate their own uncertainty about the value they produce by working closely with the clients. The impression created in the management fashion and consulting literature, as Sturdy (1997a) argues, misrepresents the clients' exercise of influence towards the consultants. Consultants and clients come to be equally dependent from each other's practices. This is because even though clients require the consultants' contribution of knowledge, consultants also require the need to sustain their quality of service to clients for maintaining their reputation in the industry. Sturdy (1997a) states that: "... managers are often critical of, and resist, consultants and new ideas and, in turn, consultants respond to, and seek to anticipate, such concerns. Also, by focusing upon why managers adopt ideas and the sources of their anxieties, consultants tend to be portrayed as confident and "in control" rather than being subject to similar pressures and uncertainties." (p.512). We agree with Sturdy's proposition and argue that we need to further elicit our understanding of the clients' instrumentality of the consultants' services. Below we provide a more comprehensive critique over the critical perspective and the limitation of the expressed arguments.

### *3.12.1 Assumptions of rhetoric, manipulation and power*

The critical perspective argues for the consultants' underlying activities in sustaining their rhetoric influence on clients and hence maintaining their selling power (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). The attached vagueness of the meaning behind popular ideas as well as the diversity of their interpretation and adaptation in practice, allows the fostering of the consultants' rhetoric in operationalising them through the use of particular management frameworks and techniques. In this context, the assumption is how consultants manage to win their client's loyalty because of the self-constructed expertise and the commodification of knowledge into change programs.

In making this argument, authors present a *conceptual justification* for the clients' reasons of purchase of such services that is based on rhetoric. However, the technical



merit gained by clients and from using such frameworks is not sufficiently incorporated in the discussion. Even though BPR may refer to the re-organisation of operations in a firm, its application takes a very particular situated expression when faced by a client in which a consultant proposes a certain course of action (Fincham, and Evans 1999). How operations need to be re-organised and what could be the potential benefits out of this, becomes an issue of *discourse* in which knowledge-claims can be accepted, rejected or regulated in this interaction (Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997a, 1997b). The critical perspective assumes that clients will be purchasing consulting services on grounds of rhetoric which is limiting the clients' locus of judgement. Such an assumption might not be enough to capture the possibility of genuine satisfaction found in clients, and when not being influenced by the consultants' argumentation. The insight we gain from the relevance of the above popular ideas is only partial for helping us understand the evolutionary process of knowledge development within the consultant-client interaction. In this sense, even though the management fashion literature provides us with a useful account for the different ways of knowledge generation and distribution, it fails to capture the more particular reasons for which specific claims about the adaptation of such ideas that may often be accepted or rejected by individuals.

The critical perspective fails to explain the increasing consumption and utility made on these ideas by clients who may not be so easily manipulated by the consultants' rhetoric. In similar terms to Zbaracki's (1998) research findings we want to argue how our understanding of the way consultants justify their knowledge claims to clients and the basis on which the clients accept them will help us identify the sustaining power of these ideas. This is not necessarily based on the consultants' argumentation techniques, but also, in understanding the locus of discourse and judgement in which clients make decisions and believe that benefit from the consultants' knowledge service. A complimentary dimension to the above has to do with the view of how clients fall prey to the consultants' seductive marketing strategies. The lure of promising solutions clients can purchase for dealing with their experienced difficulties is argued to have contributed to the clients' willingness to invest in such practices. Carter and Crowther (2000) argue for the striking resemblances between consulting packages with other retail commodities. As a result, the authors argue: "The image of "world class" organizations seems to

mesmerise and seduce managers into embarking on particular managerial programmes; managers thereby demonstrate to the corporate world their virility” (p.635). Even though the clients’ image to purchasing consulting services can be well supported from the literature, to our view the clients’ vulnerability to falling prey of consulting seductiveness has been overestimated in the literature. Authors argue for the attractiveness of the consultants’ services, as if clients have lost any vigorous sense of critical judgement. The above proposition may help to explain the rapid growth of the consulting industry, at one level, however it fails to explain the clients’ consumption of the consultants’ service at a separate level.

### *3.12.2 Management fads & practitioners*

The discussion about management fads emphasises the principle of rhetoric and manipulation of uncertainty as a means for the consultants’ advancing their market. However, a challenge is posed in reference to an existing gap between the discussion of such business frameworks in theory, and their adaptation in practice. Fincham and Evans, (1999) argue that the literature on management fashion fails to make clear how the popular business ideas are translated by practitioners. Furthermore, whether the manipulation of such ideas should still be characterised as management fads. Any change management project can be characterised as resembling a BPR initiative. The making of such associations endangers our understanding for appreciating how popular ideas are conditioned within different organisational settings. It is this very lack of understanding between academics and practitioners who led Zbaracki (1998) to initiate the conduct of a research into the reasons behind the diversity of views in support and opposition of TQM. Zbaracki (1998) found that in cases of TQM, clients proceeded to introducing changes in the organisation that often had a positive effect in the firm. Furthermore, even though the discussion on management consulting may argue for the evolution of ideas and its rhetoric, it fails to appreciate the nature of constraints bounding the consultants as practitioners which have to *act* on the business concepts. The context of rhetoric may influence the interpretation made about the consultants’ motives/activities for why they choose such models and what they aim to achieve. The emphasis placed on the consultants’ manipulation of uncertainty in clients can be argued to be logically

deductively driven from the base of ambiguity that governs rhetoric. Advancing on the rhetoric argument should not take place from what consultants want to accomplish and without appreciating the co-operational side of the relationship. After all, it is the appreciation experienced by practitioners in benefiting from the technical aspects of using TQM which according to Zbaracki (1998) reinforces the *sustainability* of TQM in firms. The interpretive locus of ideas into practice becomes a dynamic basis that creates a different and further rhetoric for what such ideas represent as experienced by practitioners. With the above argument we don't want to imply the existence of a not substantive critique on how consultants use rhetoric, but an inevitable emerging lack in appreciating the complexities associated with implementing business frameworks in action<sup>10</sup>.

Eliciting the process of legitimation in reference to the consultants and clients' experience will help us understand dimensions that are not sufficiently discussed in the literature. Such dimensions have to do with the different organisational contexts in which the consultant-client interaction takes place. Also, the different types of legitimation that may be required to examine for how competing knowledge claims are conditioned in a business assignment. Both the functional and critical perspectives have been instrumental to advancing our knowledge of the subject. However, the making of their argumentation are most often not based on empirical evidence but on the theoretical implications of the assumptions that the authors employ. The following chapter will try to take on the above challenge by firstly exploring a theoretical framework of legitimation that can be then operationalised in the consultant-client relationship.

### **3.13 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine one of the representative literature approaches to management consulting often titled as 'organisational development' of 'functional perspective'. Our objective has been to examine the way in which knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> A similar argument can be made about academics and the business education in Universities. It is argued that since academics profess knowledge of the rhetoric discourse, and who may not have direct management experience in making use of the ideas they teach to students academics are also caught in a similar discourse of rhetoric (see Mintzberg 2004; Beenis and O'Toole, 2005). Here, the reputation of universities and branding marketing strategies aim to satisfy students' demands, and, without providing them with any further substantial input that they can operationalise on in their working experience in the industry.

legitimation is discussed between authors. Also, to make explicit some the implicit but central epistemological assumptions for how author interpret the nature and role of management consulting. The first part of the chapter examined the OD/functional perspective where consultants represent a distribution channel of knowledge to clients and which are titled as 'knowledge brokers' or 'knowledge-carriers'. We argued that consultants play a dual role in channelling expertise knowledge that is external to the client organisation. Macro-environmental forces that encompass changes over the social, economic, political and technological environment are intimately related with the clients' needs of adaptation to such macro-environmental changes. Consultants become a conduit of knowledge whose value is created from allowing clients to capitalise on market opportunities.

The second part of the chapter examined the critical perspective. This body of literature argues how the phenomena of a) consulting knowledge and b) business solutions are social constructed and perceived to provide stability over the clients' managerial uncertainty. The value of the consulting service is not offering functional or workable solutions which will be in direct alignment with the client's needs. Instead, consultants legitimise their personalised solutions to fitting the clients' needs through the use of rhetoric and persuasion. The popularity of management fads is an important resource of ideas that sustain consulting practices and which defines their subjectivity and identity as 'management experts'.

The third part of the chapter provided a critique over the function and critical perspectives. We argued that both approaches have failed to make transparent the way in which knowledge is legitimised. This is partly because authors endeavour to explain the process of legitimation from what the consultants are believed to be able to accomplish. Little attention is paid on what is happening in the client during the interaction. The functional perspectives assumes not only that that consultants know how to respond against the client's organisational needs but also their delivery of advice will generate the predicted outcomes. The critical perspective assumes that consultants are able to justify their service on basis of their rhetoric and impression management. However, little is known for how consultants can manipulate the client's understanding over a business assignment. Moreover, how client may challenge, criticise, or compel consultants to

modify their way of operating in the assignment. From the above discussion it follows that an understanding of legitimation is necessary in order to detect the reasons for which knowledge claims are accepted or rejected between consultants and clients.

## Chapter 4: Conceptualising Legitimation

### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters we examined what could be characterised the two overarching approaches under which authors have examined the nature and role of management consulting practices. We discussed the different assumptions governing the two perspectives and how their interpretations guide their evaluations. In examining the dynamics between the OD/functional and critical perspective we have noticed how little attention has been paid on understanding the nature of knowledge *legitimation*. That is, the nature and interrelationship of those factors responsible for the successful or failed receptivity of new knowledge-claims in the client - consultant relationship.

It is evident that both approaches are consultant-centred in the way they account for why advice consulting claims are justified. In this sense, we discussed that even though the functional approach has emphasised the important mediatory role of consultants in providing information and knowledge, and which may not be internally shared with the client, little is still known about the clients' way of receptivity over such accounts. On a similar note we argued that in spite of the emphasis placed by the critical approach on the consultants' rhetoric, impression management and dependence on the distribution of already existing management methods and techniques, little is known about the receptivity of such ideas from the client's perspective.

Salaman (2002) expresses a similar argument to the above by highlighting how the critical perspective is driven by distinct assumptions in the light of which explanations are made. This accumulated debate has created an almost 'closed system' of thinking about consultancy in which new questions need to be asked that are often not considered in the above debate. Salaman (2002) suggests for example how few answers have still been given in spite of the fact that clients acknowledge the existence of flawlessness in the consultants' knowledge and they still demand their advice and services.

The aim of this chapter is to complement the above conceptual and empirical gap by first examining the theoretical context of legitimation/justification. In this chapter, we concentrate on presenting how authors have depicted the study of legitimation from the literature. By identifying the various key dimensions we will then gradually organise the

collation and analysis of our empirical data in the next chapters. The chapter is structured by discussing four dimensions of legitimisation. These are mainly drawn from Suchman's (1995) work and his emphasis on the cognitive, moral and pragmatic aspects. Suchman's work has been helpful in exemplifying the more narrow aspects of legitimation which lie outside their broader belonging to the institutional and strategic or management symbolic literature (Elsbach, 1994). Furthermore, by drawing on Habermas' work (1984a, 1984b) we also incorporate the discursive side of justification as an additional dimension to the above. In this framework consensus and the inter-subjectivity of meaning are the key features. In this chapter we provide a summary for what each of the dimensions represent thereby setting the context for the methodology and discussion chapters.

#### **4.2 Defining Legitimation**

Legitimation is a term characterising the conformity occurring stages between the evolving role of social systems, in relation to the conditions and changes of their environment. Studies of legitimation are attributed to broader sociological works by Parsons (1960) who argued that legitimation is accomplished with the way organisations make claims over the possession of social norms. His foundational work on the subject is distinguished between three different forms of integration. These are: 1) normative integration, 2) functional differentiation and 3) interchange relations. These phases refer to the stages that help sustain or exclude a system from its environment.

Weber (1947, 1978) provided an equally seminal contribution emphasising the role of organisational forms to the orchestration of social action. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) also argued for the surviving strategies adopted between firms and how complying with the societal norms and values helps legitimise and promote their practices. Within the literature of organisational studies there has not been a constituent definition of legitimation as it has been difficult to define it as a term. However, Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide the following description: "legitimation provides the 'explanations' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. (It) 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objective meanings and (...)

justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives (p. 111).

In using Maurer's work Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) state how legitimacy can be understood as the "the process whereby an organization justifies to a peer or subordinate system its right to exist, that is to continue to import, transform, and export energy, material, or information" (p. 124). Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) state that "A legitimate organization, then, is one that is perceived to be pursuing socially acceptable goals in a socially acceptable manner; given this normative quality, efficiency and performance alone are not sufficient" (p. 177). In a more recent study of legitimation Suchman (1995) defines it as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574).

#### *4.2.1 Strategic & Institutional Perspectives*

Suchman (1995) argues that there can be two broad traditions justifying the exploration of legitimacy and that these can be categorised as the 'strategic' and 'institutional' approaches. The strategic approach places emphasis on the instrumental role of an organisation's actions for achieving conformity with its environment. Authors in support of this view have argued for the organisations' careful orchestration of practices for becoming legitimate towards its target audience (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975, Pfeffer, 1981). Also, how such legitimate practices may adhere to the superficial conformity of such norms/values that are rhetoric or image driven and without providing any pragmatic integration for that which they propose (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Such organisations are not necessarily committed to implementing internal organisational changes but create *images* of congruence (Tedeschi, 1991). Complementary to the above view, authors have also supported the manipulative character of organisations in which they can exercise their influence to conditioning the environment's existing societal norm/values. As a result, organisations are not only *conforming* to the emerging/changing environment in a passive way, but can also influence the evolution of such values in an active way (Elsbach, 1994).



The institutional tradition to legitimation as supported by DiMaggio and Powell, (1983) Meyer and Rowan, (1977) Powell and DiMaggio, (1991) emphasise how the concept needs to be seen as an outcome of performance that resides in the cultural and cognitive belief-system of a society's members. In contrast to the instrumental or manipulative character of legitimation as emphasised by the strategy approach, the above authors argue how legitimation is an outcome of the socio-political and cultural *shifts* which the organisation needs to adopt (Scott, 1995). Such shifts become apparent through an organisation's changes of organisational structure or/and the accommodation/modification of its policies.

This is captured in Meyer and Scott's (1983) emphasis on the continuing evolving role of an organisation which prolongs its 'existence' in the environment. In his discussion of the difference between the above traditions, Suchman (1995) notes, how the institutional approach sees "organizations when they are legitimate when they are *understandable*, rather than when they are *desirable* (p. 573) (Italics in the original). For Meyer and Scott (1983), Scott (1995) legitimacy follows closely the cognitive realm of comprehensibility as it is shared and expressed between members. In this sense, the authors want to emphasise the deeper cognitive-cultural and *structural* conformities that take place within a firm's policies or strategy practices, and which become more evidently visible by the stakeholders and its wider audience.

In a similar study of legitimation by Elsbach (1994) it is argued that the two theoretical approaches under which legitimation has been mainly explored can be characterised as the 'impression management literature', represented in the works of Goffman, (1963); Tedeschi, (1981), and, the 'institutional approach' developed through the works of Meyer and Rowan, (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell, (1983). Elsbach (1994) argues how the impression management approach has mainly been focused on studies of legitimation at the individual level. Here, the performance aspect of the actors' communication of ideas is aimed at creating certain accounts of understanding, where the use of impression is significant for achieving persuasion. In contrast to impression management, institutional approaches have focused on the organisational level where corporations as social systems need to legitimise their corporate practices and which go beyond individual actions.

Elsbach (1994) highlights how despite the wide use of legitimation within the above two theoretical approaches there still is a wide lack of understanding how legitimation occurs at either of the two above levels. This thesis is also supported by Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) who argue how “most research on the construct has been confined to the means of legitimation and has overlooked the conditions under which such means are or are not successful” (p. 177). Elsbach (1994) undertakes a longitude study of the Cattle industry in an effort to complement the above gap. The author produces a useful account in operationalising the emergence of legitimation by exploring how verbal accounts and their association to organisational procedures help sustain the presence of legitimation.

Even though, the use of ‘strategy’ and ‘impression management’ titles seem to differ for the body of literature they represent, it is important to note that they both assume the instrumentality through which organisational *interventions* are made. Hence, the underpinning belief that guides the adoption of the above terms emerges from the need to exemplify how the goal-oriented individual and organisational interventions may allow the manipulation of the commonly represented environment. Even though the impression management literature does not undermine the importance of organisational action it nevertheless places equal emphasis on the performance character of impressions (see Allen and Caillouet 1994). In this sense, rhetorical discourse is argued to help socially construct a perceived reality that can differ in its presented features from the traits of events that have taken place within a particular organisational context (Berger and Luckman, 1966). According to institutionalism organisations are not keen on maintaining their existence through symbolic-management interventions, but by adapting their practices/policies to the given social norms and values of the environment they operate. As a result, the transition of legitimation takes place in a more transitory manner that is rather characterised for the need to integrate and *exemplify* the adoption of such practices.

#### 4.2.2 *The vagueness of legitimation*

One of the key challenges faced by authors in studying the nature of legitimation concerns the vagueness of the term, and the difficulty to establish the parameters for how it emerges, or whether it can be measured and how. In using Perrow’s (1970) work for example Ashroth and Gibbs (1990) state how legitimacy is subjective, context dependent and like “beauty, it resides in the eye of the beholder” (p. 177). Suchman (1995) also

argues how the fragmented stages that contribute to the development of legitimation are partially constructed over time and in the course of series of events. This makes it difficult to provide any account of explanation that depicts accurately its actual way of emergence in reality. So, even though legitimacy can be thought to be “possessed objectively, yet [is] created subjectively” (Suchman, 1995: 574). As a result of the above, the way organisations manage to sustain their legitimacy becomes an issue that is dependent on their actual organisational practices, but also on the interpretation and projected subjective reality for what these practices represent, or how its actors want their audience to perceive them. Perrow (1970) argues how organisations are able to project their legitimacy as a means to maximising their entitlement to gaining resources as well as their members’ trust. He argues, how organisations are themselves responsible for the often failure to actualise on the pragmatics of results through their rhetoric of legitimation.

Complementary to the above complexities we find Ashforth and Gibb’s (1990) proposition about the ‘double edge of legitimation’ where organisations are often bounded by their own claims to legitimation in a way that it produces the *adversary* affects from what is desired. The authors support the above proposition by demonstrating how organisational actors operate in a state of uncertainty, in not only how to legitimise their claims but also to what extent their legitimation is perceived as sufficient/adequate by their audience. The actors’ need to secure that their propositions are accepted or supported by the audience often becomes the reason for which they go through a process of *over*-legitimising. In this context, Ashforth and Gibb (1990) argue how “protests of legitimacy are likely to be more successful if they are indirect and subtle” (p. 187).

#### *4.2.3 Cognitive, Moral and Pragmatic dimensions*

In an effort to provide a more integral framework of legitimation where both the ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ features can be incorporated, Suchman (1995) provides a useful conceptual model. By segmenting legitimisation into the cognitive, moral and pragmatic dimensions, the effort is made to accommodate the different social contexts underpinning legitimation. Such framework accommodates the impact of rhetoric and superficiality as

communicated through knowledge statements or made in reference to particular values/norms.

**Table: 4.1** Suchsman’s typology of legitimation

| Typology                          | Cognitive   | Moral   | Pragmatic   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Factors underlying its creation   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contested validity claims that are based on perceived credible and reliable evidence.</li> <li>- Emphasis placed on the control and prediction as key features represented in the knowledge claims</li> <li>- The use of argumentation and rhetoric through which persuasion becomes possible</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Commitment to sustaining values and principles that are part of a shared ideology</li> <li>- Making references to protecting the important wider welfare of its members</li> <li>- Claims to protecting the common good in contrast to serving individual interests</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perceived immediate, personal, gains that become possible by showing support or conformity</li> <li>- Creating arguments about the positive tangible and intangible returns stakeholders members can attain by showing conformity</li> </ul> |
| Factors underlying its sustenance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The creation of policies and procedures that are perceived to correspond to the reiteration of the made arguments</li> <li>- Maintaining and protecting the perceived value within members of the accomplished and potential practices.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining and maintaining recognition from outside social institutions (e.g. through rewards or publication)</li> <li>- Introducing disciplinary actions in the form of policies and which are marketed to the members</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Producing financial incentives to members and stakeholders</li> <li>- Allow greater degree of participation and dialogue between leaders and members</li> <li>- Making investments</li> <li>- Hiring and firing new/old personnel</li> </ul> |

Source: Suchman (1995)

We find the distinction Suchman (1995) draws in the above typology to be reflected in the works of other authors like Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) and Rescher, (1993). Rescher’s work on pluralism and consensus begins by making a similar differentiation between the cognitive, pragmatic and moral dimensions. Rescher (1993) states: “For consensus--agreement among diverse individuals or groups--can prevail in all three of these areas: the theoretical/cognitive, which is concerned with agreement or disagreement in matters of *belief*; the practical/pragmatic, which is concerned with agreement or disagreement with respect to *action*; and the evaluative/axiological, which is concerned with matters of *value*” (p. 5) (Italics in the original). Dryzek and Niemeyer’s (2006) work on consensus and the distinctions between ‘values’, ‘beliefs’ and ‘expressed preferences’

are made on a similar tone to Rescher (1993) and Suchman's (1995) typology and they are illustrated in table 4.2.

Here, the authors differentiate between the 'epistemic' or 'cognitive' dimension in which propositional claims are made. The 'normative' or 'moral' dimension where ideological values/principles indicate an inherent degree of responsibility and which may be perceived that should lead to action. Also, the 'pragmatic' or 'expressed preference' dimension indicates the creation of consensus on the basis of the perceived gained personal interests.

**Table: 4.2** Dimensions of Consensus

| Element of Preference Construction |  |  |   |
|------------------------------------|--|--|---|
|                                    | Value  | Belief   | Expressed Preference  |
| Type of consensus                  | <i>Normative consensus</i><br>(Agreement on the value that should predominate) | <i>Epistemic consensus</i><br>(Agreement on belief about the impact of a policy) | <i>Preference consensus</i><br>(Agreement on expressed preference for a policy) |
| Meta-counterpart                   | Recognition of legitimacy of disputed values                                   | Acceptance of credibility of disputed beliefs                                    | Agreement on the nature of disputed choices                                     |

Source: Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006, p. 638)

Even though the above authors do not discuss the exercise of legitimacy strictly in relation to management studies, they nevertheless have similarities about the key theoretical categories such study should contain. This adds support to our effort to identify an adequate framework in which the consultant-client relationship can be examined. Below, we provide an analysis for each of the above dimensions as represented in Suchman's (1995) typology, and also illustrate how they can help us understand the issues of knowledge legitimation in the context of the consultant-client relationship.

### 4.3 Cognitive Legitimation

The relationship between an organisation towards its environment and its members operates within a communicative context where propositions are sustained in support of their rational, and well defined explicit evidence (Scott, 1995). By referring to the

cognitive realm of legitimation Suchman (1995) draws attention to those rationally made claims which help justify an organisation's course of action towards its internal or external audience. Propositions that take a normative character for what 'something is' or, 'should be' are often sustained in relation to a set of collective beliefs and assumptions the members of a community share (see Oliver, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983). In this sense, a manager's endeavour to convey a change of practice to his/her employees for instance, takes place through a process of 'congruence' where the existing belief/knowledge system goes through a process of *conformity* with the new practices/ideas.

The potential success or failure to communicate a set of new propositions to such members can be argued to become an issue dependent on achieving consensus in the cognitive realm (see also Shein, 2004). Suchman's reference to the notions of 'comprehensibility' and 'taken-for-granted' are made in order to distinguish the difference between the accommodation of the incoming new propositional beliefs, in contrast to the already shared world-view that makes up the members' conditioned reality. For Suchman (1995) 'comprehensibility' is used to describe the sense of conformity which assumes that legitimation becomes an outcome of *understanding*. 'Taken-for-granted' is used to characterise the role that *already* existing shared presuppositions play in the regulation of the incoming propositions between members. The already collective and shared belief-system is not necessarily made explicit for what it constitutes. It is rather a social outcome that has evolved over time and which has been unquestioned or unchallenged. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) go to the point to argue how: "Once a manipulation attempt is disclosed cognitive legitimacy may collapse when subconscious acceptance is substituted by explicit consideration and opposition because practices are perceived as unacceptable" (p. 72). In this way, challenging the already accepted and shared assumptions can prove 'dangerous' for understanding how the collective nature of those belief-making relations is being *sustained*. This is because individuals are not themselves aware of how such beliefs have been incorporated in the first place but have been embraced and acted upon by them (Berger and Luckman, 1966).

At this level of analysis, cognitive legitimation focuses on the conceptual and even subconscious level for the way receptivity and congruence occurs. The emphasis is found

in the representation of those cognitive schemata that come to be accepted/integrated/translated into the members' meaning-making relations. The systematic projection of a set of propositions/values an organisation wants its members to believe, has been argued to have a profound impact on the behaviour of its members (Scott, 1995).

Studies of cognitive legitimation often focus on the importance of stakeholders and how leaders undertake strategies through which to project behavioural qualities that the organisation is believed to have (see Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton and Penner 1993). Scott (1995) has largely argued how the desired behaviours of an organisation represent the result of its implemented organisational structures as well as their associated acclaimed qualities which are promoted by its actors. For Scott (1995) the orchestration of organisational templates and procedures helps legitimise the value of the actors' practices. Abrahamson (1996) further argues how such organisational images and their cognitive representations come to be more broadly circulated through the various publishing channels. Abrahamson (1996) argues how the audiences are subject to the projection of impressions, and these are crafted through the business press as well as other media channels.

#### *4.3.1 The consultant-client dimension*

The cognitive dimension of legitimation becomes clearly relevant to the consultant-client relationship as the construction and communication of advice emerges from the process of conceptualising the organisational problems against the needed solutions. The *value* of consulting is widely argued to exist in the consultants' competencies of providing solutions against the presented managerial needs (Clark, 1995, Legge, 2002). However, before a business contract is produced, the consultants' understanding of the clients' expressed issues can be seen as the first stage of intervention. In this sense, the cognitive 'schemata' through which consultants evaluate the clients' needs constitutes the essence of their communicative interaction (Werr, 2002). More importantly, it can be argued that the value of cognitive legitimation actually *exists* in the frameworks through which consultants accumulate and present their advice to clients (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003).

Either through data collection practices about the client's external or internal environment, or in the formulation of particular solutions through the use of managerial tools and techniques, consultants enter into a 'discourse' with clients through which they demonstrate their input (Sarvary, 1999). Such input can be communicated in the form of written reports, verbal presentations, or more participative workshops. The testability aspect of the consultants' propositions is limited during these early stages of communication with the client. The clients' choice for showing trust and acceptance over such propositions can be argued to depend on the content of the propositions, and, how well they are aligned with the members' needs, expectations and values. The issue of importance here concerns how cognitive legitimation is produced by the consultants' ability to demonstrate that their advice and service will meet the clients' needs (Czerniawska, 2002).

In addition to the above, it also needs to be argued how consulting recommendations can differ between them. Not only in terms of the content of the advice but also about the 'radical' nature of the action that they propose. Strategy consulting firms that engage with the short or long term direction of the client firm for example, come to face different degrees of challenges from an operations management consulting assignment where the client looks to reduce the employees' high turnover. Czerniawska and May (2004), argue how consulting practices vary between: a) relying on already 'tried and tested' approaches that might not be innovative but carry less risk. And, b) how the consultants' innovation and creativity for the development of new ideas often needs to deviate from using already adopted ideas but which often carry more operational risk. In high-risk project situations consultant may adopt strategic approaches that have been used in the past and through which they have accumulated personal experiences for the upcoming challenges/problems (Werr, 2002).

Even though the implications of the consultants' interventions might be very different between assignments, the degree to which the consultants come to propose a set of recommendations emerges from this conceptual level of understanding. As a result, the process of convincing the client to change a set of organisational structure, or introduce new methods of work practices happen to have as common underlying factor the demonstration of *value* at this cognitive level. We acknowledge that accepting or



rejecting a course of action is well dependent on the complex nature of the assignment, and as a result we do not want to generalise for the cognitive-related implications of the above argument. However, we want to underline that in the course of producing legitimacy through their advice through making suggestions and recommendations consultants 'enter' the clients' corporate 'dominant logic' domain (see Prahalad and Bettis, 1985;; Bettis and Prahalad, 1995; Von Krogh and Roos, 1995). The decision to accept or decline a working partnership with the consultants can well be dependent on the consultants' conformity of advice to the clients' values, needs and expectations, at the personal and also corporate level (Scott, 1995).

#### **4.4 Pragmatic Legitimacy**

In contrast to cognitive legitimacy and its emphasis on the conceptualisation of a reality that offers management solutions, methods, techniques and rhetoric, pragmatic legitimacy focuses on the fulfilment of the immediate self-interests of an organisation's members. This approach assumes that legitimation becomes possible when the organisation is able to meet its members' interests and expectations. This is evidently demonstrated in its efforts to maintain their welfare through financial or non-financial returns.

Suchman (1995) argues that in this type of legitimacy the members of an organisation might not agree with the actions, or adopted culture or values or practices from those managing it, as long as they believe to receive the expected benefits. Hence, the important dimension that characterises the above approach has to do with the perceived extracted tangible and non-tangible *returns*. Pragmatic legitimacy is argued to be particularly significant for sustaining the continuing loyalty and commitment of shareholders to the organisation (see Selznick, 1949).

Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argue how this can be achieved by offering financial incentives to stakeholders, incorporating them to the decision making structures, or, with using rhetoric and symbolic management to manipulate perceptions. Suchman (1995) argues how pragmatic legitimacy can be seen as a means of 'exchange' where members are simply rewarded for supporting "an organisational policy based on that policy's expected value" (p. 578). As a result, by maintaining the distribution of returns to its members the organisation also manages to ensure their loyalty.

Suchman (1995) makes a further distinction between ‘influence legitimacy’ and ‘dispositional legitimacy’ in order to highlight the less subtle ways through which the expected returns are produced. By ‘influence legitimacy’ the author refers to the exercise of authority, trust and power that an organisation exercises through its members. For Suchman (1995) this can happen when “the organization incorporates constituents into its policy-making structures or adopts constituents’ standards of performance as its own” (p. 578). As a result, the members’ shared beliefs that the organisation policies and leaders do not serve only their immediate tangible needs, but also the broader ideological interests. Furthermore, this happens in a subtle way and without placing pressure on the organisation for having to continuously and explicitly justify its producing returns to the members.

By ‘dispositional legitimacy’ Suchman (1995) makes reference to how individuals often align their interest and support towards an organisation because it is perceived to meet their subjective and emotional needs. Even though an organisation might not in itself actively try to create certain impressions of tangible or non-tangible returns, such members can nevertheless relate to the image and representations that they happen to find attractive. In this context, it is argued how the members’ *disposition* to legitimacy is driven by the rather subtle traits of decision making, which may not be calculative or transparent. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argue that within pragmatic legitimacy, corporations face the continuing challenge of demonstrating that the members receive their expected returns. When stakeholders identify that their support to the firm does not benefit them in some concrete way then they may withdraw their support. This then threatens the pragmatic legitimacy that the organisation exercises towards its members.

#### *4.4.1 The consultant-client dimension*

In the consultant-client dimension, the relevance of pragmatic legitimacy can be seen through the immediate and obtainable results that the consultants are believed to bring to the client party (Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005). Such results can take the form of managerial support, the providence of specific solutions to identified problems, the channelling of information about industry practices, or/and models and techniques that are thought to help improve the performance of the organisation as a whole. What



differentiates the pragmatic dimension of legitimation from the cognitive one is the degree of *feasibility* with which results can be obtained.

Even though the cognitive dimension is very much present for how knowledge-claims are produced and communicated, here the emphasis is rather on the achievement of the desired results that matter to the client party. Salaman (2002) alludes to the notion of pragmatic legitimacy by underlying how clients are interested in the tangible benefits that they extract from consulting ideas. Whereas academics may be interested in the truth-relations from which such ideas emerge Salaman (2002) argues that consultants continue to maintain their pragmatic legitimacy to clients, because clients are preoccupied with the immediate support they can receive from adopting management techniques and frameworks. How such ideas come to be accepted as 'truth' in the client is still not clear in the literature, and this is because of the different research objectives academics try to serve. He states: "The concern for the untruth of consultancy ideas about organization by those concerned with the academic analysis of organization could indeed be seen as just such a struggle for authority between academics and consultants" (Salaman, 2002: 251).

In this context, the exercise of pragmatic legitimacy can be seen as exemplified in the *operational* context of consulting activities where management tools and techniques have a direct application over the client's state of affairs. For example, a client organisation has found that the employees are not motivated when performing their work and the productivity-levels are low. The decision might be made to invite a consulting firm to help identify the reasons for it and provide recommendations. As this is an imaginary scenario, we can think of how consultants provide some kind of methodological input to the problem, by suggesting the distribution of a series of questionnaires. These are aimed at obtaining information for how the employees currently feel about the company and why they do so. We assume how the collection, analysis and presentation of the data results to an action-plan the consultants draft, and which the client accepts to implement. The above course of action can be argued to provide pragmatic legitimacy in that the consultants' service has met the immediate organisational needs in a way that has been satisfactory to the clients' demands. In this context, clients are keen on identifying the different ways of attaining the desired objectives and with paying less emphasis on *how*

the consultants might have developed their ideas in the first place. Hence, the focus is on whether the consultants can produce what the client requires (Salaman, 2002).

The above theme is also complemented from a series of extensive interviews with clients by Czerniawska and May (2004) who found how the notion of 'delivery' was regarded as the most important attribute that the clients value in consultants. The authors argue how clients expressed that 'getting things done' requires a different degree of difficulty and commitment of consulting service. Clients pay less emphasis on the qualities of presentation and appearance than they have done in the past.

As it has already been argued by Suchman (1995) the important dimension about pragmatic legitimacy concerns the members' immediate fulfilment of *interests*. Even though, organisational needs can be thought as constituting a collective entity, it needs to be argued that their design can be influenced by the individuals' personal interests. Organisational interests cannot be assumed to be equally represented by all members as their positions, roles and expectations in the firm may differ. However, the *misalignment* of interest between members can clearly lead to the failure of pragmatic legitimacy.

The issue of how members manage to win the support and trust of other members so that the identified 'immediate interests' are not seen as selfishly driven but collectively represented, has become an issue of discussion in the symbolic management literature (Goffman, 1963; Pfeffer, 1981). Authors argue for the actors' adoption of metaphors, rituals and use of rhetoric in order to help create impressions of reality that may be potentially embraced by the targeted audience (Allen and Caillouet, 1994). In this context, the reality of events is not transparently communicated between members in an objective way. They are defined, manipulated and projected in order to fulfil personal goals (Elsbach, 1994).

The critical literature has also drawn from the above authors for making the argument as to how, the value consultants provide, is at a superficial level (Kieser, 2002; Alvesson, 2001; Benders and van Ven, 2001). For Kieser (2002) the extent to which the application of the ideas consultants suggest might have the same actual affect as proposed, remains uncertain. As a result, the consultants' 'pragmatic' contribution to the client is based on the distribution of popular ideas, and which consultants assume that will produce the desired results (Heusinkveld, 2004). In this way, consultants ensure that their business

service as well as business interests are being sustained (Alvesson and Johanson, 2001). Even though our aim is not to provide answers for how 'pragmatism' is performed we nevertheless want to argue for the discussed complexities regarding the emergence of pragmatism. In particular, how legitimation occurs when clients manage to fulfil their interests/needs as represented in the state of affairs of the organisation, but also, as being an outcome that can be influenced by the use of symbolic management, rituals and rhetoric (Elsbach, 1994).

#### **4.5 Moral Legitimacy**

In contrast to the pragmatic legitimacy and its emphasis on the fulfilment of the immediate interests of the organisation and its members, moral legitimacy is argued to take place on the collective sharing of beliefs and values that have an ideological or normative character (Suchman, 1995). Hence, conformity and congruence are not based on the personal fulfilment of interests; members of an organisation believe that they get it by aligning their interests and pledging their support to it. But, in the collective understanding that the chosen course of action will produce the needed greater 'wider good'. Such social good may concern the current or future state of the organisation. It may involve issues of growth and productivity that has moral dimensions and which are not necessarily financially measured.

The moral attributes an organisation exercises, can concern its ways of treatment towards the welfare of employees, procedures of fairness, transparency and justice (Tyler and Blader, 2005). More recent debates have also focused on the sensitive relationship between the organisation and its responsibility towards natural resources and the physical environment (see Harvey, 1998). The degree of commitment an organisation requires for becoming more accountable to the societal norms and values of its community lies outside its possible capitalistic drive for economic expansion (see Hajer, 1995).

An interesting study by Tyler and Blader (2005) identifies four aspects of organisational procedures where evaluations of justice influence the employees' behaviour and loyalty, not only towards the organisation but also towards their

colleagues<sup>11</sup>. The study shows that the employees' intrinsic incentives, as represented through societal norms of contact, are more effective means of managing employees than extrinsic "command and control model" (p. 1144). The authors state how the: "employees' social value judgments regarding their work organization, embodied in their perceptions of the legitimacy of organizational authorities and the perceived congruence of their personal values with those of the organization, were the primary factors shaping their rule adherence" (p. 1148).

The creation of moral legitimacy as argued by Suchman (1995) needs to also be seen within the social constructive character of the environment and as it becomes a product of peoples' intentions. Hence, moral legitimacy is thought to become the fulfilment of an organisation's members' interests where objectivity and transparency are interwoven with political goals. In this sense, the exercise of symbolic management and "hollow symbolic gestures" (Suchman, 1995: 579) allows for the manipulative projection of a 'moral legitimacy' that may satisfy peoples' values at a superficial level. The boundary between a 'superficial' moral legitimacy from a 'pragmatic' one is difficult to qualify as both forms can equally influence perceptions of legitimacy. The study by Tyler and Blander (2005) for example, has shown that even though moral values can be argued to constitute peoples' perceptions, the presence of procedures of justice, and as expressed in the course of administrative policies/rules, does effect the constitution of these personal values.

#### *4.5.1 Dimensions of moral legitimacy*

In an effort to contextualise the more particular dimensions of moral legitimacy, Suchman (1995) makes the further distinction between: 1) Consequential legitimacy 2) Procedural legitimacy 3) Structural legitimacy, and 4) Personal legitimacy.

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<sup>11</sup> These are evaluations made a the 1) organisational level decision-making, 2) organisational-level interpersonal treatment, 3) supervisor-level decision-making, and 4) supervisor-level interpersonal treatment

### *A) Consequential & Procedural*

Durocher, et. al., (2007) illustrate the use of consequential legitimacy by referring to the ideology behind the use and types of accounting standards settings. The authors argue that in order for organisations to avoid criticism about the integrity of their adopted procedures by the public, make the case about the inherent credible qualities of consequential legitimacy. In this way “consequential legitimacy can serve as a link between the symbolic dimension of power of the standard-setting process and the valence that a user may see in participating in this process” (p. 39). It is the *properties* of the outputs produced that is sought to be highlighted in the above paradigm.

Procedural legitimacy refers to the evaluative moral standards of the *processes* through which practices are conducted. Also, the extent to which such procedures are acceptable against the set of adopted standards. Demonstrating qualities of transparency, fairness and justice for example, helps legitimise the organisational image and practices. An example to illustrate the above can be seen through Tyler’s reference to the dispute over the presidential election in the US in 2000. Tyler (2006) states how “Studies of the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* suggest that in gaining deference for a controversial decision, the Court benefited from the widespread public view that the Court is a legitimate political institution” (p.381).

In this context, the adopted procedures through which the Court came to the decisions were believed to be legitimate because of its institutional legitimacy to the public. This helped reduce the initially expressed resistance and criticism and helped the outcome of the decision as being morally legitimate. Even though, the Court is regarded as a social institution with established integral moral principles, the morality of procedures within organisations is made less evident. In this sense, it is argued that the way through which procedures come to be regarded as acceptable by an organisation’s members, depends on the collective understanding and socially constructed values that have been incorporated by those particular members (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, the perceived morality of procedures is to be treated as situation-dependent, and as being subject to the members’ interpretive schemata that can well differ between members of a different culture. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argue how: “Moral legitimacy is socially constructed by giving and considering reasons to justify certain action, practices, or institutions” (p. 73).

For Suchman (1995) “such procedural legitimacy becomes more significant in the absence of clear outcome measures” (p. 580).

Suchman (1995), Durocher, et. al (2007) and Palazzo and Scherer (2007) also emphasise the importance of the dialectic and communicative character for how such procedures are established in the first place. In particular, the effort to incorporate the members’ views and reactions in the *evaluation* of such procedures may help sustain perceptions of moral legitimacy. Suchman (1995) makes reference to “explicit public discussions” and how the incorporation of the members’ inputs creates a context of discourse that can help foster or hinder legitimacy.

Tyler (2006) also argues that: “In the legal arena, people are found to believe authorities are more legitimate when they view their actions as consistent with *fair procedures*. As a result, when the authorities engage in unfair procedures such as racial profiling or the use of unnecessary force they lose public support, whereas acting fairly increases deference” (p. 382) (Italics added). To what extent, the credibility of procedures is made evident to the members of an organization, is often under question. This is because introduced changes on policy and structures, often becomes ambiguous in the context of how organizational actors use rhetorical statements to support the making of such policies. In this context, Tyler’s above point assumes how the attached credibility of procedures at a ‘technical’ level may also become evident to the wider audience at a ‘rhetorical’ level.

### *B) Structural & Personal*

By structural legitimacy, Suchman (1995) highlights the tendency of organisations to adopt structures that are socially accepted or favoured by their members/environment. The relationship between ‘organisational structures’ and ‘moral legitimacy’ needs to be seen in the context of the qualities of tangible or intangible outputs that they are assumed to produce. For example, countries in which the representation of trade unions becomes an increasing significant dimension to the life of an organisation, structures can be created that allow their sufficient representation. Furthermore, the incorporation of decentralised structures or the formation of new departments for building/maximising capacity can be seen as features that enhance the organisation’s moral legitimacy to its



members. Suchman (1995) illustrates the above by making reference to “Educational organisations” (p.581) and how such institutions strive to win the loyalty of their customers by placing emphasis on the modernisation of their infrastructure (locations, teaching material, and resources) which can be seen in contrast to “adopting specific pedagogical procedures” to enhance the students’ performance. At the same time,

Durocher, et. al. (2007) argue for the need to distinguish between claims about the incorporation of new procedural structures and their symbolic representation, in the management’s effort to maintain its exercise of power or to eliminate conflict within its members. Durocher, et. al. (2007) articulate the above, stating: “Organizations may adopt structures to appease the wants of interested parties and prevent conflicts from arising. Thus, non-decisional committees are types of symbols that could play the same role as rituals. Structural legitimacy can serve as a link between the symbolic dimension of power of the standard-setting process and a user’s perceived instrumentality of participating” (p. 39).

Finally, by personal legitimacy, Suchman (1995) argues for the individuals’ personal attributes and their influence on their members. The exhibition of personal, moral qualities and traits like charisma, integrity and trust, have been discussed in the leadership literature (Bryman, 1992, Bass and Avolio, 1994). Authors have argued that personal traits play a significant role for sustaining the employees’ loyalty to the organisation (Tyler and Blander, 2005; Scholtes, 1998). In studies of professional services, the exercise of personal ethical standards have been acknowledged as critical for the sustaining of the business relationship (Moore, et. al, 2006). The employees’ conduct with the organisation, as a social system is constituted through the members’ interpersonal conduct from which ethical or unethical values are channelled through. As the study by Tyler and Blander (2005) has shown, procedures of justice and fairness are situation-dependent on the employees’ interpersonal conduct with their superiors and colleagues. The members’ impressions about the moral standing of the organisation are produced by the narrow and self-situated personal conduct.

In this context, personal legitimacy has to be seen in relation to the making of perceptions. Such perceptions are driven from how personal values and ethical norms are being translated within human interactions. In discussing the exercise of corporate

legitimacy and in using Suchman's typology for referring to moral legitimacy, Palazzo and Scherer (2006) make a similar argument to the above. They argue that corporate legitimation concerns the continuing interaction and adaptation between the corporation as a social entity and the complexities of its environment; "if the conditions of social acceptance change, the perception of the legitimacy of a particular form of organisation, e.g., corporations or type of behaviour...may also change" (p. 73). As a result, the social response to the corporate legitimacy is a phenomenon dependent on the instrumentality through which the organisation and its members sustain the moral feature of their practices.

#### *4.5.2 The consultant-client dimension*

Moral legitimation plays an important role in the consultant-client interaction. The production and delivery of advice is a professional service heavily dependent on the quality of the personal interaction between the people who provide it and consume it. In contrast to pragmatic legitimation where the fulfilment of personal interest provides congruence and conformity, moral legitimation is dependent on the mutual sharing of normative and ideological values which help define the conduct of service (Tyler, 2006; Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Such values concern the form of a professional code of conduct, and which may vary according to the degree to which they are explicitly defined in the relationship.

Following a series of business scandals where the consultants aimed at fulfilling their business interests above the clients' needs, the industry of management consultancy has experienced increased scrutiny as to whether its members exercise a professional and ethical code of conduct (Clark and Fincham, 2003). The possible exemplification of moral legitimation is argued to be based on the behavioural qualities and professionalism through which consultants treat the clients' needs (Lynch, 2003). A professional code of conduct can concern dimensions like: a) Keeping terms of confidentiality for the information disclosed and preventing its distribution to competitors. b) Showing qualities of integrity and honesty through which consultants conduct their daily practices in the client (i.e. showing transparency for the information produced). c) Avoid efforts to

manipulate the client with representing different realities and in order to sustain/extend the business contract (Lynch, 2003).

#### *4.5.3 Moral legitimacy in relation to accredited bodies*

The increasing importance of moral legitimation can be vividly illustrated through the recent creation and growth of accredited bodies, like *The International Council of Management Consulting Institutes* (ICMCI), the *European Federation of Management Consulting Associations* (FEACO) and *All-Japan Federation of Management Organizations* (Zen-Noh-Ren) (Curnow and Reuvid, 2003). These are institutions whose role is to regulate the entry and practices between its member firms as they operate in different countries.

Consultants that are members of the above bodies are believed to express the ethical norms and professionalism that characterise its 'best practices'. The Institute of Management Consultancy (ICM), (which is the representative body of ICMCI in England), plays an important role through its certification practices on new or existing practitioners. The role of such institutions is fundamental for the way they market and sustain their moral legitimacy in clients. By making reference to their association with such institutions, consultants often promote the moral legitimacy of their practices and avoid the negative reputation or criticism, the consulting industry has been associated with. This is clearly expressed from the below foreword paragraph written by the chairman of the (ICMCI). He states: "The growing acceptance of the CMC qualification as the profession's global standard will provide reassurance to clients and the public in this post-Enron era, as management consultants are increasingly subjected to ever-greater scrutiny and increasing accountability" (Elliot, 2003).

The above statement clearly illustrates how such institutions desire to act as means of accreditation 'barriers' where clients are encouraged to believe that their associated consulting practitioners are trustworthy. It also signifies that they represent the professional code of ethics that the institutions stand for. It is interesting to note that such institutions exercise their authority by having the right to intervene, and also *penalize* individuals that may have expressed misconduct. Lynch (1998), for example states that "Failure to observe these codes can result in sanctions being applied against the offending member. Unfortunately, if the subject of a complaint is not a member of either of these

bodies, then little can be done as the profession is not regulated by statute” (p. 34). Providing support and protection to consultants that are already members of the accredited party in contrast to those that aren't, is made in order to market and reinforce the legitimacy of the institution. As a result, it follows how consultants often achieve moral legitimacy by making reference to their affiliation to such institutions.

#### *4.5.4 Moral legitimacy in relation to the members' internal state of affairs*

In the literature, most of the discussion around moral legitimacy has concentrated on the context of the above accredited bodies. Hence, different views have been expressed that are thought to take a 'positive' or more 'critical' approach. For example, Kieser (2002a, 2002b) argued for the superficial character such institutions represent and how the professional codes of conduct are only part of the consultants' 'symbolic management' to clients. To what degree consulting practices can be characterised as 'ethical' or 'unethical' cannot be attributed to the institutional association between consultants and such membership bodies. At the same time, Toppin and Czerniawska, (2005) argued for the actual difference that such regulations make in the life of the clients' experience. Policies and regulations help ensure the exercise of transparency and fairness that the clients deserve to expect from consultants.

Apart from the above, a dimension we want to introduce concerns how moral legitimisation can be argued to take place on basis of the clients' relationship with the social and political dynamics, as represented by their own organisation's members. We want to argue for how the emphasis shifts from the qualities of the professional code of conduct of the consulting-relationship to the inner political games of interest between the *client-members*. In the literature, authors have partially discussed the above theme in the context of the image-metaphors and how consultants are represented as 'heroes' (Clark and Salaman, 1998). Consultants are often seen to intervene and 'rescue' the client amidst an organisational crisis after which they walk away (Micklethwait, and Wooldridge, 1996). Even though the dimension we want to introduce is associated with the above metaphor, the emphasis is not on what the consultants can provide, but on the political situation *of* the client. In this context, it is not what the consultants provide which helps create the needed moral legitimacy, but what the consultants' intervention

*means* in relation to the clients' socio-political internal environment. The associated reasons for achieving moral legitimacy are not solely dependent on the nature of the interaction but on the clients' degree of fulfilling/achieving their own self-situated normative set standards of morality towards their own members.

We can illustrate the application of the above by drawing on Suchman's (1995) characterisations of 'consequential' and 'procedural' legitimacy. The undertaking of a project by a client may require funding and support by the various departments and this is often a classic example where political and personal interest comes into play. At a rhetorical level, the person initiating the project may allude to the potential organisational benefits from supporting the initiative. Furthermore, potential financial returns should encourage the support and commitment to it by the other members. In an effort to bypass potential conflicts of interests or the bias for how the project favours the interests of the individual, the client may use the work of consultants as an outside party that can investigate and report on the validity of the contested claims. Here, moral legitimacy is principally driven by the work of consultants to verifying or challenging the interests behind such a project's initiative. Even though the interaction and professional conduct is still an important factor in this process, it is not the determining factor through which moral legitimisation happens. We acknowledge how the existence of bias is imminent and can be dependent on the interests of individual in liaison with the consultants. Also, how this can certainly distort the overall assumed objectivity of advice, consultants bring to the project. However, moral legitimisation takes place on the basis of what the clients need in relation to the internal affairs between members, and not in direct relation to the consultants.

A complementary example can also be given about the dimension of procedural legitimacy and where the emphasis is on the adopted techniques and procedures (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy is not dependent on the immediate personal conduct between consultants and clients, but on the social constructed qualities of objectivity and transparency that are believed to govern how consultants conduct their operations in the client. Drawing from our data sample we can briefly illustrate the above argument, through the case of an operational managing director that felt how the processes in the firm needed to be dramatically improved by reducing the chain of activities. The

individual only had support from one other member from the board about the validity of his propositions. Doubts were expressed about his actual concern, leading the client to suggest the contract of a consulting firm to investigate the above and report back to the board. The making of recommendations the consultants made were believed to help produce moral legitimacy because the consultants were outside the immediate political interests of the board members. Even though it can be argued how consultants were operating under a degree of bias, and because of the possible conversations they could have with the particular managing director, the accumulated moral legitimacy the consultants brought to the project took place on the grounds of the potential conflict of interests between members.

#### **4.6 Discursive Legitimation**

Having provided a summary overview of the three dimensions as outlined by Suchman (1995), we now move to add another dimension to this framework that is based on Habermas's contribution. Even though Habermas has not been widely incorporated in the management studies literature, his proposition of the discursive dimension of his communicative framework can be very useful to our understanding of legitimation (Willmott, 1997; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). We provide a brief overview of his theory and also discuss how it fits into our study of knowledge legitimation in the consultant-client interaction.

In his seminal work *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas (1984a, 1984b) is addressing what could be characterized as two differing philosophical camps: The first one represents the positivist aspirations associated with the potentials of human reason, the emphasis on discovery of a concrete reality and the excitement of human progress as felt since the time of Rene Decartes. The second one represents the disappointment and pessimism of any possible discovery of knowledge and the realization of the futile attempts to access any given reality. Instead of simply becoming apologetic for either of the above camps, Habermas aims at accommodating the human pursuit of an objective reality with also appreciating the subjectivity and interpretation of what this reality represents in the social setting (see Habermas, 2001).

There are two main branches of exposition that can characterize the setting of Habermas's departure of his communicative action theory. The first one has to do with the dimension of access and representation of man's knowledge towards the environment/world. Here, the individual is thought to be capable of gaining knowledge in a way that he purposely uses and manipulates for adaptation and survival. The behaviour emerging from this purposive-rational action is also characterized as 'cognitive-instrumental action' and is based on the acquiring of empirical or technical knowledge.

Within organizational studies the above idea is mainly expressed in reference to 'strategic action' where successful pursuits are realized when the corporate/individual goals are fulfilled. An example of this is the rationalization of organizational structures and administrative process which are drawn from the use of empirical knowledge and which are further based on the study of behavioural sciences. The making of objectified claims between individuals has very much to do with having an acclaimed stronger position/knowledge for what the conditions of the environment are. The acclaimed qualities of knowledge and expertise indicate a more privileged position of representation which the other party may be asked to accept on the proposed evidence. Habermas moves to theories of argumentation as the arena in which contested validity claims are made and are supported. Habermas (1984) discusses three particular types of argumentation, namely the aesthetic, the therapeutic, and the explicative<sup>12</sup> and which each of them helps to provide a different basis of validation.

The second branch of Habermas's theory focuses on the communicative realm of the obtained knowledge where the making of contested claims needs to be understood *in relation* to the other party's position and understanding of the situation (Habermas, 1998; 2001).

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12. The aesthetic discourse works by the critics arguments bringing us to see the work or performance which itself demonstrates a value. "A work validated through aesthetic experience can then in turn take the place of an argument and promote the acceptance of precisely those standards according to which it counts as an authentic work." p 20. Aesthetic arguments may then be less conclusive than practical or theoretical discourse... and depend for their force on the consensus achieved. [crit 4]

The therapeutic discourse is that which serves to clarify systematic self deception. We call a person rational "who is both willing and able to free himself from illusions, and indeed from illusions that are based not on errors (about facts) but on self deceptions ..." p.21  
Such self deceptions typically arise from developmental experiences which have left certain rigidities of behaviour or value judgement. These rigidities do not allow flexible responses to present time exigencies.

The explicative focuses on the very means of reaching understanding the means of expression. "We call a person rational if he is ready to come to an understanding and reacts to disturbances by reflecting on linguistic rules." p.21

The determining factor for the acceptance or rejection between claims is no longer simply dependent on their inherent objective validity or acclaimed representation against the state of an external reality; but in the communicative discourse through which meaning is commonly *shared* between people (Habermas, 2001). This does not necessarily mean that two parties may employ the same rationalization or thinking for reaching agreement or for coming to a common understanding. Different actors may pursue their particular interests and differing aims that may not be supported or shared in the same way. Habermas (1984) states: "But communicative action designates a type of interaction that is coordinated through speech acts and does not coincide with them" (vol. 1, p.101). From the above follows, that what enables the *social coordination*, among the represented different oriented interest/goals between parties, becomes the "cooperative processes of interpretation" (vol. 1, p. 101). Habermas highlights the exercise of language as the communicative channel of expression for which beliefs and convictions need to be shared and challenged. For Habermas, the important factor of communicative rationality is the process of reaching a mutual understanding that allows individuals to socially coordinate their actions. Habermas clearly encapsulates the main crux of his argument in the below statement:

"...the concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extraverbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of interpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus." (1984a: 86) (Italics in the original)

The proposition behind his theory shifts our focus to the communicative realm of human interaction where implicit beliefs and values have to be articulated, shared, and sustained (Habermas, 1998). The theory of communicative rationality argues how before any socially coordinated activity becomes possible actors have to reach a common understanding and agreement which takes them from the conceptual realm to possibly the actual realm of 'praxis' (Habermas, 1971). In this context, Habermas (1984a; 1984b) describes communication as being "oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus - and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims" (Habermas' 1984a:17). Through the above statement



Habermas does not simply discuss or limit the notion of rationality as existing in the conceptual world but as something that is expressed in the *social* realm. Habermas emphasizes the *participative* discourse between actors in the development of a communicative rationality which is dependent on the mutual sharing of meaning and agreement (see Honneth and Joas, 1991).

As a result, Habermas recognizes the continuing need for actors to make knowledge-claims about the environment, which are supported and objectified with evidence, as valid. At the same time, he recognizes the continuing presence and imminent need of their communication at a level where there is a partnership of understanding. It is important to clarify how such mutual consensus is not simply established on one party's acceptance of the proposed evidence, but is dependent on a continuing dialogue in which both parties may alter, refine, or improve their positions. In this context, Habermas's notion of: 'intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims', focuses on the very nature of discourse which is interactive and dialectic in nature. The condition or accommodation of one's point of view by another party takes place by means of participation, which itself influences the progress of the discourse in a way that mutual agreement might or might not be reached (Honneth and Joas, 1991).

The acceptance or rejection of validity claims are not made on basis of their normative values or qualities, - that is for what they represent, but in the subjective situational rationality of the individual or group level to whom they are communicated. It is the dimension of capacity that is critical to recognize here for appreciating how 'justification' may be exercised. This is clearly expressed by Habermas in the following statement: "...there are internal relations between the capacity for decentred perception and manipulation of things and events on the one hand, and the capacity for reaching intersubjective understanding about things and events in the other." (Habermas, 1984a:14).

The theoretical implication and spectrum of Habermas's communicative action theory exceeds on a much greater theoretical scale from the way that it is described here. We are only limited to using Habermas' views to our study of the consultant-client interaction. However, we find his argument most useful as it helps us understand the inner and

intersubjective dynamics of legitimation as they are based on the dialectic communication between actors.

There are distinct similarities between Suchman's (1995) exposition of the strategic and institutional perspectives, as represented within his segmentation of the three categories with Habermas's communicative theory approach. For example, Suchman's description of cognitive legitimation is in a similar way also represented in Habermas's argument of 'strategic-action' and 'instrumental rationality'. It is the second dimension of Habermas's framework however that is not adequately discussed in the above theoretical streams. In particular, the view that the inter-exchange of validity claims are not just conditioned as intended but that they are challenged, modified, changed and endeavoured to find alignment with the meaning-relations of the other party.

Habermas illustrates the above idea stating how: "The concept of reaching an understanding suggests a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticisable validity claims. The validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness) characterise different categories of a knowledge embodied in symbolic expressions" (1984a:75). In this context, the developing of a communicative discourse that is mutually shared between actors becomes the very lacuna that *conditions* understanding (Habermas, 1998; 2003; Honneth and Joas 1991). In this sense, Habermas (1984a, 1984b) argues for specific points of alignment in the understanding/shared meaning, which unless they are present socially coordinated activities might prove dysfunctional<sup>13</sup>.

Habermas's notions of consensus and intersubjective meaning have also been criticised by authors like Rescher (1993) who argue that the uniformity between views and beliefs cannot be accomplished in an ever changing and progressive pluralistic society. The assumption that consensus brings stability or enables social coordination, Rescher (1993) argues, is mistaken. Instead, the author proposes how a wider recognition of pluralism should be embraced and where the lack of uniform beliefs and values, should encourage diversity without threatening the degree of social stability. Rescher's attack on consensus has also been criticised for not qualifying the theoretical boundaries

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<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to Habermas's work McCarthy further clarifies the above point stating: "The key to his notion of reaching understanding (*Versändigung*) is the possibility of using reasons or grounds to gain intersubjective recognition for criticisable validity claims." (Italics in the original: p. x).

of his proposition, and, also for misinterpreting Habermas's treatment of consensus (see Arblaster, 1994).

#### *4.6.1 The consultant-client dimension*

In the discursive paradigm of legitimation we move away from the strict application of the strategic and institutional approaches. Here, the emphasis is not the instrumentality with which actions between actors are performed. Legitimation is argued to take place on the grounds of the dialectic/communicative discourse where meaning and intentions are challenged, refined, modified. The objectivity or vigour with which consulting knowledge-claims are represented in this interaction, according to Habermas (1984a, 1984b), only helps bring the performance side of knowledge into existence. The acceptance or rejection of such claims is not dependent on the actors' acknowledgment of the quality or content that they represent (e.g. consulting methods, techniques, and tools). It is rather, dependent on their alignment with the meaning-relations of the other party as represented through verbal and non-verbal communications.

From this follows that understanding *how* knowledge-claims might be conditioned within the value-structures, belief-system, and meaning-making relations helps make transparent how legitimation is actually accomplished. Operationalising the study of discursive legitimation mainly focuses on examining those social communicative settings of interaction, where the creation of consensus and meaning are co-produced. In the consultant-client dimension this can refer to examining the areas: of 1) conversations 2) language and presuppositions, and 3) exchanges of power within relationships.

Through conversations consultants and clients shape their roles and expectations over a given assignment. They decide the technical features governing the business project. It is through conversations that consultants find the opportunity to demonstrate their potentially added value against the clients' organisational needs.

The study of language is also argued to have a central role in the understanding of discursive legitimation as it does not only represent a vehicle of vocal utterances but a system of meaning-making relations. By studying the language consultants and clients use in their interaction we can see the ways in which new propositional claims come to be accepted, rejected, or modified. Also, the consultants' way of communicating the 'same'

language with the clients has a broader connotation to the alignment of sharing similar values, beliefs and objectives. In cases where clients or consultants may choose to challenge the language used by the other party, they may find themselves in a process of re-establishing their meaning-making relations, in ways that may indicate their acceptance or failure.

Secondly, our understanding over the held presuppositions between consultants and clients, can further help appreciate how new knowledge-claims may be conditioned. Presuppositions can be seen on the similar lines to the notion of 'taken-for-granted' emphasised by Suchman (1995). Habermas equally argues for the importance of pre-understanding and how the actors' already made presuppositions can determine the receptivity and legitimation between new claims. The important issue is that even though, presuppositions might not be made explicit during the course of the consultant-client interaction, they can nevertheless determine the degree to which legitimation occurs. Finally, by examining the exchange of power and control we come to understand how legitimation is dependent on managing the type of social interactions responsible to the generation of meaning-making relations.

In conclusion to this part of the chapter, it can be argued how one of the main features that differentiates the discursive approach from the institutional one, is in challenging the assumption that once organisations know the qualities that they need to develop in order to legitimise their practices, will also know how to develop their required competencies. Habermas argues how the success or failure to legitimise one's practices is not necessarily dependent on the actors' cognitive recognition for how to achieve an alignment of institutionalisation with the environment as for example supported by Scott (1995). It is rather, the achieved fruition of inter-subjectivity that is accomplished through the process of communicative discourse with the members of that environment.

#### **4.7 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the premises of legitimation and its application to the study of the consultant-client relationship. We have concentrated on providing a theoretical framework upon which its various theoretical aspects can be made

transparent. We have provided a detailed analysis of how the subject has been discussed in the literature, and, what are the main views adopted in the authors' studies of it. The reason we place emphasis on the notion of legitimation is because little emphasis has been laid on identifying those factors responsible for the embodiment of knowledge-claims in the consultant client relationship. Both the functional and critical approaches make claims about the pragmatic or superficial intervention of management consulting practices without necessarily explaining *how* this takes place (Werr, 2002; Elsbach, 1994). By drawing upon the area of legitimation we want to disentangle some of these assumptions and, provide a more coherent critique on why knowledge-claims may be accepted or rejected.

Our framework has been mainly based on Suchman's (1995) work and his distinction between the pragmatic, moral and cognitive dimensions. To this, we have added a fourth dimension that is based on Habermas's (1984a, 1984b 1998, 2001) work and which argues for the discursive and communicative side of legitimation. Here the emphasis shifts to how the intersubjectivity of meaning is created between actors. How the critique over proposed knowledge-claims can be used as a means to hindering of fostering the creation of consensus has also been discussed.

The thesis of this chapter's argument is that the conformity between new and old practices as well as the integration of new knowledge-relations to existing ones, takes place by drawing reference to different areas of human existence. Legitimation, at a cognitive level takes place by means of argumentation and where contested claims come into play. Here, the process of conformity or congruence takes place on the grounds of the actors' existing cognitive schemata and knowledge representations. New practices are incorporated because they are adequately supported with evidence that are perceived to be credible or/and reliable.

In contrast to the above, pragmatic legitimation places emphasis on the fulfilment of individuals' interests. Unless the immediate outputs indicate the return of the expected financial or non-financial outcomes, it is argued how organisational actors will be hesitant to accept the proposed premises (Suchman, 1995). In the moral dimension we find how it is the collective and moral ideological values that guide legitimation and how this is in contrast to pragmatic legitimation. Such values do not fulfil the members'

immediate personal interests but they are guided by the moral principles that are socially constructed and shared between members. In Habermas's (1984a, 1984b) discursive dimension we find the dialectic aspect of legitimation and how propositional beliefs cannot be justified unless there is a mutually shared consensus between actors. Such consensus is created through courses of communicative discourses in which the internalised meaning-making relations become explicit. In this context, knowledge-claims can be challenged, rejected, modified, accepted, before mutual consensus of understanding can become possible.

Throughout our discussion of the above categories we have also argued for the interplay of the 'reality' and 'rhetoric' dimensions (Zbaracki, 1998). Namely, the generation of the various claims under the cognitive, moral, pragmatic and discursive dimensions, should not be understood in a way that is objectified and detached from the political interests of its members. The making of claims about a course of action an organisation should take simultaneously reflects the 'institutional' and 'symbolic management' aspects. The institutional aspects may reflect the actual changes of procedures and policies that need to be undertaken. The symbolic management aspects may reflect the use of rhetoric, rituals and the projection of certain meaning-relations in order to manipulate the audience's understanding and persuade them.

In this context, the process of generating claims under the different dimensions of legitimation needs to be understood as a social constructing process that not only incorporates organisational procedures but also the creation of impressions (Clark, 1995; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this sense we follow the argument propounded by Zbaracki (1998) and Elbach (1994) who state how the construction of verbal accounts, among with the application of organisational procedures, creates the platform in which legitimation becomes possible.

## Chapter 5: Methodology

### 5.1 Introduction

The development of every research project is grounded on epistemological and ontological assumptions that govern the collection and analysis of ideas (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Bell, 1999). Such assumptions not only govern perceptions about the study of reality as it is situated within human events, but also, in the framing of interpretations for what such events represent (Bryman, 2001).

The study of methods is concerned with recognising those broad and often unrealised factors that govern the researcher's thought process concerning his/her research paradigm. Also, how the application of different methods for studying a phenomenon may affect the means by which different knowledge claims are produced. The study of methods has gained increased relevance in the literature, because of the growing recognition for how the creation of knowledge is intimately linked with the position and experience of the researcher (Miles and Huberman, 1994; May, 1997). As a result, the study of methods is a way of recognising the inner dimensions behind a researcher's world-view that further influence the making of assumptions and making of knowledge claims (Silverman, 2000).

The aim of this chapter will be to provide an overview of the methodological dimensions of this research. Our main aim will be to discuss the theoretical framework that has been guiding our collection and analysis of our data. The means by which the empirical data was collected and the particular stages that were followed in the segmentation of the key ideas which influenced the crafting of the following chapters. Furthermore, we seek to examine the limitations of the research and qualify our contribution to the literature.

The first part discusses the theoretical framework of the thesis. This is our adoption of a qualitative and interpretive approach to the study of the consultant-client relationship. Our effort is to provide a theoretical grounding on interpretive research and how this is linked to our research subject. The second part of the chapter outlines the methods used for collection of the empirical sample. This entails the initial design of formulating the early research questions and the means by which the interviews were conducted. Here, we provide a summarised overview of how personal contact was made and the overall

strategy for data collection. The third part of the chapter discusses our adoption of the use of thematic analysis as the more preferred analytical theoretical framework (Boyatzis, 1998). Here, we make particular reference to our selection of themes that helped in the analysis of the recorded text and how other relevant sub-themes continued to emerge out of this process. Our interest is to make explicit how we organised the material under certain categories that complemented our research framework. We conclude our chapter by making references to the ethical guidelines that were followed by providing confidentiality over the data as well as anonymity of the participants.

## **5.2 Quantitative and Qualitative Research Frameworks**

In discussions about the study of research methods the qualification is made between approaches that are governed by particular epistemological assumptions of what reality is and how knowledge can be obtained from it (Brewerton and Millward, 2001). The two methodological fields that are often discussed are characterised under the qualitative and quantitative titles (Blumberg et. al., 2005; Bryman, 2001). Even though qualitative and quantitative approaches are thought to be separate because of the different assumptions they share, it is also argued how they complement each other and should not be seen as separate camps (Silveramn, 1993; Punch, 1998). Below we provide an overview of what each of the approaches. We place greater emphasis on the theoretical premises of the qualitative approach as this is the one that we incorporate in the thesis.

### *5.2.1 Quantitative research framework*

Quantitative approaches to the study of social sciences are often characterised as positivist because of the belief that reality resides in the world and outside of the researcher that can be made accessible (Blumberg et. al., 2005). The exercise of reason is thought to have an inherent association with the way in which the outside physical reality is also represented. As a result it is assumed that the discovery of facts, through means of observation and experimentation provide the empirical context of obtaining reliable knowledge about the world.

One of the primary assumptions of positivism is the ontological relationship between man's reason and the environment (Crotty, 1998). The assumption is that the universe



operates in a rational way with particular laws governing its functions and development. Individuals are able to understand and study the universe and how to relate to it precisely because their use of reason relates with the nature of their function (Crotty, 1998). There is an intimate relationship between the nature of the physical environment and man's interaction with it through reason (Bewkes et. al., Bell, 1998).

The claims of positivism originate in man's supreme confidence in the power of the human mind to think out the truths of nature, to trace out the meaning of nature's laws, and then to employ this knowledge to human advantage (May, 1997). This attitude assumes that reason has the power to find the truth about the world and that nature is in some sense rational, namely it contains within itself an order that exemplifies the principles of reason (see Hollis, 1994, Crotty, 1998). If this were not the case then the secrets of nature would have no logical connection with the clues that we have, and reason would be unable to uncover them.

Hollis (1994) provides a useful historical overview of how the particular scientific discoveries and developments gave rise to the quest for discovering the "hidden order" (p. 25). Even though rationalism has its basis on the use of reason and empiricism the basis of experience both approaches have the common characteristic of seeing a correspondence between: a) that which is perceived, and b) a reality that it corresponds to. The conclusion that followed from this assumption was that if nature has a rational substance for the way it operates, then human reason can relate to it and produce control and prediction. Thus, people may be able to 'master' the environment, control certain processes or manipulate the presented reality. Since individuals can generate conceptual meaning for what something 'is', this indicates that there is a pragmatic relationship between the creation of meaning in the individual and the existence of the reality about the subject (Bewkes et. al., 1963). This knowledge is to be found outside the individual but which nevertheless becomes possible through the exercise of reason.

Bewkes et. al., (1963) interestingly state that since the time of the Enlightenment: "almighty reason became the unrivalled *judge* of truth" (p. 1963) (Italics Added). In this respect, to the rationalists of the seventeenth century reason was the realm of the eternal truths through which one participates in nature and enters into the intelligible world (Hollis, 1994). The ontological existence of reason in the nature of the environment and

the access of it by man's rational activity, constitute the essence of the positivist approach. Because, nature is both rational and material its existence is quite independent of the individual and his/her knowledge. This concept has been very influential in the modern world (Crotty, 1998).

The use of reason, however, was not the only dominant principle to guide man's access to the nature of reality or knowledge. After Locke, Hume, Kant, and their argument for the importance of physical senses in collecting data about the environment, the emphasis shifted to the physical experience of the individual and not just to his/her rational capacity (Bewkes et. al., 1963). According to empiricism, the way of accessing knowledge takes place through the use of our physical senses and the way our senses categorise the information as 'knowledge'. Even though, Locke, Kant and other supporters of this approach realised the limitations of human capability, the assertion for the correspondence of knowledge to an outside reality remained (Hollis, 1994; Bewkes et. al., 1963). Positive empiricism would later argue that man's knowledge is limited to the individual senses, but nevertheless express a *representation* of the state of it in the individual (Bewkes et. al., 1963).

### *5.2.2 Scientific Method*

Even though at first both of the above approaches (rationalism and empiricism) were used in isolation among authors, scientists would later combine them into one primary approach that constituted the 'scientific method' (Crotty, 1998). The scientific method represented the dominant approach through which the study of the universe was conducted and became the principle research method of scientists exploring physical phenomena (Bryman, 2001).

An important issue at this point is that the scientific method enabled people to make important discoveries and to 'progress' in their development of knowledge (Hollis, 1994). The increased assertion of man to accomplishing innovations that would contribute significantly to the quality of human life and the developments in technology, medicine, communications, became an important factor for growing trust in the scientific method.

Two important activities contained in the scientific method are the practice of observation and experimentation (Crotty, 1998). Through observation the individual attempts to rationally understand the behaviour of phenomena and through experimentation to test and explain the causes and the various laws that govern them. Both these practices have the objective of explaining the origin of the phenomena as well as predict their behaviour in the future. Because knowledge was not situationally restricted but universally relevant and applicable, the generalisation and applicability of various discoveries became prominent (Crotty, 1998).

A second important dimension is that even though the scientific method was primarily used within natural phenomena, it also became the primary research method for studying *social* behaviour (Bewkes et. al., 1963). It was assumed that the outcome of research in social sciences could take the form of causal laws that could be explained and predicted. Positivism, through the use of the scientific method, claimed to be confident in discovering knowledge about human behaviour and decision making. Methodologies contained in this paradigm include cross-sectional studies, experimental studies, longitudinal studies and surveys (Gummerson, 2000).

### 5.2.3 *The Qualitative Approach*

So far we have seen that the popularity of the positivist approach relied upon man's confidence for capturing knowledge through reason and, in his ability to explain the function of natural phenomena. In the same way, the scientific method was used to examine the nature of causes in the physical world it was also employed to study and explain social behaviour (Crotty, 1998; Bryman, 2001). However, significant differences were noted that partly gave rise to the epistemological approach of interpretivism (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Hume, an early supporter of the interpretivist approach, argued that people *contribute* to formatting the relationship between cause and effect not just perceive it (Bewkes et. al., 1963). As a result, knowledge is not just 'out there' to be discovered but the individual significantly contributes to its making according to the way of it being interpreted (Berger and Luchman, 1966). This idea of personally contributing to the 'making of knowledge' was new among researchers and posed a challenge to the view of

acquiring valid or true information/facts/data (also see Hassard, 1999). The primary question that emerged through interpretivism was: how is it possible for individuals to understand and acquire knowledge, since, different people contribute or influence its making in a subjective way?

Interpretivism was influenced by Weber (1949) who started to develop it as primary epistemological approach to the study of social science. Interpretivism contains different research methodologies than the ones used in natural sciences. Also, it has different objectives for the analysis of data. The primary aim is to understand how *meaning* is created within the individual and how knowledge is generated through interpretation (Symon and Cassell, 1998; Crotty, 1998). In short, interpretivism shifted the centre of emphasis from the discovery of knowledge to the individual's way of creating meaning and with placing value on the information *perceived* (Berger and Luchman, 1966; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Interpretivism argued that information and knowledge is to be interpreted rather than to be discovered, because what we think to constitute reality is merely our own interpretation of facts<sup>14</sup> (Berger and Luchman, 1966).

Bewkes et. al., (1963) argue that ever since the interpretivist perspective was developed by Hume, a scientific 'law' does not describe a necessary and universal relation in the objective world, "it is rather a summary of certain regularities which have been observed up to the present time and which are expected, *yet without certainty*, to hold in the future" (Bewkes et. al., 1963: 574) (Italics Added). This is an important difference between how positivism approached the notion of knowledge with that of interpretivism. Whereas according to positivism knowledge could be captured, be generalised and become applicable among individuals, interpretivism argued that knowledge is only context related and it is the individuals that *interpret* information in their particular way (Denzin, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

Hence different people in different situations can interpret the same information as 'knowledge' differently (Denzin 1997). Therefore, individuals cannot have such access to 'complete' knowledge as it was initially assumed by positivism. This is because individuals are being influenced in the way they interpret the information, from their

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<sup>14</sup> Even the idea of 'facts' here represents a cultural interpretation of events and the meaning created that comes to be represented as facts. In this sense, facts are not given, neither objective, but constitute so, because they have been accepted and formulated by the wider culture and community of people.

environment, social setting, culture and ethnic origin. Thus, the knowledge generated is context dependent and relative to personal experience of that particular environment.

As authors started to recognise the factor of interpretation among individuals, people gave less emphasis on the ideas of 'cause and effect' and gave more emphasis on their physical senses, the experience of accumulating data, and more importantly the *way* that they interpret data (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The methodologies used in interpretive research are ideographic rather than nomothetic (Hollis, 1994). This means that they are concerned with the study of individuals and with instances of the particular, rather than seeking to generalise the finding to a wider spectrum of phenomena (Hollis, 1994).

#### *5.2.4 Differences of approaches to meaning realisation*

Interpretivism argued that there is a fundamental difference between the study of physical and social phenomena (Symon and Cassell, 1998; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It highlighted the differences in the way people acquire meaning and their individualism for what they assume it to constitute subjective and particular knowledge. Whereas positivism argued for an outside body of knowledge that is to be discovered, interpretivism argued for the mechanisms employed by the individuals for acquiring meaning and interpreting the environment (see also Walker 2000).

Interpretivism argued that there is no common and objective knowledge that all people have access to, but there is a continuous interpretation for what is perceived. The qualification of this we come to regard as 'knowledge' (Williams, 2000). In this sense, a personal experience of knowledge differs according to the individual it cannot be generalised or be widely applicable among different people and origins. An important distinction that arose between the positivist and interpretivist approach concerned the differences between the notions of understanding (*Verstehen*) and explanation (*Erklaren*) (Crotty, 1998). Whereas, the aim of positivism was the explanation of the function of the phenomena and their causes interpretivism argued for an understanding of the phenomena (Bryman, 2001). The notion of understanding is related with the construction of meaning by the individual and the ways of interpreting what is perceived.

Weber (1949), who was one of the early founders of this approach, argued that in the interpretation of human 'action' we are not satisfied by merely establishing a relation

between the action and a purely empirical generalisation regardless of how strict this generalisation may be. Instead, we require the interpretation of the ‘meaning’ of the action. In this sense, Weber argued, “the attempt to grasp the total reality of all historically given phenomena is *inconsistent* with the attempt to reduce these same phenomena to natural laws” (see Weber, 1949: 72-73) (Italics Added).

What gave rise to the realisation for the importance of meaning for Weber (1949) was the acknowledgement of the subjective construction of meaning that was thought to qualify as ‘knowledge’. Different authors made different claims about knowledge that were assumed to have accurate correspondence with the external environment. Weber (1949) realised that knowledge is not a substance that can be acquired but knowledge *is* the subjective interpretation by the individual about that which is perceived. This difference between understanding and explanation, and the notions of interpretation with objective knowledge, came to be an important dimension that would differentiate the two social research approaches (Crotty, 1998).

From the above argument it also follows that the aim of the social researcher is *not* to explain the phenomena but to understand how meaning is constructed. It also entails understanding the primary factors that influence the kind of interpretation for what is claimed to be ‘known’ in a particular situation (Hassard, 1999). Hence, the above held belief is how the social scientist can only reveal ‘trends’ rather than ‘laws’, and that he/she will be reduced to studying not what social reality is, but the logic of situations producing findings. Checklan and Holwell (1999) argue that: “In situation A, a likely outcome is B’ without any guarantee that his will hold in any particular situation” (p.71).

This argument had an important influence for the way generalisations were previously made (under positivism), since, the knowledge of the individual was now to be subjective and restrained within that cultural and chronological setting (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

#### *5.2.4 The researcher’s role in the phenomena under study*

Another important factor in the interpretivist approach is the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. Whereas, according to positivism the researcher was distanced and thus not influencing the subject of research, hence making valid

conclusions for the outcomes discovered, interpretivism argued for the close *interrelationship* between the researcher and what is being researched (Auerbach and Silverstin, 2003). Interpretivism argued that the researcher has a direct influence towards the subject of study and the outcome/conclusion of his research (Hollis, 1994).

Variables of importance that were not taken into account included the subjective assumptions of the researcher, his/her country of origin, and the culture and values of his/her society to mention just a few (Smith, 1993). All of these factors influence the interpretation of information about the environment and the qualification of it as 'knowledge'. To the interpretive researcher organisational and social realities are constructed as a product of theorizing and this process shapes the perceived reality as there is no external reference point by which to judge the reality of the phenomena (Roulston, 2001). As a result of this view the applicability and generalisation of research outcomes are becoming restricted to the particular context of the researcher (Whitfield and Strauss, 1998).

#### *5.2.5 Ontological assumptions of interpretivism*

A final important dimension of interpretivism concerns the nature of its ontological assumptions in relation to acquiring knowledge and how this influences the use of particular methodologies (Crotty, 1998). The ontology of interpretivism concerns the *reality of meaning* and not the reality of objective knowledge or objective reason, as claimed by positivism. For interpretivism, the notion of 'meaning' constitutes a pragmatic existence within individuals and becomes the driving force by which people make decisions (May, 1997).

In this sense the acquiring of 'knowledge' about a certain situation is to demonstrate how the object/information perceived creates meaning in the individual. Thus, according to interpretivism, in order for us to understand the nature of knowledge we first need to understand the stages of meaning construction in the individual (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Furthermore, the ontological idea of 'meaning' does not refer to the 'truth' or 'false' correspondence for what is meaningfully perceived by the individual. In developing his theory Weber (1949) was not concerned with the objective dimension of the nature of meaning but as being a *conduit* through which individuals develop

acquaintance or subjective knowledge about their environment (Crotty, 1998). The idea of knowledge has to be understood as ‘making sense of’, instead, of capturing the reality of what is being researched in a complete sense.

Another significant issue is that the epistemology of interpretivism takes place through understanding and this is because meaning is not observable but interpretable (Byrne, 1998; Bryman, 2001) In this sense, understanding involves the interpretation of the *meaning of actions* that constitute the experienced social reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). For this reason, Weber (1949) argues that meaningful actions are susceptible to *meaningful* interpretations because the acquiring of meaning will determine what is perceived or acknowledged *as* knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the interpretation of the meaningful actions by individuals is a critical part to the development of any interpretivist methodology (Crotty, 1998). This is because the role of the researcher is to examine in what way individuals construct meaning, within a particular situation, and act on it. The attempt to understand *how* people perceive the reality of phenomena also constitutes the aim of the interpretivist methodology. The interpretation of the researcher himself will also influence the overall process of research and thus the outcome perceived (Hollis, 1994). This is because, as we noted earlier, the act of observation is filtered through means of interpretation since we have no direct access to reality (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

The notion of ‘facts’, as being interpretations can be understood in two ways: Firstly, because we use existing knowledge to make sense of what we observe (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), and secondly because the facts that we study are interpretable cultural facts. Hence, the study of the social world requires a different logic of research procedure than positivism. That is, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans against the natural order (Hassard, 1999). The role of the researcher is to examine not only how meaning is perceived, but also, the nature of all the other particular factors that contributed to its formation (Healy et. al., 2000). In an organisation, such factors can include the culture of the organisation, the treatment of employees, the organisation’s

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<sup>15</sup> In other words, according to interpretivism the meaningful construction for ‘what something is’ also constitutes the *nature* of knowledge.



code of ethics, the degree of politics within employees and the broader social and cultural environment that the organisation is placed in (Denzin, 1997).

### **5.3 Interpretive approach to the study of the consultant-client relationship**

Having provided a summarised overview of the differences between the qualitative and quantitative approaches, our effort has been to make explicit some of their underlying epistemological differences. In this section, we move to discuss our application of the qualitative approach. Our objective will be to provide an overview as to why our use of an interpretive approach fits within the broader research paradigm of the thesis.

The research question of the thesis is how do management consultants legitimise their knowledge service to clients. By appreciating the different social contexts of the consultant-client interaction we are able to understand the nature of factors that exercise influence for how legitimation occurs in the relationship. Our study of the consultant client relationship is not made in the context of introducing particular variables that we try to test against an external reality. Our interest rather lies in the need to understand the social functions that governs the activities between each party and what makes such a partnership possible. One of the key features that characterises the consultant-client framework concerns the social context of the relationship. Even though consultants are often associated with the distribution of mere advice against the clients' needs, authors have widely argued as to how the locus of the relationship is equally shaped by social forces (Bloor and Dawson, 1994; Bloomfield and Best, 1992; Clark and Fincham, 2002). Such social forces constitute the creation of a social reality that is sustained through the exercise of internal beliefs, values and subjective interpretations. Hence, the way in which consultants perceive their delivery of a service is not only justified in relation to the quality of the content of the advice itself, but in relation to the social interaction with the other party to which is communicated.

Such social context is characterised for the ingrained qualities of culture, beliefs, and power relations that are shared between members and which are not often made explicit (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995). Our research focus concentrates on the need to understand the particular factors that may account as responsible for shaping the legitimation of knowledge within the relationship. Discussions about legitimation from

the literature have mainly concentrated on how consultants believe to justify their service to the client party. As a result, the principle perspective with which the literature came to be associated is argued to be mainly consultant-driven. As we have already discussed in the previous chapters, both the functional and critical perspectives interpret the process of knowledge legitimation from a consultant-centred approach. Even the legitimation of advice to the client is often interpreted on the basis of the consultants' intentions/motives (Werr and Styhre, 2003). In this context, and by bringing the client side into our discussion, our purpose is to understand how client members perceive the course of the consultants' actions and related activities. We argue how the clients' legitimation of the consultants' work cannot be fully substantiated from the consultants' assumed explicit intentions. Consulting actions are being interpreted by the client members and according to their own experienced social reality which is currently under-researched.

In using Suchman's (1995) and Habermas's work (1984a, 1984b) we want to argue that the justification of knowledge claims is an activity located within the meaning making relations of each party. The social forces that help shape the communication of knowledge claims are not only constructed differently but also interpreted differently. How consultants think of justifying their knowledge claims can be received very differently from what the clients may have been anticipating. In this context, the legitimation of a service is often dependent upon the locus of the interaction and it is not an activity whose success/failure can simply be pre-determined or pre-planned (Clark, 1995). By employing an interpretive paradigm to the study of legitimation our interest is in understanding the creation of meaning as experienced within the consultant and client parties.

#### **5.4 Collection of Empirical Sample**

Having provided an overview of the research framework, we now move to present the stages we undertook in order to collect the empirical data. Our purpose will be to show the dimensions of the operational side of the research which includes making explicit the challenges we faced while gathering the data.

Our primary method of data collection started with the commencement of interviews with consultants and clients. This was also further supported by a number of case studies

that were collected from the MCA and their annual awards for the best case study. The collection of the empirical data initially started through the making of personal contacts with individuals, some of whom were recommended by academic staff from within the department. The collection of 6 interviewees led to a pilot study through which initially formulated ideas needed to be tested out before being applied to the main sample.

The initial interviews also provided the opportunity for feedback and modifications on the initial research themes that helped improve the quality of the questions. The design of the interview questions were focused on understanding the specific position and activities between actors when being involved in the business assignment. The theoretical framework which guided our design of questions sprung from the initial research focus that was to understand the dynamics of legitimation. The existing literature became our initial reference point. Since the literature does not present us with an explicit legitimation framework we made use of Suchman's (1995) and Habermas (1984a; 1984b) work. Below, we discuss the theoretical context of the use of interviews for collecting empirical data, and as located within the qualitative research framework. We discuss the design of the questions through which we pursued to address our research question.

#### *5.4.1 The role of interviews in the collection of qualitative data*

The use of interviews plays an instrumental role in the collection of qualitative data because they allow participants to disclose their view on a social phenomenon and which is in accordance to their understanding and interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Interviews are closely related with the dynamics of the qualitative approach to research. This is because they allow for the creation of meaning to occur in a way that is natural to the participants' experience and environment (Gummesson, 2000). Interviewees do not have to explain statements in relation to a set of pre-defined ideas imposed on them. According to Cicourel (1964) interviews are instrumental in helping us understand the situation that shapes phenomena, rather than trying to examine only what the phenomena represent in themselves. Silverman (1993) also argues that "...interviews (like other narratives) display cultural particulars – which are all the more powerful, given the connections which members make between them" (p.114).

An advantage to the use of interviews is that they provide the opportunity to elicit meaning relations that participants make, in a way that other forms of questioning would not allow it (Darlington and Scott, 2002). The creation of a social reality according to the interpretivist paradigm is not situated within the course of specific actions that can be isolated for their environmental attributes (Gummesson 2003, 2000). It is rather the interaction between social actions that shape the reality of social experience and which can only become apparent if we allow those broader 'social forces' to become apparent.

The use of interviews is made in order to allow the participants to describe the relationship between such 'social forces' as they experience them (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Hence, the opportunity to understand the context in which statements become meaningful for the participants provides a powerful vehicle for understanding how the conditioning of meaning is also represented.

The purpose of interviews is not only to extract data from the participants but also to identify relationships that may indicate how and why events take place in the way that they do (Whitfield and Strauss, 1998). Here, we are interested in the motives and subjective views by the participants over their circumstances. It is necessary to clarify that our understanding of the participants' experiences becomes an interpretative analytical process. We are not able to objectively detect the reality of their experience as they are taking place. Our understanding of the participants' situations is filtered through our research interests. We seek to investigate aspects of the participants' experiences that are relevant to our exploration of legitimation. The interviewees' preferred ways for discussing their own experiences, influences the way events are reconstructed and for how evaluations are made by the participants (Williams, 2000; Silverman, 1993). To what extent an inherent causal relationship exists between the arena of interviewees' experience of social events and our analysis of it becomes a process that is subject to qualification by the researcher and in the context of his/her interpretation of the data. The process of creating conceptual relations for how events shape the course of human experience, as Silverman (1993) argues, is part of the complexities of the interpretive paradigm.

#### *5.4.2 Types of Interviews*

There are three general types of approaches used to characterise the design of interviews. These are: a) structured b) semi-structured and c) unstructured (Camic et. al., 2003; Darlington and Scott, 2002). Differences between the above approaches vary depending on the adopted research focus. Structured interviews are based on an already designed set of questions that the interviewer is presenting to the participants. The nature of the research enquiry takes an explorative character that tries to testify the given answers against set questions. The researcher already carries a set of assumptions about what is to be validated and how. The use of structured interviews is based on the assumption that the participants happen to share a homogenous experience. Their reaction somehow shares similar traits between other participants.

In structured interviews the design of questions often remains unchanged, and the reliability of the findings is dependent on the degree of variability between the expected answers. Structured interviews are more common when researchers initiate their research design upon the knowledge of a particular theory, whose features they want to understand within the subjective context of the individuals' experience (Darlington and Scott, 2002). Nevertheless, structured interviews allow for the presence of variability between answers but which also are restricted to the formulated questions.

Semi-structured interviews differ from the above, in that the participants do not follow a set of questions. The researcher is interested in obtaining a much deeper and broader understanding of the experience of the individual (Higgs, et. al. 2001). Questions are semi-constructed in the sense that there is absence of an already set pattern that is followed during the interview. The researcher can move away from initially designed questions because of the new information that the participants disclose. The making of reference to dimensions that are outside the researcher's repertoire allows for a more fluid expression of information that fits the experience and meaning-patterns of the individual.

Finally, unstructured interviews aim at eliminating the researcher's influence on the information gathering from the participants, by allowing a much greater freedom of expression. Unstructured interviews are most popular in studies of ethno methodology that seek to appreciate the meaning making complexities that reside within participants

(Darlington and Scott, 2002). Also, unstructured interviews are used when researchers try to incorporate a primary inductive approach to theory making which emerges out of the features of the studied sample.

For the purpose of our research aims we have chosen semi-structured-interviews as being the more appropriate to our research design. We make use of how authors have already discussed notions of legitimation from the literature (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, Elsbach, 1994; Suchman, 1995, Habermas, 1984a, 1984b). However, we are not interested in just testing these ideas on the participants as in the case of structured interviews. Rather, we want to allow the participants' information and input to influence views that are already expressed in the literature of management consulting. The research questions have been designed under certain themes which are in correspondence with the overarching research purpose. This is linked to our intersubjective view of knowledge where meaning is situated in the dialectic discourse between actors. By collecting information about the thematic areas we do not restrict the process of information gathering to pre-defined ideas that have been already formulated by us. We rather allow for the participants to challenge initial pre-conceptions. We believe that the experience of the participants should provide the main drive from which to discuss the nature of the consultant-client relationship.

Furthermore it is widely argued how studies about the nature and role of the consultant-client relationship, is lacking substantial empirical input from practitioners (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Existing assumptions have dominated how authors think about the nature and role of management consultancy at various conceptual levels but without making clear correlation with data that comes directly from the participants (Salaman, 2002). We aim to contribute to the above empirical gap by allowing the individuals' experience to help shape how we think of the way that legitimation occurs.

#### *5.4.3 Interviewees and epistemological representations of data*

A complementary theoretical dimension to the above has to do with the epistemological premises through which we treat the participants' testimonies (Auerbach and Silverstin, 2003). The research challenge is the reliability with which the expressed 'realities' should be treated from the empirical sample (Auerbach and Silverstin, 2003). Also, how accurate

such testimonies are thought to represent the nature and sequence of events that took place in the past. Silverman's (1993) reference to the exogenous and endogenous views of interviews is useful for addressing the above challenge.

Since the use of interpretive research is made in the context of extracting the way that meaning relations are produced in individuals, the question is how individuals themselves interpret the social events. Silverman (1993) argues that the externalist approach to interview treats the participants' experience "as straightforward reports on another reality" (p.107). It is assumed that events are reconstructed in a positivist way by means of 'accurate representation'. In contrast, the internalist interpretative perspective treats the interviewees account as self-constructing the reality of events and according to the individuals' experience of the situation. As a result, the reality that is represented is not necessarily to be treated as representative to the order and sequence of events. The individuals create their own reality of events by talking about them. Silverman (1993) expresses this point by stating how: "interpretive procedures or conversational practices present in what both interviewer and interviewee are *doing* through their talk and non-verbal actions" (italics in the original) (p. 107). Silverman (1993) implies that the reality the participants construct by talking about their experience constitutes their own interpretive reality of their situation which does not necessarily represent the sequence of events in the way that they actually took place.

The individuals' interpretation about their experience is in alignment with the theoretical premises of the interpretivist perspective in that the representation of reality is filtered through the individual's subjectivity. Such experience cannot be simply projected for what it is represented 'undistorted' (Higgs et. al., 2001). Silverman (1993) states: "all the interviewees invoke a sense of social structure in order to assemble recognisably 'sensible' accounts which are adequate for the practical purposes at hand" (p.114). Darlington and Scott (1995) make a similar point by arguing on the impasse of accessibility to the past and the reconstruction of events at present shapes the reality of how the events are presented. They state: "The only perspective that can be obtained is that of the present, no matter that the events, thoughts and feelings being reported have already occurred. We can find out how someone feels now about what happened in the

past, even what they say now about how they felt then, but this does not give us access to the past” (p. 50).

The way in which we have dealt with the above self-interpretive feature of the participants and for obtaining reliable data has been through in-depth and vigorous questions on the ideas initially expressed. We have tried to not simply rely on the information disclosed at face value but to challenge claims through further questioning. This has led to the interviewees having to support a specific claim by making reference to different experiences or/and the use additional experiences/examples. We have tried to strengthen the reliability of the obtained data with encouraging the interviewees to support their reiterated claims through various forms of evidence. The interviewees’ justification of their supported claims took different forms of representation. For example, references were made about the culture of the organisation, religious practices, beliefs and emotions expressed about their colleagues, and the play of power relations that had impacted the perceived reality at the time. In such discussions the interviewees did not just try to answer the question in a normative way but made specific references to issues they experienced within the context of their position/role and activities. Despite our effort to strengthen the reliability of the data, it also needs to be acknowledged how any form of interpretive data cannot take place outside the participants’ self-imposed construction of reality and which fits their subjective experience.

### **5.5 Access**

Having provided a summarised overview of the theoretical underpinnings behind the various forms of data collection, we now move to discuss the features of the empirical sample, and the means by which it was collected for this study. Firstly, we discuss the activities that were undertaken to obtaining access to the participants. Secondly, we discuss the type of consultant and client representatives that participated in the research. Finally, we want to provide a detailed overview of the occasions in which the interviews were conducted, and also the means by which the data was recorded. The below discussion will provide the context for showing the stages we used to analyse the data, and which will be undertaken in the last section of this chapter.



### *5.5.1 Issues of gaining access*

The management consulting industry has received a lot of publicity from both the academia and the wider press. This is mainly because of its swift growth during the last two decades, and which has meant an unprecedented rate of financial growth and increase of employment (Czerniawska and May, 2004). Nevertheless, the process for obtaining access to management consultants and clients continue to be a key challenge to obtaining reliable data (Carter and Crowther, 2000).

Consultants fear how the disclosing of information might jeopardise their business relationship with clients. Management consultants feel needed to protect their knowledge of personal contacts as well as their knowledge of specific issues regarding the internal business affairs between client firms. As Carter and Crowther (2000) argue “the unwillingness of organizations to talk about their relations with consultants” (p.626) becomes one of the common reasons for which obtaining relevant data becomes difficult. Difficulties for obtaining reliable access to both consulting and client firms has resulted in a lack of understanding about the industry. This is supported by Engwall and Kipping (2002) who argue how despite the fact that “an increasing number of case studies of consultancy interventions both in the private and public sectors”, have been produced, questions still remained to be answered, for how the legitimation of the consultants’ advice to clients takes place. And also, how consultants manage to overcome challenges prior to and in the course of delivering a business assignment.

### *5.5.2 Data collection strategy*

Our data collection strategy has been to make use of a number of electronic and hard copy resources that we have discussed below. Our principle aim has been to maximise the number of personal invitations made to consultants and clients with the expectation of maximising the number of positive responses returned. In summary, we have largely relied on existing information about consulting firms that is publicly accessible from the World Wide Web. By conducting simple research engine searches we have identified a number of information resources about consulting firms. Also, we have largely relied upon obtaining access to the Management Consultancies Awards case studies that contain information about individual clients that have made use of consultants. Gaining access to

specific personal information about consultants and clients has been an overall challenge. However, we are pleased with the rate of access achieved and with the quality of the semi-constructed interviews we conducted. Furthermore, internal existing contact through the department of Durham Business School has been particularly successful. Members of the academic staff were very kind to offer their assistance in terms of getting me acquainted with consultants and clients. Access to the public sector officers was particularly useful as the department maintained good relations with government bodies.

### *5.5.3 Electronic sources*

Our efforts in obtaining access initially started from investigating a wide array of electronic and hard copy publications that contained information about different activities. We started off by looking at the information and white paper publications by the electronic resource Management Consultancy (<http://www.managementconsultancy.co.uk/>). The site provides a useful introductory overview over the different firms operating in the UK. The listed categories with which the information is segmented allowed easy access to current existing firms. However, one of the difficulties we faced in contacting the above listed firms was finding the appropriate individuals that would be interested in our research project. Throughout the course of data collection we clearly experienced that making personal contacts with the individual consultants would ensure a higher degree of success, in contrast to contacting the company. So, even though the above electronic site provided good general information the process of obtaining access was more difficult.

We turned to similar electronic resources where the names and positions of the individual consultants would have been more specifically disclosed. A useful resource was tfpl ([www.tfpl.com](http://www.tfpl.com)). This organisation promotes training and consulting activities in the areas of knowledge management, change management and information service management. The company is also responsible for the administration and organisation of the following conferences that attract the participation of academics and practitioners: a) European Business Information Conference (EBIC), b) Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) summits, c) Collaboration, Communities and Networks in the Public Sector. In

advertising the above events, the participation of consultants and from various disciplines is made publicly available and this is how information was also obtained.

Another electronic resource has also been Cambridge Network ([www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk](http://www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk)), where consulting firms advertise their services. Similar sources have been: 1) ptsc ([www.ptsc.co.uk/](http://www.ptsc.co.uk/)) which is a consortium composed of individuals from the public and private sector, which offer management consulting related services. 2) Green Sheet Media ([www.greensheetmedia.com](http://www.greensheetmedia.com)) which offers a classified directory tool where firms advertise their services. The firms vary between IT related services to the more traditional consulting firms. In addition to the above efforts we also made 'cold contacts' to various firms some of which represent the larger accounting firms (e.g. PWC, Booz Allen Hamilton, KPMG). We experienced a limited degree of success as consulting firms were not willing to initiate any kind of dialogue. Participating in the Evolution Business Knowledge Conference (EBK) was also a useful opportunity to develop contacts. The event is part of a larger government research project on knowledge management which attracts participants from the academic, consulting and client fields<sup>16</sup>. The already existing networks between the academic staff from within Durham Business School with outside consultants and clients played an important role to obtaining various references.

The type of consulting firms we approached operated in the area of traditional management consulting services. We have deliberately excluded firms that specialise in IT or outsourcing operations. The reason for this has been the context of our theoretical research focus that concentrates on consulting activities which promote an *interactive* dimension of service. Hence, we are interested in how consultants think about the generation and distribution of advice to clients. Also, how clients perceive the nature of the consultants' activities in fulfilling their organisational needs. IT services are often part of large consulting corporations that provide management service, often in outsourced mode of operations and this is why we felt that it was better to not opt for them. Table 5.1 shows the summary of the means from which consulting and client firms replied to my invitation.

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<sup>16</sup> For further information for EBK please see: <http://www.ebkresearch.org/>

**Table 5.1** The different sources from which empirical data was collected

| Source  | Consultants | Clients | KMO <sup>17</sup> |
|---|-------------|---------|-------------------|
| Electronic publications, 'cold conducts' & snowballing affect | 20          | 5       | 4                 |
| Contacts through the department                               | 8           | 7       |                   |
| MCA Case Study Awards   | 2           | 18      |                   |
| <b>Total</b>  | 30          | 30      | 4                 |

#### *5.5.4 Management Consultancy Association - Case Studies*

Our use of the case studies relied on the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) ([www.mca.org.uk](http://www.mca.org.uk)) which is a representative body of management consulting firms in the UK. MCA was established in 1956 with four founding firms (Urwick Orr, Incbucon, Production Engineering International, and Personnel Administration ([www.mca.org.uk](http://www.mca.org.uk))) (Fincham and Clark, 2002:7). Currently, its "members represent around 70% of the UK consulting sector, employing around 20,000 management consultants and work with the FTSE 100 and all government departments" (ibid.). MCA has grown over the years as an important institution to management consulting firms, because it provides an active and informative role to its members while also regulating the firms' practices. Currently MCA operates a number of different activities that include: a) research of the industry, b) the study of emerging or changing market trends, and c) the opportunity for the members to develop their networking relationships with the other players. MCA promotes the marketing of its firms' activities and is keen on maintaining government relations that help the potential consumption of the firms' services by public clients. MCA provides training to its members for strengthening their public relations and consulting practices.

One of the annual and important activities MCA produced in the last year concerns the MCA Awards. In an effort to foster the quality of the consultants' work and increase the competition for the positive development of the management consulting practices the MCA Awards offer the opportunity for public recognition of the consultants' work. The awards started to take place since 1999 and take the form of case studies in which

<sup>17</sup> KMO stands for Knowledge Management Officer

consultants can record the experience of a business assignment. By illustrating the best practice with which the consultants dealt with the presented obstacles, they have the opportunity to demonstrate how they best served the clients' needs and helped distribute the required advice within the various situational constraints. The case studies make clear reference about the clients' organisational needs against the course of consulting service and they have been a rich knowledge-pool of diverse consulting experiences and empirical data.

The case studies provided a rich opportunity for obtaining information about the identity of specific clients and led to the opportunity for interviews with them. The clients were selected and invited to participate in the interview through an invitation that was mainly sent to them electronically. The opportunity to have interviews with individuals about whom the reports were written proved a fascinating experience to revisit the consultants' presentation of events as recorded in the reports. We had the opportunity to verify and often challenge how the consultants projected the clients' reality at the time.

The case studies are categorized according to the following business lines of service: 1) Innovation, 2) Corporate social responsibility, 3) International, 4) Business strategy, 5) Change management, 6) Human resources, 7) Marketing, 8) Operational performance, 9) Outsourcing consultancy, 10) Technology. The reports are assessed by a jury of individuals representing the academic and client and consultant worlds. The MCA Awards are accessible to the public. Timothy Clark has been part of the above jury and has helped us get access to the case studies for which I am very grateful. The represented consulting assignments summarise the consultants' activities within the 2000 word limit as instructed by MCA. The total economic output of the consulting firms for the UK economy is considerable, reaching eight billion pounds a year ([www.mca.org.uk](http://www.mca.org.uk)). The publicity of the above event has been well recognised from private and public sources. The event was co-sponsored and enjoyed marketability by publishing houses like, the monthly business magazine 'Management Today', The Times Newspaper, and the BBC.

#### *5.5.5 Access to client firms*

For gaining access to client organisations we followed the above practices as for meeting consultants. It needs to be noted that with every management consultant we interviewed

we made requests about obtaining information about the individuals' past or present clients. From the sample of thirty consultants interviewed, we only received one client contact that turned out to be a management consultant who happened to be a client on some past occasion. The above failure to obtain access about clients from consultants is an indication of the protectiveness that characterises their practices. Consultants feel the need to ensure the safety of their business relationships and the need to eliminate the possibility of other individuals questioning the credible character of their service that might pose a threat to their work.

The MCA case study reports proved significantly useful as the name of clients was disclosed in some of the reports. We managed to trace the individuals through various means of communication that were mainly electronic. The difficulty to obtain access to participants has meant that we could not interview consultants and clients who had participated in the same project. By qualifying our research sample to consultants and projects that were management based, we had the opportunity to interview individuals that were involved in similar business projects (strategy, change management, human resources, business process re-engineering, etc).

The client organisations that participated in the research were part of the private and public sector. This helped to provide a rich landscape of consulting practices, and helped identify inter-organisational differences as they are part of different organisational environments. After collecting the above personal information we created an invitation letter that was sent by email or by post. The letter invited the consultants and clients to participate while sketching out thematic areas of the information we wanted to obtain and while ensuring confidential treatment of the potential collected data (*see Appendices 2&3*).

#### *5.5.6 Details of data sample*

The total number of interviews conducted was sixty four out of which thirty were with clients and thirty with management consultants (see Table 5.2). Four were with individuals specialising in knowledge management activities. Sixty interviews were made face to face and by travelling to the individual's location (*see Appendix 1*). Four interviews were made over the phone. From the above interviews in two occasions there was representation of two individuals. In coding the interviews we separated them so that

the extracts of the interviews could be well accounted for their sources of origin. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were digitally recorded. The interviews were transcribed and a copy of the document was sent to the participants for corrections and for making further elaborations. Summaries were also created in most of the interviews after they were conducted.

The size of the management consultancy firms varied between the participants. Large corporations contained in excess of 100 employees and medium size firms contained between 20 to 100 employees, while small size firms had between one firm independent-consultant to 20 employees. From the clients' side of participants we accumulated a good representation of private and public sector organisations. In particular, eleven interviews have been with clients from the public sector. The position of the interviewees varied from local council organisations to educational institutions to public government departments. The use of consultants, by the public sector, has increased dramatically over the last ten years with the result of making it one of the most important reasons for the continuing growth of the industry in UK market (see Czerniawska, 2004). In our analysis of the data we make reference to the differences between the nature of the private and public sector even though we do not concentrate on expanding the nature of such differences in detail.

**Table 5.2** The size between the consultant and client firms interviewed

| <b>Size of firms</b> | <b>Over 100 employees</b> | <b>Between 20-100</b> | <b>Less than 20 employees</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Consulting firms     | 8                         | 11                    | 11                            |
| Client firms         | 22                        | 7                     | 1                             |
| KM                   | 3                         |                       | 1                             |
| Total                | 33                        | 18                    | 13                            |

### **5.6 Links between the literature and our development of research themes**

So far we have discussed the different empirical means by which we have sought to collect the empirical data. In the following section we discuss how our understanding of the literature has led us to the development of specific research themes that we have operationalised through the design of the interview questions. In this section, our discussion aims at making transparent the conceptual links between: a) the discussed

theoretical content of the literature with b) the pursuing of our research focus in the interviews.

#### *5.6.1 Knowledge distribution and legitimation approaches*

The study of the distribution of knowledge in the consultant-client relationship can be argued to be largely discussed within three broad trends that focus on: a) the nature of organisational needs that clients face, b) the advice and knowledge that is required to address their needs or generate solutions by the consultants, and c) the locus of interaction in which the above knowledge is communicated in the relationship. Authors have used different typologies in order to characterise the consultant-client relationship that vary in their level of detail (see Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Barcus and Wilkinson, 1995; Blake and Mouton, 1976). We have illustrated the above in detail when discussing the various definitions characterising the consulting work. We believe that what differentiates the authors' features of discussion is not so much the categorisation of the stages that consultants and clients follow. It is the loci of interpretation authors adopt in order to understand and explain the consultant-client relationship. As a result, in large we are faced with two different approaches.

The Organizational Development approach argues how the role of the consultant serves a specific organisational need. Clients are confronted with an array of managerial issues or corporate strategic dilemmas where decisions need to be made and which may affect the current or future state of the firm. The accumulation of information and the devise of methods and techniques can help generate solutions. The creation of value is seen as being the achieved correspondence between: a) the identified organisational need and b) the creation of advice that will help respond to such need. Assumptions that govern the above mode of interpretation place emphasis on the consultants' genuine motives for helping the client. The quality of the consultants' knowledge is thought to contain some correspondence with the organisational reality experienced in the client. What prevents the above OD perspective from becoming problematic as a trend of interpretation is the *homogeneity* with which the clients' needs correspond to the consultants' solutions. If there is not a clear correspondence between: a) what the clients experience and b) what consultants deliver, then the value of the above perspective looses



its strength. This is because the consulting process does not bear a pragmatic validity to the client's realm of organisational life.

In a similar fashion to the above approach, we have also seen how authors that support the critical approach question the assumptions about the creation and delivery of knowledge. They rather argue for how the immediate economic need that consultants deliver is believed to fulfil a socially constructed phenomenon. The consultants' creation of knowledge to clients does not bear an assumed direct correspondence but it is rather governed by a fierce competition of interests in which the clients' perceived value lies in the eye of the beholder. The perceived value is dependent on the two parties' interaction.

As a result it is argued that consultants are not simply conveying a set of solutions that simply make a direct difference in the life of the client. Rather, consultants are confronted with a similar level of uncertainty for whether their course of solution will produce the required results as with the client. What legitimises the consultants' value of service is the careful orchestration of claims that aim at securing the consultants' perceived knowledgeable position. The clients' perceived value of the consultants work is intertwined within the locus of the information produced but which is sustained with the making of impressions and the use of rhetoric.

As the above discussion indicates the understanding of legitimation from both the above perspectives is ingrained within a set of assumptions that each of the perspective does not often question in length. If we are to produce afresh any perspective for how the consulting service is legitimised it is necessary that we endeavour to obtain answers to fundamental questions from both consultants and clients. In the literature, explanations for how legitimation occurs usually take interpretive accounts that place weight on the consultants' experiences and which are not equally shared with examining the clients' experience. In this study our aim is to incorporate the client dimension more integrally. By beginning from the literature as the starting point of developing our theoretical research interests, we use the existing discussion from which to elicit a number of relationships. As table 5.3 illustrates, these can be characterised as the broader themes which will guide our interview questions.

**Table 5.3 Literature review themes**

| Theme No. | Consultants  | Clients  | Lit. Review   |
|-----------|--|--|---|
| 1         | Consulting role & Services   | Clients' perception of consulting role & activities                | Chapter 1 & 2.<br>Key words: Consulting advice,<br>Indicative references See consulting definitions by: Greiner and Metzger (1983), Powell (1995)                             |
| 2         | The consultants' role to identifying the clients' perceived organisational problem | The clients' views about their own identified organisational needs | Chapter 2.<br>Key words: Organisational needs<br>Indicative references: Schein, 1999<br>Toppin and Czerniawska (2005)   |
| 3         | The generation and distribution of advice and solutions                            | The generation and distribution of advice and solutions            | Chapter 3<br>Key words: managerial solutions, knowledge, advice, information, knowledge sharing<br>Indicative references: Empson (2001a, 2001b); Suddaby and Greenwood (2002) |
| 4         | Perceptions of justification & value   | Perceptions of justification & value                               | Chapter 3 & 4<br>Key words: presentation, rhetoric, solutions, impressions<br>Indicative references Abrahamson (1996); Clark (1995); Sturdy, (1997a, 1997b), Fincham (1997)   |
| 5         | Outcomes & Implementation  | Outcomes & Implementation  | Chapter 3 & 4<br>Key words: Outcomes, solutions, performance, problems<br>Indicative references: Grant et. al., (2006), O'Shea and Madigan (1997) Argyris, (1996), (2000)     |

Below we provide a more comprehensive summary as to why we chose the specific thematic relationships and the data that we were targeting to collect from the participants.

### 5.6.2 Question themes for Consultants

- Consulting roles and services

The above theme was aimed at extracting an introductory overview to the specific consultant's job and activities. Furthermore, to establish the consultants' self-understanding of his/her own role in terms of its meaning representation. Rather than incorporating any suggestion for their expertise or lack of expertise, alluding to the assumptions made by the functional or critical perspectives, consultants had the opportunity to qualify their own qualities in the way they felt most appropriate.

- The client and his/her organisational problem

In asking the consultants to discuss their clients' needs our focus shifts to the business experiences of the interviewees. In particular, to the type of specific organisational needs they encountered with clients. Our interest focuses on how the consultants perceive the clients' needs and how they are able to identify and locate such need in the first place. This question is closely followed with the type of help and advice clients might need through the consultants' contribution.

- The generation and distribution of advice and solutions

This theme is looking at the ways in which consultants perceive and discuss the need to produce and distribute advice against the clients' needs. The question is seeking to establish how information and knowledge is approached by consultants and the possible different organisational contexts in which the interviewees apply the above knowledge. Furthermore this theme seeks to trace why the consultants' knowledge is thought to help fulfil the clients' expressed needs. What are the different channels by which consultants communicate and distribute their knowledge to clients. What form does this advice take and why.

- Perceptions of justification and value

The above theme explicitly centres on the idea of legitimisation. Our aim is to address why consultants believe that clients might accept or reject the consultants' advice. The effort is to make transparent the narrower conceptual relations consultants make about the value of their service to clients. Furthermore, in what form is this value measured or understood by the consultants.

- Outcomes & Implementation

The above concluding theme is seeking to address the operational outcomes of the consultants' business project with clients. The positive or negative outcomes of the consulting work. Also, to what extent implementation becomes part of the consultants' role and responsibility.

### 5.6.3 Question themes for Clients

- The clients' perception of the consultants' role & activities

The clients' perception of the consultants has been under-explored from the literature. With the above theme, our objective is to identify the clients' perceptions of the consultants' identity and role. The clients' diverse experience of consultants is thought to enrich our understanding of what these views represent.

- The clients' views about their own identified organisational needs

In drawing to the above theme our interest is to elicit how clients perceive their own organisational needs. We want to identify how clients discuss, contextualise and present the recognition of their own needs. Furthermore, in what way clients realise the consultants' involvement as necessary precondition to producing the desired solutions.

- The generation and distribution of advice and solutions

In a similar way to addressing the question of how consultants' might perceive their contribution of knowledge, with this theme we also try to establish how clients interpret the consultants' knowledge. Our aim is to clarify the clients' expectations and identify possible issues that may concern aspects of communication and interpersonal interaction.

- Perceptions of justification & value

The clients' way of extrapolating the value of the consulting knowledge is often interpreted from the literature of a consulting perspective. Our focus on legitimation from the client's perspective aims to complement the above gap. How clients justify the consultants' advice becomes a subjective process. The creation of value for the client might differ from the consultants' intentions/scope. How clients think about the consultants' legitimation of knowledge is intimately related with our understanding of the creation of knowledge.

- Outcomes & Implementation

With the above theme we sought to examine the consultants' possibility of implementation of advice in the client. Also, to establish the clients' perception about the efficacy of the consultants' advice in relation to the presented needs. The application of the consultants' advice by the client can have implications for how notions of value are produced in the client. If clients find that the consultants' recommendations are not feasible or relevant to their business situation, this can impact their satisfaction of the consultants. In this sense we want to find how the implementation aspect fits within the context of the communication of advice. The above theme becomes the concluding part in the interviews.

#### *5.6.4 Themes and interview questions*

In contrast to trying to test already made assumptions by either the functional and critical perspective, our objective is to allow the interviewees to express their experience without being influenced by our assumptions. The articulation of the questions at the time of conducting the interview became a semi-constructed process. As a result, new questions were triggered from the interviewees' disclosed experiences which were not initially designed. The logic that has guided the design of the below research paradigm emerges out of the need for an orderly sequence of questions through which the interview becomes a manageable exercise.

The thematic questions that we designed in order to examine the more particular dimensions of the relationships are illustrated in the tables below. In them, we provide particular examples of the questions used. It is important to underline that our use of the interview questions did not take the same order/format with all the participants. Questions were asked in order to clarify or support a particular point that was relevant to a particular example/story, the participant was giving. We deviated from using a particular/standard set of questions and this provided the opportunity to obtain information that otherwise might have not been possible had we only relied on the articulation of the questions in the way they were designed. We believe that every interview is different and we asked questions that were distinct to the specific situation of the participants.

It needs to be noted that we have tried to produce consistency in relation to the thematic areas we have covered. In all of the interviews questions have been asked about issues relating to the clients' organisational needs or the consultants' perceptions about the adopted mechanisms on the generation of advice, or the factors that have been responsible for the justification of knowledge claims in the relationship. All of the interviews follow a certain thematic trend but the articulation of the questions themselves differs.

A practical challenge of the semi-constructed interview approach has been the need to identify thematic relations between ideas that were not immediately obvious. Because new questions were asked and different type of information was provided, our exploration to identify patterns became more difficult. This is because we could not rely on the immediate information that was expressed against the interview questions. Rather, we had to rely on the meaning of the content of the information, which at times was not immediately apparent.

Furthermore, this practice has also meant the need to acquire good knowledge of the broader context of the interview prior to using it and for showing support towards a particular idea. Because of the large number of interviews conducted this has also meant a subsequent lengthier process from what was initially anticipated. In order to deal with the above challenge we also chose to produce a summary for each of the interviews just after they were transcribed so that the main ideas could be made apparent while analysing the more particular themes (*see Appendix 2*).

A complementary issue to the above has also been the way in which we have analysed the content of the interviews by providing emphasis on the narrative of the interviewees' experience. Even though we will discuss more about this in the next part of the chapter, it needs to be noted how our use of the content of information for providing support to a specific idea, is not made by simply providing the exact quote that referenced the idea. Because the meaning of the information disclosed by the participants becomes significant within the context of the narrative, we have deliberately tried to produce a storyline about the participants' situation. This has allowed for the meaning of those specific points to be made more clearly relevant.

Tables 5.4 and 5.5 list the various themes that we have addressed in all of the interviews complemented with examples of the questions asked. The precise way of expressing the meaning of the questions changed depending on the way in which the participants discussed their experience.

**Table 5.4:** Research focus & question themes: Consultants

| <i>Thematic Category</i>                                | <i>Question Examples</i>  |
|---|---|
| Consulting role & services                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How long have you been a consultant?</li> <li>- How did you find yourself in this industry? Have you always been with this firm?</li> <li>- How do you view your role as a consultant?</li> <li>- How do you view your contribution as a facilitator of advice to others?</li> </ul>   |
| The client and his/her organisational problem           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What are the primary needs the clients are confronted with and the specific reasons for you to seek help and advice?</li> <li>- Can you identify the key features among your clients' needs?</li> <li>- What are the key expectations from the clients when asking for advice? What is that you feel they want from you?</li> </ul>   |
| The generation and distribution of advice and solutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you structure an assignment for you clients?</li> <li>- What are the primary mechanisms used from which you draw your information and knowledge?</li> <li>- How do you generate your advice against the clients' needs?</li> <li>- How do you communicate the advice to clients? Could you give some example of this?</li> </ul>  |
| Perceptions of justification and value                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-How do you convince a client for what you can offer?</li> <li>- How do you justify your advice to clients?</li> <li>- Would you like to give me an example where you felt that you added value for a client?</li> <li>- Are the different ways of the presentation of the materials important for whether the client will accept or reject your suggestions and recommendations?</li> </ul> |
| Outcomes & Implementation                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What are your views on the implementation of advice to clients?</li> <li>- Does the implementation take place and if so how?</li> <li>- Could you comment on the results of your involvement on a business assignment? Have the clients managed to apply that which you suggested? If so, why do you the client was able to apply your advice in his/her situation?</li> </ul>              |

**Table 5.5:** Research focus & question themes: Clients

| <i>Thematic Category</i>                                       | <i>Question Examples</i>   |
|--|--|
| The clients' perceptions of the consultants' role & activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What does the idea of 'consultancy' mean for you? What is that the consultants do?</li> <li>- How did the consultant approach you when expressing interest for their service?</li> </ul> <p>How did they respond to your issues or problem?</p>   |
| The clients' view on organisational needs                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are the different type of managerial and organizational issues, challenges, or, problems you are encountering in your position &amp; activities?</li> <li>- How often have you used or do you use management consultants? Why?</li> <li>- What particular consultancy firms do you go to?</li> <li>- What were your particular organisational needs?</li> </ul>  |
| The generation & communication of advice and solutions         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What type of knowledge and information did the consultant provide to you? What advice did they give you?</li> <li>- Do you know how the consultant might have drawn their information from which they provided their advice?</li> <li>- What were the content specifics of the consultants' advice to you?</li> </ul>   |
| Perceptions of justification & value                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When it came to the point that the consultants had to present their opinion, advice, solution, recommendations, how did the consultants suggest/present/argue their recommendations to you?</li> <li>- How did the consultants <i>justify</i> their claims for creating value for you through their assignment or recommendations? What evidence did they propose?</li> <li>- What are the reasons which made you feel that you needed to <i>accept</i> (or <i>reject</i>) their advice? In other words, <i>what convinced you</i> for what the value they claimed to offer?</li> </ul> |
| Outcomes & Implementation                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-How has the implementation of advice taken place during the course of your business assignment?</li> <li>- Do you believe that your experience with management consultants has helped you to be able to respond better to managerial challenges or demands of the environment? If so why?</li> </ul>   |

### 5.7 Data Analysis

Apart from the broader epistemological paradigm someone might adopt for acquiring knowledge about social phenomena, the analysis of the collected data takes place through more specific analytical tools. The use of qualitative research is made in order to identify



the meaning making relations as they are experienced by the participants (Fairclough, 2003; Auerbach and Silverstin, 2003). The purpose is not to try to explain phenomena against the features of an already presented reality. The purpose is to understand the context in which the phenomena gain significance and the way in which they are conditioned within the particular and broader social context of the individuals.

Tools that are employed for the analysis of the information vary. Even though the qualitative approach might be used as an overarching paradigm to treating social realities, the analysis of the data can take different forms of expression. Such different analytical tools can be: Discourse analysis, with placing emphasis on the use of language and how specific ideas are interrelated to particular concepts (Fairclough, 2003; Prunckun, 1996, Darlington and Scott, 2002). Case study analysis, where the participants' experiences are recorded within an orderly set of events and whose actions are examined against the presented narrative (Eisenhardt, 1989). Also, the use of grounded theory analysis that places emphasis on the emergence of themes that are contrasted against their repetitive emergence onto text. The use of thematic analysis is linked to principles of grounded theory but which also has distinct differences in the way the information is encoded from text (see Boyatzis, 1998; Dey, 1998).

The use of thematic analysis is primarily concerned with the exploration of repetitive themes that come to be coded under certain categories that are either, already decided prior to the analysis, or which are inductively emerging from the data itself. Our adoption of thematic analysis is largely based on the work of Boyatzis (1998) and Auerbach and Silverstin (2003). The notion of thematic analysis has been used between authors (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2000), but Boyatzis (1998) and Auerbach and Silverstin, (2003) helped to provide a more systematic analysis for what it represents.

According to Boyatzis (1998) "Thematic analysis allows the interpretive social scientist's social construction of meaning to be articulated or packaged in such a way, with reliability as consistency of judgement, that description of social "facts" or observations seems to emerge" (p. xiii). Thematic analysis begins with the exploration of ideas that reappear within the information disclosed by the participants, and as recorded on text.

### *5.7.1 Thematic analysis*

The exercise of thematic analysis is based on the theoretical principle of the emergence of themes that help indicate qualities about the phenomenon studied (Boyatzis, 1998). A theme is characterised as a basic conceptual entity, which demonstrates some kind of correlation between the researcher's research objectives with the displayed content of the data. The reappearance of themes is produced from the way that individuals refer to their experience. Boyatzis (1998) argues that: "A theme is a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (p.4). In this context, the process of identifying a particular pattern from the recorded information is the first basic step of thematic analysis. The second stage is based on the coding of the information which is made under the naming of specific categories. Boyatzis (1998) argues how such categories can be deployed from a specific theory that already designates such categories. The coding can be based on the already made collection of prior data that provides some prior context of such categories. The coding can be made inductively and by creating categories as they emerge from the data itself.

The two important stages that characterise the process of thematic analysis are: 1) the sampling of the units of analysis and 2) the sampling of the units of coding. By 'unit of analysis', reference is made to the segment of the chosen text that needs to be reviewed, whether this is an interview, a chapter or a book (Boyatzis, 1998). By the 'unit code', reference is made to the labelling process of how the themes should be categorised under a title (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) states that: "a good code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. A good code may emerge from one or more original themes. Once it is developed as a code, it becomes the form of the original themes that the researcher uses throughout his inquiry." (p. x). The code is not simply a representation of the data but how we conceptually tend to perceive or interpret the data. Hence, the process of coding is a process of interpretation and dependent on the research interest of the researcher.

The third stage of thematic analysis is the interpretation of the codes and the broader pattern that is created between the selected codes. Our way of applying the above principles began from studying the displays of the interviews and after they were

transcribed onto text. After repetitive analysis of the data we started categorising the displays of information under specific paragraphs and provided themes that connoted a particular concept. We then collected the themes and their associated meaning from which we started to produce the various codes. This was done by first selecting the various themes from each interview and secondly by selecting all the themes and we then tried to identify broader patterns that led to the codes. The research questions under which we sought to extract information from the participants proved particularly helpful as it allowed us to identify commonly repeated patterns. In tables below we have listed a series of examples of the titles used from the client interviews.

### *5.7.2 Stages of thematic analysis*

Our analysis of the empirical data can be characterised as a five stage process and we come to illustrate the phases in detail below. As discussed in the previous section, our designation of the interview questions concentrated around a specific number of broad themes. These themes are in principle drawn from the literature. However, the themes are not given extensive attention for what they constitute by authors. As a result, their treatment from the literature often follows a way of interpretation that is not shared between authors. Our aim has been to expand our understanding of these themes by elaborating on their treatment and incorporation by practitioners.

The second stage of our analysis has been to make use of the thematic categories to which we based the initial screening of the empirical data. In some of the interviewees and depending on the information gathered, it became necessary to add some additional categories that could account for the interviewee's experience and which was not necessarily commonly expressed in the other interviewees. Some of these categories are: a) Differences in the public and private sector, b) Knowledge Management officers and their practices c) the relationship between the public sector and the political environment of the interviewees. Our use of the inclusion of the below thematic categories has been made so that could be the more *representative* of the empirical data. Table 5.6 illustrates random examples of the categories used against the created theme and the displayed data from which the theme was drawn.

**Table 5.6** Example of the creation of thematic categories, for clients, from the data

| Interviewee | Thematic category                                   | Specific theme  | Data  |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| CI 13       | Consulting role & services                          | The client's choice of the consultant from word of mouth and at the time the need for the review was announced    | And he announced on that occasion that we were going to conduct a fundamental business review, in order to assess the scale and nature of our problems and put them right. And we appointed ABC, a traditional financial accounting company consultancy, which had recently started a business consulting division as a result of our Chief Operating Officer - Margaret knowing someone who used them.                 |
| CI 13       | The client & his/her organisational problem         | Board puzzling of the problem and quest of an outside consulting firm   | So we, as a board held a series of seminars devoted to examining the nature of the problem. And we decided that we were so consumed by the problems of running the day-to-day business, that we needed almost a special Think Tank to examine the present dynamics of the business; and that we would seek some external help in setting up that think tank and conducting an initial analysis into what was happening. |
| CI 13       | The generation & distribution of advice & solutions | The consultants' multi-functional work with channelling the different teams' findings back to the executive board | Yeah, it was a joint effort really; I mean they helped to structure the programme, they provided the expertise through individual consultants who guided the work streams to undertake the analysis and create a conclusion which they then, as a team, offered back to the business for discussion and decision.   |
| CI 13       | Perceptions of justification and value              | The client's expressed view of the consultants' value in helping them identify own strengths and weaknesses       | Well not necessarily straight away, because what the consultants help you do is identify strengths and weaknesses at the most senior level. And where there are perceived weaknesses, they may offer a view that you need to boost your talent pool in a given area. And you can recruit in the interim to act in some kind of deputising capacity for the incumbent director, for example.                             |
| CI. 13      | Outcomes & Implementation                           | The client's successful implementation of the strategic plans   | And if anything we've expanded that strategy in terms of the detail involved in it now, as we've implemented the fundamental business review – that is now done. We've changed the business to that extent, we've reduced our cost base, so now we have a much stronger platform from which we can go forward and implement the rest of the strategy.   |

**Table 5.7** Example of the creation of thematic categories, for consultants, from the data

| Interviewee | Thematic category          | Specific theme  | Data   |
|-------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Con.26      | Consulting role & services | Previous experience in consulting, & currently CEO of ACA | As of today, I'm the Chief Executive of the ACA Group, which provides consultancy – this is in many iterations – but really is about performance enhancement with the main focus on behaviour and people. So I run the consultancy |

|         |   |  |  |
|---------|---|--|--|
| Con 26  | The client & his/her organisational problem         | Large Client firms: Rail industry, Government, financial services sector | Absolutely. Our clients tend to be large organisations that range from the rail industry to government to the financial services sector, so we tend to be across a variety of sectors. The one area we don't really get involved in, - I was going to say retail – though that's not really true, as we've just had a massive job with Starbucks.  |
| Con 26  | The generation & distribution of advice & solutions | Consultants' emphasis on Rossmore being good at relationship development | We get to go back to the comment that I made earlier about our being behavioural psychologists. I would like to think we are fairly skilled but the one area that we are really skilled at is really at the developing of relationships with our clients: talking to them, understanding them, coaching/mentoring them, it's a totally different approach. We don't go in and say, "We've got all the answers, and we're more clever than you."  |
| Con. 26 | Perceptions of justification and value              | Consultants: no use of off-the-shelf solutions                           | We're not like some of the big boys, don't get me wrong because I've worked with some of the big boys, but it seems to me the approach that is often taken is: "we know the solution, now what's your problem?" so, it's an "off the shelf" type of solution. We have none of that. We have certain tools and techniques to do a diagnosis. So for instance, if we go into an organisation and it may be that the chief executive male or female says, "we've got a real problem in getting this company to change." |
| Con. 26 | Outcomes & Implementation                           | The consultants' implementation role in the client                       | What we say is that we will stay with the client until the implementation takes place – we are implementation consultants, we aren't strategists. The model I showed you is that we will not leave until implementation has proceeded, and then we will go back from time to time to alter the implementation.   |

The above display of information helped us to make the data more manageable. It assisted us with the operational handling and locating of the themes in relation to the relevant quotes we would need to use to support our analysis. The display of themes is necessary for understanding the broader relations that the interviewees are making and which are not immediately identifiable. Our endeavour to understand the represented themes was further assisted by creating further displays. Table (5.8) illustrates a number

of themes that were eventually selected from each of the interviews and designated category.

Our scope in doing the above exercise aimed at producing an accurate understanding of the information displayed. The creation of the themes demanded a sound understanding of the context of the interviewees' experience. It needs to be noted how the creation of themes took an interpretive form of expression. The use of words and the ideas that were re-created from this activity led to the creation of new concepts that would form the basis for our later analysis. As a result, the stratification of ideas was not aimed only at creating displays of information but enhancing our understanding and interpretation for what they mean.

Our adoption of the above approach was made in a way of replacing the electronic categorisation of the data by using qualitative software, like Nvivo. We felt that in the process of creating the initial titles and then codes, our simple segmentation of data proved to be more useful even though at times it has proved more time consuming. In the below tables we illustrate a random and indicative number of themes in relation to our designated code. The general categories by which we constructed our interview questions have enabled us to generate a sound understanding of the interviewees. As a result, consultants and clients had the opportunity to discuss their experience in a way that was fitting their views and assumptions. The use of semi-constructed questions helped to allow the interviewees to create relations that were not influenced by our own assumptions.

**Table 5.8** Random examples of themes created from consultants

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Client need</i>                 | <p>The client's stagnated position of 'rose tinted glass' and the functionality of an outsider with bringing new information and positive challenge to clients' operations that may contain independence of business interest and 'objectivity' (Con.4)</p> <p>The consultant's view for his role is to identify the difference between the 'expressed' from the 'actual' need (example given) (Con.9).</p> <p>The clients' often semi-clarity of their own needs and high level of terming in expressing it in contrast to the more simple actual state of the problem (Con. 27)</p> <p>The consultants' emphasis and role is to identify his clients' actual from expressed needs and how clients are not aware of the difference (Con.31)</p> |
| <i>Con. advice &amp; knowledge</i> | <p>The consultant's view for how consultants are not 'experts' but bring outside knowledge from the study, research and problematisation over issues (Con. 4)</p>  |

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
|                      | <p>The consultant's acknowledgement of learning from the client and at the expense of the client (Con.9)</p> <p>The consultant's very rich knowledge pooled within the industry and markets accumulated through continuing research, publications and commenting (Con.27)</p> <p>The consultant's recognition of the common body of knowledge the clients buy from consultants and how this has been the same over the last few years with variations of the 'same' product and nothing new (Con.31)</p>  |
| <i>Justification</i> | <p>The consultants' effort to convince the key people in particular and them to become part of the resolution (Con.4)</p> <p>The consultant's role in generating understanding and agreement in the client to justify the acclaimed advice (Con.9)</p> <p>The consultant's basis of justification in making the knowledge relevant to the client's particular circumstances (Con.27)</p> <p>Trust and justification: the influence of personal relationships to radical solutions and the consultant's compliance to the client's way (Con.31)</p>  |
| <i>Value</i>         | <p>The value of the consultant's presence and work because it helps change the behaviour in the client and bypass the internal politics or barriers of communication which are a real obstacle (Con.4)</p> <p>The value of consultant's services to help the client move from the 'knowing' stage to the 'doing' stage (Con. 9)</p> <p>The consultant's value of work in simplifying the knowledge of the industry to the particular client's needs/issues (Con.27)</p> <p>The value in the consultant being an outsider, looking 'in' the client and the advantage associated with it for providing objectivity or independence (Con.31)</p> |

**Table 5.9** Example of random themes from clients

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Client need</i>                 | <p>The large diversity of agendas, goals and objectives (cl.1).</p> <p>The client's need for the consultants to confirm some of the decisions that had been taken (cl.2)</p> <p>The client's HR related needs in the organisation (e.g. recruitment, training, development, appraisal) (cl.26).</p> <p>The client's need for integrating the different and existing Performance Measurement approaches into a single one in an effort to improve employees' performance (cl.28).</p>                            |
| <i>Con. advice &amp; knowledge</i> | <p>The consultants delivering tools and techniques in the client and not just 'knowledge' (cl.1)</p> <p>The consultants' methodology input to clients as the key area of knowledge transfer and the emphasis on making incremental changes (cl.2).</p> <p>The consultants often made effort to 'sell' the client some business model or 'expertise' and the client's limited use of that (cl.26).</p> <p>The consultants' knowledge of similar experience with other organisations as very valuable (cl.28)</p> |

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Justification</i> | <p>The consultants' good track record and excellent presentation that was very positively received (cl.1).</p> <p>The client's internal communication and justificatory role in helping legitimise the consultants' advice and suggestion to trade unions and members (cl.2).</p> <p>The consultants' use of their previous expertise and contribution from doing similar projects (cl.26).</p> <p>The consultants' demonstration of having experience with other organisations and use of that knowledge in the client (cl.28).</p>   |
| <i>Value</i>         | <p>The consultants' value in helping alleviate the members' political interests and the fact that added credibility and validity to the project (cl.1).</p> <p>The value of the consultants' work in verifying and validating the decisions taken by the client (who initiated the idea) showing no intention for monopolising (cl.2).</p> <p>The value of the consultants' pace of work and professionalism and disciplinary management approach against the often seen lack of drive by the client 'kept us focused, kept the discipline right and enabled us to achieve the right outcome' (cl.26).</p> <p>The consultants' valuable facilitating role and forwardness in relation to decision making (reducing time leads) thus making the client more proactive and upbeat about pursuing the objectives (cl.28).</p> |

### 5.8 Legitimation theories

Even though, we made inductive use from creating themes and codes from the data, our interpretation of the codes was placed within broader categories of legitimation that are drawn from the literature, and particularly from the works of Suchman (1995) and Habermas (1984a, 1984b). This constituted the third stage of our data analysis. Even though the notion of legitimation has been implicitly discussed from the consulting literature, it has not been given systematic attention for what it represents or for how it could be applied. Our interest in concentrating on legitimation aimed at complementing the above research gap.

At a broad level, the meaning of legitimation is thought to convey congruence and conformity for how an individual or organisation manages to achieve acceptance in the environment (Tyler, 2006). Overall, studies of legitimation have taken place within the context of institutionalisation and the creation of organisational structures, procedures, or policies that are in alignment with the changing demands of the environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). For example, organisations are thought to legitimise their actions if they are believed to comply with competition laws



and tax regulations that allow them to condition their practices. The use of institutionalisation has been a useful and popular metaphor for understanding the nature of legitimation between authors (Greenwood et.al., 1996). More specific explorations of the subject have tried to weight the instrumental role between the particular parts/functions of an organisation to legitimation (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). The institutional approach to legitimisation connotes some kind of functional validity in which organisational actions represent accounts of meaning and which, are in turn in alignment or misalignment with the conditions of the environment (Suchman, 1995).

Complementary to the above approach, legitimation has also been studied within more critical theoretical perspectives that underline the hidden dimension of power relations and competitive interests. Here, authors are keen to underline the difference between pragmatic and superficial traces of legitimation as they are based on actions of rhetoric and impression making (Elsbach, 1994; Clark, 1995). According to this approach the power of an organisation to influence employees for complying with a set of new practices is dependent on the organisation's competence to convince members. How convincing takes place is interwoven with political interests that come to regulate the way perceptions are created and which often can favour the more powerful party. As a result, practices of legitimation are outlined for the need to achieve conformity through practices of impression management and the use of rituals and rhetoric (Moore et. al., 2006; Mills and Bettner, 1992).

### **5.9 Categories of Legitimation**

In an effort to generate a more coherent discussion of legitimation, Suchman (1995) identified a number of social contexts that can be equally represented in the above approaches. These dimensions are: a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, and c) moral legitimation. Our use of Suchman's (1995) typology has been incorporated in the literature but also represented by authors through varied categories which represent the same ideas (see Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006; Rescher, 1993). In the following chapters we provide a substantiated discussion that illustrates how they are incorporated.

Our theoretical approach to legitimation is not limited to Suchman's typology but also incorporates Habermas's work and his theory of communicative action (1984a, 1984b). Habermas argued for a communicative approach to legitimation that is based on the

intersubjective condition of meaning that is sustaining through forms of discursive interactions. Throughout his work Habermas (1984s, 1984b, 1996, 1998, 2001) has argued for how conformity should be understood as a means of discourse that is not necessarily based on the exercise of power but on the creation of intersubjective understanding.

Through the above theoretical framework Habermas has shifted the attention to language and communication dynamics through which knowledge claims are conditioned. The social and subjective context of where beliefs and assumptions are situated determines the way of receptivity of new knowledge (Habermas, 1998). The success or failure of legitimation is not just dependent on how beliefs are intended and communicated, according to the meaning-making relations of one party only. Rather, they are dependent on how they are conditioned in the deeper, complex cognitive and psychodynamic structures of the other party. The created dialogue helps to challenge and refine the meaning of ideas so that they are accepted/rejected/modified. Habermas (1984a, 1984b) attempts to operationalise the above theme by looking at the exercise of language as a system of meaning making relations and vehicle of social expression.

We qualify how our adoption of Habermas's work does not do justice to the vast philosophical system of his theory. His theory is complex and contains a lot more dimensions from what we currently examine here. Habermas's ideas have penetrated the various fields that include political theory, ethics and philosophy. For the purpose of our study we find useful the emphasis on the discursive aspect of legitimation which is not adequately examined between authors in the organisational studies literature.

Interpretations of the institutional and critical approaches tend to place emphasis on the positive or negative *receptivity* of intentions without placing further weight on the complexities under which beliefs might be conditioned. In this sense, little attention is paid on the dialectic character of the communicative interaction, where legitimation can be thought as a by-product of dialogue and inter-subjectivity. Our use of Habermas's work to address the issue of legitimation is thought to help complement the above conceptual gap. We recognise the limitations of our theoretical context to using his work. The reason for using an initially inductive and then theory approach to our thematic analysis and creation of codes, is made because we did not want to limit the depth and

breadth of the empirical data. Our aim was to try and understand the complexities of the participants' experience *before* applying our interpretation to such categories.

The interpretation of the codes to the above legitimization categories has been one way of approaching the issue and it is not the only one. The employment of a different theoretical framework might lead to the creation of new/other categories. The richness of all the data accumulated has been as much exhaustively discussed in the thesis as it has been operationally possible. The identification of the above relationships has helped us understand the legitimization process on an empirical credible basis.

The creation of the legitimization categories led to a subsequent stage of thematic analysis from which we revisited the empirical data and created a new set of categories. Our selection of how the codes should be applied to the above categories is an interpretive process and subject to our judgment. As a result, the issue of what dimensions should be part of the cognitive or pragmatic aspects of legitimization has been subject to our ability to *support* our claims with the empirical data. There is not a set type of framework that shows how the selection of data should be categorised to the above dimensions.

Our justification for using the above categories: a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, c) moral, and d) discursive, has been discussed in a separate chapter. Once we decided on the above categories we used the key thread as the guiding point to examining the empirical data, illustrated in table 5.10. Even though we could develop our own different legitimate framework as emerging from the data, we felt that it is necessary to rely on the existing literature on this subject. This was because of the existing theoretical analysis dedicated to identifying and examining the proposed categories.

In this phase of our analysis we went back to the literature and tried to identify the categories from which we can then analyse the data. This meant that we had to develop a sound understanding about the similarities and differences between the different legitimization categories, before we can use them as the main guiding point from which to interpret the data. Through repetitive visits to the display of the themes, we started segmenting the data according to a new set of thematic categories. The use of themes proved helpful in leading us to the appropriate quotes that were referencing the relevant context of discussion. The general research questions that guided our quest to creating the

subsequent necessarily links was focused on the type of information that could support the demonstration for the existence of the legitimization categories. At a broad level we reviewed the empirical data in light of the key theoretical *thread* of the legitimization categories as illustrated below.

**Table 5.10** Legitimation dimensions and the theoretical thread for categorising the data

| <b>Legitimation Categories</b> | <b>Theoretical premises</b>   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Cognitive                      | The creation of claims at a cognitive level   |
| Pragmatic                      | The fulfilment of personal-centred needs  |
| Moral                          | The ethical based decision that may affect the wider whole  |
| Discursive                     | a) Exercise of language that sustains intersubjective meaning<br>b) the relationship dynamics that enable meaning relationships |

Tables 5.11 - 5.17 provide a very brief indication about the type of data that was categorised within the legitimization codes. It is the meaning expressed in the statements that has led us to the organising of the statements in such categories. We emphasize that the justification for allocating the data within such categories has been subject to our understanding and interpretation of the interviewees' experiences. Our objective has been to substantiate the argument that we develop in each of the below categories with the right representation of data. The below empirical samples give a brief indication about the type of data obtained and how it was categorised in the various legitimization codes. In the following tables the data is drawn from a random sample of consultants and clients.

**Table 5.11** Random sample of clients and the categorisation of data to the legitimization codes

| <b>No.</b> | <b>Cognitive Code</b>   | <b>No.</b> | <b>Pragmatic Code</b>  |
|------------|---|------------|--|
| 29         | We then put a team together to put that in place and then towards the end of that exercise we brought in a separate consultancy firm who helped us to put the 'tick in the box'; they were our final accreditation route. They came in to have a look, they didn't just do the accreditation, they looked through all our documents through all our operating models we'd come up with, and, helped to fill in any additional gaps which were there before they finally said 'yup this is fully compliant with what the GOC is coming along'. So we've used them for that, and we do bring in project managers occasionally when we don't have resources, and we get those we as well as others from external companies not normally through our IBM-Fujitsu route. | 26         | Yes. And that probably goes back to where I started from, you know, we've tended to use consultants either because they have a specific expertise in a discipline or they give us structure and focus and I think that's definitely what this was, and a methodology. You know sometimes these guys have a very good way of getting to the facts and assembling the information and cutting through some of the bullshit, you know. But I don't think I've found a consultant in 30 years that's come up with something revolutionary. |

|           |   |           |  |
|-----------|---|-----------|--|
| 24        | They laughed, and to give you a clue as to how much they laughed, this presentation that I'm showing you bits of, at their request, I went to their Christmas-get-together for the whole of the European consultants, there were about fifty consultants in the room, and they asked me to make this presentation. Now, the presentation took me half an hour and I answered an hour and a half of questions; that gives you a clue as to how they took it, because, as I said in the beginning as well, that the most difficult thing we're selling is thought! We haven't got anything, we can't show you a shiny product, we can't do this, so the more you can help us, tell us what we're getting wrong, the better we like it and you've got to warm to an attitude like that – thank you very much, yes, I'd love to come along and criticise you. | 27        | No, actually the leadership programme that they did was a combination of group activities by individual coaching and mentoring, and it was at the individual level that it was very, very effective, and the kind of activities that they were doing were capable of being delivered in a group without diminishing the impact of what they were doing. But it was a very personal programme, it was essentially an individual coaching and mentoring programme, but we happened to be all together as a group.... So there was a group discussion about leadership, leadership styles, different styles of leadership, what they mean, where they're effective and so on, so once you understood that it was followed up by a personal one to one interview about my specific leadership style which had come from a direct assessment of what I was doing. |
| <b>No</b> | <b>Moral Code</b>   | <b>No</b> | <b>Discursive Code</b>   |
| 28        | Yes, we did have some suggestions of how we would manage that internally, I think that's the point you're getting to. We did have some ideas and we actually began training up some of our internal team facilitators to be able to deliver the series of workshops, the training that we wanted, we ultimately decided upon. However, we really felt that at the senior level, so at the CEO and the global services executive board level, we wouldn't have somebody, or we needed an external perspective to give the whole concept the credibility and to bring in people that were used to delivering at that senior level.  | 2         | Actually no, with ABC I knew one of the partners in ABC well, and, you know I said there's some issues we've got, etc, etc, and he said well I've got a guy, speak to him. It was after speaking to the guy that we made the appointment. I think that's the crucial bit though, you've got to be able to have a relationship with a person.   |
| 3         | There's a <i>lack of trust of professional judgment</i> , in my view. This is specific to the public sector. I think, it probably does stem from governments actually. Governments will say...well they will not say it overtly but the government's stance is: "private sector good, public sector bad, private sector efficient, public sector inefficient." So that kind of belief permeates peoples' thinking. So the council can't say 'we want to spend forty million pounds' because the council is the public sector and therefore bad. But if Price-Waterhouse-Cooper says 'the council should spend forty million pounds', then everyone goes "oh well that must be right then because the PWC is the private sector, therefore good, therefore that's got to be correct."  | 27        | For example, at every workshop we had trade-shows. And trade-shows were brown papers stuck on the wall, with lots of Power-point panels stuck on them, which explored particular aspects of company activity. So for example you might have seen a trade show about future retail offer, and why it needed to change, and what it could look like in the future. And everyone at the workshop would go and would hear from the stream responsible for implementing this change what they were proposing – and they could challenge at that point. And then they would come back into a big group and you'd debate what you'd just seen. And if no one had any objections, what was being proposed was actually what we ended up with.  |

**Table 5.12** Random sample of consultants and the categorisation of data to the legitimisation codes

|           |   |           |   |
|-----------|---|-----------|---|
| <b>No</b> | <b>Cognitive Code</b>   | <b>No</b> | <b>Pragmatic Code</b>   |
| 16        | You have to understand where the client is, and, what the real problem is and the nature of the problem in some detail. You then, have to understand, what would the client think; is it a good result? What would make them happy in terms of them having to share the outcomes with people who matter to them? Might be their directors, might be their public etc. And if you can agree with them what the problem is, if you can agree with them what would represent value at the other end, rather than doing the project and the saying "well we've created value", then the client says "well hang on a second that wasn't the value I expected" or "I don't recognise that as value" that's the <i>worst result</i> , that | 4         | From my experience people can, well let's say, decision makers, whoever that may be, can use consultants to drive change through that they can't establish, because they have too poor a relationship with their line managers. For example, if the relationship has broken down between the line managers and the decision maker the decision maker says 'blow this I'll bring in somebody else', that makes it happen. The other way is to kind of safe guard their position as well. If they're getting pressure from other board members lets say, then they can say, well, 'I've got a report from KPMG that says the problem is you', so they use it as a blocking tactic and an aggressive tactic to push the decision and push the problem onto somebody else |

|           |  |           |   |
|-----------|--|-----------|---|
|           | happens quite a lot. So it's incredibly important to try to agree what would <i>represent a good outcome</i> and to have in place a system to measure whether you have achieved that rather than just claiming it.   |           |   |
| 3         | So again we use creativity and innovative techniques to rephrase things, and say 'is this really a problem?' So example we have from CAF, 'we've got a huge turnover in our call centres, huge turnover of staff in call centres, you know they'd say, oh no, no, we've got to recruit more people, it costs loads of money to recruit, huge turnover of staff'. It's a problem. Why is it a problem? 'Well we need this many people sitting in the chairs to answer the phones'. Well why? Well because we have this metric that we're driven by, which is to answer all of the calls within three minutes.   | 11        | Well in the context of that firm it is about how to best address the most predominantly infringing issues, misuse, and unauthorised use of their trademarks that they were encountering in new jurisdictions. And part of my job, I felt, was to educate clients, - because it was my life, my career, my business, this is what we do; is to say to people look there's a...to encourage them to see things in a new light, in a new way, and seeing things differently, adjusting perception, is one of the really important things a consultant can do, and give you... We help them to get a sense of control, a sense of understanding over what is going on because we're used to looking at things in that way.  |
| <b>No</b> | <b>Moral Code</b>  | <b>No</b> | <b>Discursive Code</b>  |
| 26        | A lot of it is driven by the city. The chief executive might say to his board of directors, we have some problems. To get it through the city, for people to continue to invest in this company, shareholders will need to <i>show</i> that we're bringing in one of the big boys: Mackenzie, Booz Allen Hamilton, Accenture, PWC, PA, etc. That happens at times, there's no doubt about that, and you then got to take it face on - that's what you're being paid for. It maybe that there's a clash between what manufacturing wants to do and what finance wants to do - and we have got to look at what's especially best for that business. Not what's best for the man who runs finance, or the man who runs manufacturing, it's what is best for the business. | 2         | First of all you have to be able to display the world in a way that they will recognize. How many times you've seen flow charts of stuff which are so bewildering that relates to systems and things of that sort that the customer whoever who has no interaction, simply does not recognise. So firstly it has to be a <i>recognisable display</i> of the problem.<br><br>Secondly it has to be <i>succinct</i> . In my judgement, what you can say on one side of the piece of paper, by juxtaposing ideas and things of that sort <i>using the language that the client is using is absolutely everything</i> . Sure refer to appendices and things of that sort, but there's an elegance in <i>simplicity</i> which helps people think 'Ah, I've got my mind, you helped me get my mind around the problem', if, I as a client and can get my mind around the problem, I can see where I'm going, I can understand where the priorities are, those sort of things. |
| 28        | Yes, Yes. Because politicians are generally not experts in... they may be expert in their own areas but not in other fields, but they are often not experts in the services and the delivery of those services for which they are responsible. They have an interest and they may be a gifted amateur, but they're not professional. The consultant provides validity not only to the project, but provides validity to the team of people, the in house team that are actually promoting the solutions as well. Because there will always be political tensions between members themselves, between members and officers or members and civil servants.   | 5         | I think trust is very important. And I think consultancies recognize that trust is important because a lot of business that consultants deal with are repetitive in nature. So, if a company had a good experience with a consultant, they will bring them in again, again and again to do other things. And trust is the key issue there. So, and how they get this trust is working with these people within the organization. And word gets around: People will say, 'I was very impressed with the questions I was being,' so it's this build-up of trust. And again we're back to people. Always back to people. It's not back to a written report. It's not back to book; it's back to people every time. So I'm not sure if I've answered that question ... but trust is a key element. There's no doubt about that.   |

### 5.10 Identification of themes within the legitimization codes

By following a similar process to the earlier part of our analysis, the display of data indicated a number of themes that were strongly represented in the various categories. The process of deciding what kind of data should be categorised under the cognitive, pragmatic, moral or discursive codes is dependent on the meaning of that information in relation to its alignment to the theoretical dimensions of the categories. This became the fourth stage of our analysis. In each of the legitimization chapters our aim has been to

justify how the data is relevant to the theory by means of discussing the context of the interviewee's experience. The data in itself does not indicate the categories. A different research focus might indicate a different interpretation of the data that may lead to the creation of different relationships. Hence, it is important to highlight how it is the meaning of the interviewees' experience that becomes the decisive factor for how we have treated the data. Following the above displays of information we then started to identify a number of relationships that were relevant for each of the legitimation categories. The below themes are equally represented for the client and consulting parties. Our development of discussion concentrates on providing the necessary support for how the below themes can be understood from the legitimation categories perspective.

**Table 5.13** The identification of themes within the legitimation codes

| <b>Codes</b>          | <b>Theme</b>  | <b>Theme</b>  | <b>Theme</b>   |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|
| Cognitive perspective | Competing claims of knowledge representation              | Re-identification of Clients' Needs   | The consultants' reputation and use of experience        |
| Pragmatic perspective | The Providence of Solutions                               | Operational Competences & Resources   |  |
| Moral perspective     | Moral Legitimacy through Outputs & Consequences           | Procedural Legitimacy   |  |
| Discursive (A)        | Exercise of language and intersubjective meaning creation | The impact of pre-understanding   |  |
| Discursive (B)        | Relationship and partnership dynamics                     | Client's involvement into consulting practices and the co-creation of meaning | Clients' criticism & the consultants' change of approach |

We further created the tables below in order to illustrate what type of data displays led us to the creation of the above inductive themes. The repetitive appearance of a common pattern of themes became the reason that we created the above categories. Our interpretation of the data is clearly influenced by the legitimation categories in which we are trying to make sense of the data. As a result, the data itself is not limited to the legitimation categories that we decided to survey it from. The data indicates dimensions

that we have not explored because it did not constitute our principle research focus of legitimisation. We provide a detailed discussion about the above in the following chapter. However, the below tables should be helpful in order to illustrating our reasoning behind the creation of relationships.

**Table 5.14** Cognitive Perspective themes and data

| <i>Theme</i>   | <i>Empirical sample (consultant)</i>  | <i>Empirical sample (client)</i>  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Competing claims of knowledge representation</b>      | I think there is an interesting fine line that one walks, especially those day workshops where you have to be enough in agreement to what they think they are for them to feel comfortable having you in the room. But not so similar that you don't challenge them in some respects (con.27)   | I thought it was a cracking way of understanding my own role, and it seemed logical and it seemed well researched and backed up with good evidence to at least give it a go, and that's what I did; I gave it a go and I continue to try and practice some of the things that they suggested I needed to improve on. (cl.27)                              |
| <b>Re-identification of Clients' Needs</b>               | I want to do some kind of diagnostic work and get to know to see whether their view of the problem is actually what I think their view of the problem is, because most of time I think they don't really know and they kind of guess they're not very good at understanding what their problem is (con.30)  | I think as an organisation there are lessons to be learned with previous experience. Sometimes when consultancy hasn't worked as well, it's quite often when we haven't been as clear about what we wanted them to do. In this case, we were quite clear, 'that's what we wanted you to do, we didn't want you to flood us with more consultants' (cl.16) |
| <b>The consultants' reputation and use of experience</b> | ...we pull upon the size of the network, the level of expertise we have. The fact that we are globally representative, the fact that we do have very significant experience in pretty much all the areas across the globe, across the solution lines, and so on. Past experience; the level of firms that we've worked with before and really it's just a question of putting together looking at what they require and actually putting together what we believe will actually be the best message. (Con.19) | Partly it was their background. They claimed to have a very strong track record in economic consultancy and environmental consultancy and they had been used by a number of other clients in similar areas. So, in terms of their track record and background, this was sort of inspired trust and confidence in that way (cl.1)                          |

**Table 5.15** Example of the creation of the pragmatic perspective themes from the data

| <i>Theme</i>                                   | <i>Empirical Sample (consultant)</i>   | <i>Empirical Sample (client)</i>   |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Providence of solutions</b>                 | What I bring to it [client assignment] I think is clarity. I can help develop proper understanding about linking the big strategic objective with the specific set of actions for a specific team. But it definitely takes a different sort of skill and that's why you have thousands of brilliant business strategies out there and relatively little implementation. Almost all businesses for example believe they can grow faster than the background market can and very, very few of them actually do (con.17)  | They helped us formulate that strategy, because until we'd had the discussion with them and analysed the rate of growth in, say the freight market, we hadn't actually nailed our colours to the mast in terms of saying, freight is growing, that's what we need to do, we need to carry much more freight, we have to capture our share of the growing freight market, tourist day trips are in decline, so stop chasing tourist day trips, change the on board offer as a result, make it much more streamlined, make it much more professional, offer a retail range which appeals to people going on longer holidays not day trips, etc, so that one thing leads to another (cl.13) |
| <b>Operational competences &amp; Resources</b> | The only benefit that a consultant can give is they don't have these distractions stuff, they don't have all the competing demands on their time and they also don't have the history, because when people are in line management roles, it is difficult to challenge all the time, it's a mind-set to challenge all the time. So a consultant can come in and that's his job to challenge as he has only one thing to do. So it is difficult for me to break those two because 'yes you are paying for an additional resource' but an additional resource who | The value that I got from the consultant was a learning experience working with these people. I was very impressed at the efficiency by which they undertook certain projects. Things that would normally take the local authorities finance department a number of months was taking only a few days. So, they could channel the resources in, they could pull the resources in from anywhere and they hit very, very tight deadlines. I was very impressed with their professionalism and how they dealt with members at a very, very professional level.  |



has a much defined term of reference. A very defined objective that is delivered by the consultants but that is given to him by a decision maker

**Table 5.16** Example of the creation of the moral perspective's themes from the data

| <i>Theme</i>                      | <i>Empirical sample (consultant)</i>   | <i>Empirical sample (client)</i>  |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Outputs &amp; Consequences</b> | It maybe that there's a clash between what manufacturing wants to do and what finance wants to do – and we and they have got to look at what's especially best for that business. Not what's best for the man who runs finance, or the man who runs manufacturing, it's what is best for the business...There is so much office politics taking place in some organisations that people try to hide things from the guy at the top, and therefore he'll never get the straight answers to his questions (con.15) | But don't forget the human dimension here. The human-political dimension which sometimes prevents companies from doing what it is that some people <i>know</i> needs to be done. And other people won't allow to be done. And that is one of the most <i>valuable</i> reasons for bringing consultants in – because you get accelerated change at the human level... And the role of the consultant in that process really was no more than to <i>validate</i> the thinking (cl.13)     |
| <b>Procedures</b>                 | Some of the people I work with are extremely clever clients, brilliant people, very, very clever; knows more about management than I'll ever know. Yet see the value of having somebody in who is not contaminated with the organisational history to sit and this is where things like 'borrow the watch to tell you the time', so I can go in say things, like in ACAS I've been working, and I can say things which they've already said, but because <i>I've said it</i> , things start to happen (con.3)    | But confirming the research and validating the research, <i>was vital for me</i> , - <i>that's where I got value for money</i> . Because there was concern that [AA] was seen to not monopolise the partnership, and what I couldn't afford to have was the other two partners thinking 'this is [AA's], [AA's] stamped its personality on this, this is going to be [AA's] way', and that would create tension, so the consulting was to take pressure off me in that respect. (cl. 2) |

**Table 5.17** Example of the creation of the discursive's perspective themes from the data

| <i>Theme</i>                       | <i>Empirical sample (consultant)</i>   | <i>Empirical sample (client)</i>  |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Exercise of language</b>        | First of all you have to be able to display the world in a way that they will recognize. How many times you've seen flow charts of stuff which are so bewildering, that relates to systems and things of such kind that the customer who has no interaction simply does not recognise. So firstly it has to be a recognisable display of the problem (con.2)         | I think it's just about how they approach it, if they come in using your language or willing to use your language and work with you as opposed to opposing things which, to some extent, [the consultants] tried to do and he [the client] challenged them on that (cl.10)  |
| <b>Impact of pre-understanding</b> | But there are clients who just say: 'tell us' and that was probably, given the consultancy that has had been going across the border, [of that client] in the late 90s, they were used to that sort, 'we're the experts' so, I was coming in from a different one [approach] (con.6)   | Well, I expected more leadership and direction from the consultants on this matter. What they in fact did was to prevaricate 'well it's your decision' and I didn't know enough about the decision making that was required so in the end. I think that rather the poor input from us through lack of knowledge and experience combined with an unwillingness by the consultant to make a decision that might have sharpened our bid; ended up with us submitting something that wasn't as good as it could have been (cl.27) |
| <b>Relationship Dynamics</b>       | The critical thing for us, as I said right at the beginning Stephanos, is to go in and develop a really <i>good relationship</i> . We have clients in Hong Kong who would not go to anyone else, it costs them far more money to do so, they have to fly our businessmen and put them up in a hotel out there and such but they would not go to anyone else (Con.15) | It's been very strong, we've got a good relationship backed up by observation around a strategic partnership; one of the key components is around personality match and whether we feel that they are the people that we can work with and get on with. They're very good; they're a good group of people both on a personal and professional level (cl.10)   |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>Clients' involvement into consulting practices</b></p>               | <p><i>Fundamentally, value for a client as an organisation occurs when action occurs. And action in an organisation occurs, shifts, changes, when the mental model of that organisation runs to changes. Many consultants, I think, try to change that mental model by sort of sticking a bit of their own mental model in there. Either in the form of you know, like a point recommendation – 'buy the business/don't buy the business'. 'Build the plant/don't build the plant'. Or, a more comprehensive, all-encompassing set of, you know, kind of mental DNA. What we do, is try and shift that mental model in a different way. There's that, and – I don't want to make it sound like we never bring new content to a client. But if you look at the balance, it's overwhelmingly helping them look at and articulate their mental models. (con. 20).</i></p> | <p>The consultants then went away and they put it into a deliverable programme of activities, brought it back, we changed some things around, there were some bits we felt maybe that they had missed the point or we wanted to firm up. And we also agreed on our input to the actual delivery because what we wanted was some of our senior managers to be seen to be working with them in the <i>delivery</i> of the programme (cl.29)</p>  |
| <p><b>Clients' criticism &amp; the consultants' change of approach</b></p> |  | <p>At the beginning of it, as soon as we became aware of that, and as a programs officer, - because we have constant contact with the teams so we can observe and we knew; we then got our change and communication team involved, learning teams involved, and my team involved, at various stages in order to give our own people the confidence to say 'No, I am running this, this is <i>my</i> project, this is my budget you are talking about. I really welcome your support ACA but we're in the driving seat'. And we did that.</p> |

So far we have provided a brief and random display of the information we used to place within the different categories of legitimation. We briefly illustrate in what way the identified themes could be categorised under the different legitimation categories. Our in-depth discussion of the above takes place throughout the following chapters in which we elaborate on each of the above dimensions.

### 5.10.1 Cognitive legitimation

Under the cognitive perspective the data indicates how the creation of knowledge claims between consultants and client takes a number of different cognitive representations. At one level the consultants' legitimation is dependent on their competency of argumentation where rational propositions are made for what the client needs to do and how. The premise of the above interaction follows in line of argument made by the functional perspective where knowledge is believed to be the central resource communicated to the other party. The soundness with which consultants construct their argument becomes a battleground of justification. As a result, clients may be persuaded to buy in the consultants' advice because the knowledge-claims clearly demonstrate a possible potential outcome.

The clients' knowledge position becomes an equally significant factor for the consultants' success or failure of legitimation. This is because the competitiveness of the consultants' advice claims gain recognition for their relevance/value in relation to the clients' level of knowledge representation on the same subject. From this follows how the consultants' ability to justify a set of knowledge claims is contingent to the reasoning of the client organisation and in discourse of the topic. That means that both parties cannot empirically testify or validate the propositions made. The consultants' competency to manipulate the client's understanding might be at stake in the course of the interaction between the two parties. However, it is not the inherent extension of the consulting practices themselves.

At a second level and when entering into the business assignments, we find how the identification of the clients' needs often becomes the principle arena from which the consultants come to demonstrate the value of their knowledge service. The consultants' legitimation of service often takes the form of a discourse in which the clients' needs are often contextualised or re-identified in agreement with the client. The process of defining the 'seeming' from the 'actual' client needs takes place at a cognitive level and resides within the immediate individuals on the project. We find that consultants and client exercise their interaction within a hidden tension of competing views.

Another thread we discovered was how consultants legitimise their service to clients by making reference to their reputation and experience from previous projects. Here, clients are not in the position to testify the credibility of the consultants' claims. Accepting or rejecting a set of propositions is dependent on the consultants' construction of argumentation and rhetoric. In contrast to either interpretation by the functional and critical perspective we find how clients do not easily buy into the consultants' propositions. Consultants do not necessarily aim at persuading the clients from a set of rhetoric that is purely based on the distribution of management fads.

#### *5.10.2 Pragmatic legitimation*

Under the label of pragmatic legitimation we identify how congruence and conformity takes a different form of representation that is centred on the immediate desired needs/expectations of the organisational actors. We identify how consultants are able to

legitimise their service not because of the theoretical soundness of the arguments made at a cognitive level, but rather, on the basis of the extracted and measurable benefits. In the paradigm of pragmatic legitimacy we find two subsequent dimensions. The one concentrates around the clients' perceived obtainable solutions. Such solutions correspond against the immediate interests of the client. The second area concentrates on the operational efficiency with which consultants conduct their activities and which clients value against their own organisational stagnation. In reference to the first dimension, we find how the consultants' legitimation is intimately associated with the way in which the embeddedness of the proposed advice will generate the desired outcome (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). The consultants' reliance of knowledge possession is not enough to constitute as a resource unless it is somehow substantiated in the client.

In contrast to the assumptions made by the critical perspective, we find how the clients' satisfaction over the consultants' solutions are not simply represented in the packaging of well designed management fads. Clients are not keen on establishing the theoretical soundness from which the ideas are drawn. They are rather interested in the immediate and measurable results that can be produced. Such outcomes can be drawn from previous assignments and experiences. The credibility of such solutions is not existent in the impressive past solutions but in the future measurable results. The embeddedness of the solutions is believed to play a key role in the above process.

At a second level, we also find how consultants represent a desirable operational force where the use of resources and operational efficiency makes it an attractive service. Here, it is argued how pragmatic legitimation takes place in the form of business processes that consultants happen to deliver more efficiently than the client. This is not because the client is not competent to deliver the desired results, but because they often lack the time, resources and people to deliver the particular project.

### *5.10.3 Moral legitimation*

The exercise of moral legitimation takes place not in the fulfilment of personal interests but in the expectations that can be of interest to the wider collective good. Moral legitimation is grounded under norms, beliefs and ethical values which organisations need to conform in order to legitimise their practices. Within management consultancy,

the moral dimension has mainly been discussed within the context of the consultants' manipulation of client interests. It is argued how consultants need to operate under an 'ethical code of practice' that produces transparency and honesty when dealing with the client's issues (Lynch, 2003).

The empirical data, however, indicates moral legitimation is exemplified in the context of the clients' domestic and interpersonal political interests. The consultants' moral legitimacy becomes dependent on the clients' domestic state of affair and is not necessarily dependent on the immediate consultant-client interaction. A central theme that characterises the above process has to do with the consultants' qualities of independence and objectivity. Even though the above qualities are often used by the interviewees in relation to the immediate organisational issues, we find that they are in fact associated with a perceived moral duty of the actors. The consultants' independence and objectivity become moral attributes that enables individuals to often go against already established power relations within the firm. Organisational actors have difficulty producing forms of resistance against aggressive interests by their own colleagues with higher seniority. As a result, organisational actors translate the consultants' independence within a moral fabric of duty with which they can generate resistance. We help establish the theoretical link between moral legitimation and the consultants' image of independence and objectivity by using the work by Moore et. al., (2005).

At an operational level, the above discussion is translated in the way that procedures are undertaken and the outputs and consequences that clients seek to produce. The consultants' involvement in administrating different business processes creates a sense of alibi through which clients can demonstrate that they are not driven by personal interests and bias for making their decisions. This becomes an important arena of support against potential criticism generated by the domestic affairs of the organisation.

Throughout our above discussion we qualify our contribution by arguing how our treatment of moral legitimation is not concentrating on a set of ethically objective values. Moral legitimation becomes a socially constructing process where that which is perceived as the wider good becomes subject to the immediate organisational actors' shared and situated beliefs and values.

#### *5.10.4 Discursive legitimation*

The exploration of the discursive legitimation shifts from the classification used by the work of Suchman to the work of Habermas. Habermas (1984a, 1984b) has made a seminal contribution to our understanding of social reality through his work of communicative action. Even though Habermas's ideas and contribution exceeds well beyond our limited treatment of it in our study, his contribution on legitimation has proved a very useful vehicle for understanding the consultant-client relationship.

Our analysis of the empirical data, and for incorporating the use of his theory, has been divided into two main parts. The first one concentrates on the exercise of language and its use to the creation of intersubjective meaning. Furthermore, the impact of the carried and implicit pre-understanding for legitimising the contested views. The second part concentrates on legitimation by looking at the interpersonal relationship dynamics in which consultants and clients manifest their social identity against the role and expectations of the other.

The general themes that emerge from the empirical data, and which are in support of Habermas's theoretical framework, argues how legitimation becomes contingent in the way through which each party shows awareness for managing the way in which reality is lived in the experience of other party. The study of language helps operationalise the above quest because is not only a means of expressing vocal utterances but a vehicle of meaning creation. By looking at language and pre-understanding we identify how the use of language plays an influential role as to why clients may accept or reject the consultants' advice. Furthermore, we identify how the implicit pre-understanding that governs the behaviour of the two parties, results in the creation of expectations that often are not made explicit and can result to the success/failed legitimation. The language consultants use to communicate their idea is not about the factual features of their advice/information. It is about their way of accommodation to the cognitive schemata of the other party. As a result, consultants may fail to legitimise their service because they do not endeavour to understand the way that the client comes to perceive or reason in that business problem.

In addition to the above, we find how the relationship in which the two parties exemplify their intentions, beliefs, objectives is central to the understanding of how such

meaning relations are maintained. Our analysis identifies two distinct areas in which this takes place. The first has to do with the clients' involvement into the consultants' practices and co-creation of meaning that is produced out of this relationship. The second concerns the clients' expressed criticism over the consultants' practices, which often forces the consultants' change of behaviour/approach. The clients' process of generating resistance against the consultants indicates a desire for a more equal sharing of power.

We argue how the dialectic approach to legitimation places principle emphasis on the interactive side of the consultant-client relationship. This is not simply in the context of where ideas are simply communicated between the two parties. It is rather the way in which inter-subjective meaning is managed and realised between the two parties. Legitimation does not become a normative process in which propositions are accepted or rejected for what they entail. Rather, legitimation becomes an outcome from the way in which meaning relations are conditioned in the other party. As a result, the emphasis shifts from the set of knowledge consultants' communication to clients, over to how consultants concentrate on the complexities in which the knowledge is accommodated in the client party.

### **5.11 Ethical considerations of the research**

Every research project contains ethical implications for its content and methods of data collection that should be acknowledged (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Dawson, 2002; Darlingont and Scott, 2002; Bell, 1999). The ethical sensitivity of the data concerns the disclosure of information about the individuals' experiences and which are necessary for the study of the phenomenon. The treatment of such experiences contains vulnerability for how they are intended to be used by the researcher.

Throughout the duration of this project we have followed strict ethical guidelines that are in accordance with the Data Protection Act. We have also followed the 'Research Ethics Framework' as initiated by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The qualities of this framework have concentrated on:

- Obtaining informed consent through which access was made possible
- Confidentiality and anonymity over the collected data
- Clear voluntary participation by the interviewees and which is free from any coercion

- Securing the avoidance of any form of harm to research participants
- Maintaining independence towards the participants' interests

The professional interaction between consultants and clients contain a complex array of interpersonal sensitivities that concern not only the way a project assignment is dealt with, but how events can influence a person's career and personal relationship with his/her colleagues. Darlington and Scott (2002) argue for how: "Research has the capacity to harm the legitimate interests of the organisation and the professional and personal reputations of the individuals it employs" (p. 31).

Throughout our making of the thesis we acknowledge the importance of the political dimension and the power relationships where the competition of interests between members is evident. As Easterby-Smith et. al., (2001) argue, the process of undertaking research activities in management takes place within a political context. Such power relationships extend to the different types of relationships that may concern institutions or the researcher towards the participants, but also "the relationship between the participants themselves" (p.58).

The disclosure of information from consultants and clients about their own colleagues, assumes significance before, during, and after the research is conducted. As a result, there is need to ensure that terms of confidentiality are maintained throughout the course of the research and after its completion (Mauch and Park, 2003; Auerbach and Silverin, 2003). We have been grateful for the participants' acceptance of our invitation and we have respected their choice of the individuals that decided not to contribute. Also, through the undertaking of the project we have ensured strict confidentiality and careful treatment of the empirical data. That is, not only at the time the data was obtained, but also in the later stages of its analysis.

From the time that we initiated our letter invitation to approaching the individuals we have made clear for how the data would be treated (*see Appendix 3*). We have ensured the provision of anonymity on all the participants and the elimination of sensitive information that could be potentially damaging. Furthermore, we have tried to ensure that the participants were satisfied with the information they disclosed by giving them the opportunity to have access to the transcript and to make further comments and corrections they felt were necessary. Our conducting of the interviews took place in a



socially amiable environment and with showing respect towards the participants' time commitment. Our confidential treatment of the data has been necessary for ensuring the maintaining of a professional code of conduct, that is, respecting the participants' experience and participation in the research.

### **5.12 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to provide a detailed overview about the methodological part of our research. We have tried to provide the justification for the epistemological perspective that we have adopted. We have substantiated the premises of our research framework by making reference to the literature and by explaining the nature of our assumptions that govern the study of social phenomena.

We argued that there are two main approaches that are used to characterise the research design are the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Even though the approaches have differences between them they also have similarities and can be used as complementary to each other rather than separate. In the first part of the chapter we discussed our adoption of the qualitative approach and the emphasis on the interpretive epistemological context. This approach is characterised by the need to understand the way the nature of social reality by understanding how meaning patterns are generated. The interpretive approach has grown in importance out of the increased recognition of the different complex, social and interpersonal factors that govern human behaviour (Auerbach and Silvertin, 2003). According to the quantitative approach emphasis is placed on studying social phenomena by making reference to cognitive relationships that are rational and seem to correspond to the function of the physical world. The belief in the man's competence to understand the environment was based on an inner association between reason and an external reality that was believed accessible (Crotty, 1998). The rise of the interpretive paradigm indicated how perceptions of reality were difficult to define because of the complex and inner interpersonal relationships that govern human behaviour (Berger and Luchman, 1966). The need to explain phenomena shifted to the need to understand them.

The ontological relationship between the generation of meaning as an expression of reality and the study of those factors that help produce it, became the basis of this

paradigm. It is for this reason that Silverman (1993) argues how: “The phenomenon that *always* escapes is the ‘essential’ reality pursued in such work. The phenomenon that can be made to *reappear* is the practical activity of participants in establishing a phenomenon-in-context” (italics in the original) (p.203). Reality is context dependent and our study of the social factors that contribute to its creation helps us accomplish understanding and which leads us to the position of explaining phenomena (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The study of the management consultant-client relationship takes place within a social context of interaction where organisational and interpersonal factors are at play (Clark, 1995). It is by appreciating the complexity of this interpersonal interaction that we conducted our study within an interpretive epistemological context. Our research aim has been to study the way in which knowledge claims are legitimised in the relationship. We have operationalised this research objective by exploring the dimensions of legitimisation as they are discussed in the literature and as they emerge from our empirical sample (Suchman, 1995, Elsbach, 1994, Habermas, 1984a, 1984b).

For the empirical collection of the data, we have primarily relied on the conduct of semi-constructed interviews with consultants and clients.. Our analysis of the data is based on the thematic analysis approach and which seeks to identify theme patterns that reappear on text (Boyatzis, 1998; Auerbach and Silverstin, 2003). Thematic analysis is closely associated with grounded theory as revealed by Sraus and Corbin, (1990) and the data comparative method (Silverman, 2000, 2001). However, it also contains its own distinct features for how themes can be identified, contextualised, and interpreted.

Our use of thematic analysis combines the inductive approach which begins with the displays of data and which leads to the identification of themes and codes. However, we also use thematic analysis in relation to theoretical frameworks that are already incorporated from the literature and which help define the context of legitimation. Our interpretation of the codes is made at our discretion and in relation to our competence to justify them with reference to the empirical data. This approach has led us to the typology of four types of legitimation which are the a) cognitive, b) pragmatic, c) moral and d) discursive one.

Throughout our discussion of the methodology design we acknowledge the limitations of our research in terms of the participants we interviewed, the use of the case studies and the absence of participant observation. The issue of access has been an overarching barrier throughout this project. We are grateful to the participants that were willing to share their experiences. However, we have not been able to gain access to interviewees that worked on the same project. Our interviews with consultants and clients are concentrated on management related project, where the quality of interaction is an integral factor. However, there is not an equal match between the participants and we had to rely on interviews in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of our findings. As Wertz and van Zuuren argue “participants need to have or be able to ‘develop some significant relationship with the phenomenon under study’ (1987, p. 11)” (quoted in Darlington and Scott, 2002:52). We believe that are collection of the empirical sample is good representation of individuals that have longitudinal experience with the industry. Also, that the participants’ views are representative of their experience and can be used as reliable input for our analysis.

## Chapter 6: Aspects of Cognitive Legitimation

### 6. 1. Introduction

This chapter aims to demonstrate how consultants come to legitimise their knowledge-claims by making use of the cognitive dimension of legitimation as argued by Suchman, (1995) and reflected by Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) and Rescher (1993). We want to show how legitimisation occurs in relation to the consultants' exercise of instrumental rationality that is based on the technical features of their advice as well as on practices of rhetoric and impression management (Clark, 1995). The principle thesis of our argument is that consultants legitimise their knowledge-claims by making competitive claims of 'knowledge-representation'. That is, by demonstrating how the knowledge produced within a given business situation is credible enough to be trusted upon. What drives the knowledge-justification process can be characterized as the actors' competitive superior/inferior 'knowledge perspective' that can be accepted, rejected, or negotiated for what it entails. The determining factors that help shape the legitimation process is the consultants' demonstration of how their proposed knowledge claims are in *alignment* with the reality of the client's environment.

The structure of the chapter is divided into three parts. The first part looks at cognitive legitimation from the perspective of the consultants' access to a knowledge-pool which is part of the clients' external or internal environment. Competing knowledge claims are validated because of the clear empirical evidence with which claims are supported. The acceptance or rejection over such claims is dependent on the rigorousness of the argument and the technical features of the consultants' advice. Clients may not have access to the means by which consultants come to the making of such claims. Nevertheless, the quality with which such claims are crafted helps bring conformity and congruence in the client. The representation of the empirical facts is an activity where symbolic management is also at play. By this we mean how consultants endeavour to convince the clients by structuring the principles of their argument with making reference to symbols and rituals that are meaningful for the client. Cognitive legitimation is not simply dependent on the attainment of a normative truth that becomes accessible by the client. It is also dependent on the process by which the consultants' cognitive schemata

become meaningful in the other party. Hence, cognitive legitimation occurs because of the potential alignment of understanding as represented between the clients' cognitive needs, and the consultants' argumentation. The second part of the chapter looks at the process through which consultants come to re-define the clients' perceived needs. This is a phenomenon that often takes place at the early stage of the assignment, and where the clients' need is often negotiated and re-established through the consultants' input. The generation of perceptions play a determining role for accepting or rejecting the business contract. The consultants' differentiated input helps to demonstrate the rectified and earlier assumed *misconceptions* made by the client. This becomes a key arena by which consultants demonstrate the added-value of their service. The third part of the chapter examines the consultants' use of previous experience with clients on similar projects. By making of reference to past positive success stories consultant seek to ensure the clients' evident satisfaction as conveyed through testimonials. However, the client actors become passive audience against the consultants' performance acts (Goffman, 1963). Even though clients are in a restricted position in order to testify the truthfulness of consultants' claims, it is argued that they influence the justification of the consultants' service.

## **6. 2 Cognitive legitimation & knowledge representation**

This part of our data analysis argues that consultants engage in forms of argumentation where competing knowledge claims are made for what clients should do at specific business situations. Cognitive legitimation does not occur simply because consultants have surplus knowledge over a given situation than the client. The manipulation of cognitive schemata through which consultants communicate their advice can happen to be in alignment or misalignment with the clients' expectation or needs. Our findings indicate how consultants endeavour to manipulate the meaning of their advice to forms of communication that correspond to the client members' reasoning. Consultants are not able to convince clients about a course of advice because they claim to be experts in it. Consultants enter into a discursive communication with clients where knowledge claims are often criticised or challenged. Cognitive legitimation takes place because both parties share the reasoning of the propositions made as they are confined to forms of

conversations or argumentation. The use of language plays an important role as to how expectations are discussed and managed between parties.

### *6.2.1 Client views on cognitive legitimation*

To illustrate the application of cognitive legitimation we start with the example of the following participant where forms of *new* information and knowledge helped legitimise the consultants' service. Here, the client organisation appreciates the set of factual information that is based on research activities and which the client had not maintained overtime, neither could have produced internally.

There's no doubt in my mind that the consultants were helping the senior management of this company discover an amazing amount of things about the business that we didn't know – perhaps we should have known, but we didn't know. (cl 13).

A similar claim is similarly made by a different client where the subject of his discussion is the needed leadership qualities he was seeking to develop through the consultants. The 'reality' of the consultants' advice is represented with the new insights about the leadership style and qualities. Such insights are perceived as well supported, and logically grounded on good evidence.

I thought it was a cracking way of understanding my own role, and, it seemed logical and it seemed well researched and backed up with good evidence to at least give it a go, and that's what I did I gave it a go and I continue to try and practice some of the things that they suggested I needed to improve on. (cl.27)

In both the above examples we find the clients' recognition of the validity of the consultants' outputs to be based on well structured and coherent arguments. Even though in both cases the distribution of new information is an important part of the advice, the clients find that the way in which consultants communicate their ideas is in alignment with the reasoning of the client members. In Client 13 this can be illustrated from his reaction to the consultants' recommendations where new insights are made about aspects of the business not realised before. Client 27 appreciates the order in which consultants communicated their ideas and the attached credibility to the claims.

Moving to a different case example, we come to look at the experience of a firm undertaking a strategic review over its current and future strategic practices. The consultants are asked to undertake the task of evaluating the company's strategy and organisational structure against similar organisations. Also, to provide recommendations for the type of social and technological changes it needed to incorporate, as well as the making of general improvements for its future activities. In the client's view the consultants' legitimacy of advice is based on the fact that the research outcomes were well supported with information, and which were reflecting current industry practices.

So they do directly support projects and they do also do some strategic consultancy work. For example, when we were doing some work on our transformation agenda about where we wanted to be by 2010. We bought in some specialists from IBM who'd worked in all sorts of transformational areas where there were accounts who knew about organisation structures, who knew about organisational change processes, who knew about business change management processes, which might help us. And that wasn't really aimed at our systems; that was aimed at the organisation level rather than the systems underneath, even though, it was obviously a knock on effect there (cl.29)

Ok, well there's two things. Not as an individual but as an area we allow them a lot of free range in terms of 'this is what we want to do, so go away and develop a proposal for us to say this is how we'll do it, this is how long it's going to take, this is how much resource it's going to take, these are the benefits that you'll get out of it, and, and this is what the likely costs are going to be' which is a sort of proposal that we ask for under our request for Change-Operation, which specifies what we're after (cl.29).

The context of the above quotations is made in regards to the company's evaluation programme for its current and future strategy in the market. The primary organisational issue has to do with obtaining a sound understanding of the market and its changes. Also, in identifying ways for incorporating the required changes in its structure, procedures and policies, that will allow the corporation to continue to operate effectively. The use of the consultants is to fulfil the primary need of providing answers to key questions about the content and process of the needed practices. The consultants have the opportunity to gather and construct a body of information that then becomes presentable to the client. Even though the client is not in a position to know about the degree of success to implementing the consultants' recommendations, the acceptance or rejection of the advice is dependent on its content premises which at this point in time can only be testable at a cognitive level. In this way, the consultants' cognitive legitimation is dependent on providing answers to the several organisation-related questions the clients

do not have definite answers to. As the below quote further illustrates the client-firm engaged into a process of verifying the consultants' findings, by assessing the recommendations against the initially assigned objectives. The client goes to make decisions about the feasibility of their implementation and the associated costs to making the appropriate investments.

When that proposal comes back in terms of validating that proposal that's where my area and the technical review team do an awful lot of work. Because they will get the proposal they will look at what's been suggested. They will compare the proposal against our published IT strategy in terms of where we want to go over the next three or four years. They will have a look at the technology-mix that they put in there. If we don't have the right level of knowledge to be able to actually say 'does this make sense, does this not make sense' we will do some research. But if we're still lacking on it then we'll use other organisations like Bartner, or like anybody else to say 'we've had this proposal we're not really sure about this, From your clients that you have on your list, has anybody else used this sort of technology? Have they had these sort of benefits? What's the sort of issues?' So we actually evaluate the proposals that come back to make sure what they come up with is actually fit for purpose for us, and, fit for purpose for our organisation and also value for money. And if we are comfortable with all that having made the relevant challenges and we believe, 'yeah that's actually a good way forward', then, we will adopt that and that will become the mechanism for achieving that particular project or that particular end state that we're after (cl.27).

The process of evaluation as illustrated in the above statement makes clear reference to the degree of *alignment* between the consultants' propositions and the clients' assumptions and expectations. The cognitive arena in which the consultants operate and make sense of the client, becomes a critical stage for how the consultants not only develop their knowledge, but also create some type of uniformity with the clients' expectations. Understanding the client's IT strategy over the next three or four years is about sharing the implicit or explicit concerns and expectations of the client. Consultants are required to craft their advice in alignment with the client's long term IT corporate objectives. If consultants are perceived as supporting a course of action that the client does not want to accomplish, they will be asked to stop the implementation of the project. The client acknowledges the different situations in which the above uniformity may take place and that it can fall outside the client's knowledge paradigm. For this reason, the client mentions how the use of a third party consulting firm might be useful in order to evaluate the recommendations made by the already employed consultants. The client's active engagement and evaluation practices play an important role in rectifying such potential misalignments. Also, in enquiring support from a third consulting party the



client clearly indicates the desire to achieve such an objectified alignment at a cognitive level so that it can orchestrate its corporate practices accordingly.

Our findings are in accordance with Suchman's (1995) reference to the qualities of comprehension and taken-for-granted attitude which helps the accomplishment of such cognitive conformity. The consultants' making of recommendations that might be well supported/documented, but may fall outside the clients' objectives or organisational values, can indicate a lack of alignment of mutually shared meaning-patterns. Even though it could be argued how the adaptation of the consultants' advice could radically improve the client's performance, the fact that the client might fail to appreciate the proposed value comes to equally lead to a failure to legitimise. In the above example, validating the consultants' knowledge-claims becomes an internal process, and it is dependent on evaluating the content of the consultants' propositions *against* the shared cognitive schemata represented in the client members.

The above theme is largely also repeated in the case below. Here, the firm was in a much more difficult strategic position because of the neglect it experienced from its more senior leaders. The interviewee refers to his experience with the consultants as he was heavily involved in the design and communication of the consultants' advice. For the interviewee the company had lost touch with its competitors and the rigid hierarchical structure made it immensely difficult, for him and his colleagues, to generate any type of significant improvement. In his discussion about the consultants' work and the aspect of the legitimisation of their advice, the client makes reference to the quality of the consultants' output at those strategic organisational aspects the firm had little knowledge of.

They certainly helped us understand the dynamics of the market more fully than we perhaps had on our own. They had two consultants assigned to the long-term strategy work, and they did nothing else but long-term strategy for the first eight-week period, and they were examining everything: competitor analysis, geographical sector analysis, they were looking at the dynamics of the ferry industry in other parts of Europe – there was an international dimension as well, one of the consultants was Italian and one was Spanish, and they brought in sort of a completely fresh view, really to our market, because they had previous experience of working in it. But they were very good, and they were very quick – they learnt very, very quickly. And we were obviously able to furnish them with all the information they needed to make assessments and to go off and research particular ideas and...dynamics of the industry as it exists (cl.13).

The credibility of the consultants' service is dependent on the quality of their research findings and their presentation to the client. To some extent it could be argued how the significant absence of internal knowledge in the client can be used to explain the client's immediate acceptance over the proposed claims. Even though we recognise this possibility we still want to argue for the client's own emphasis on the positive receptivity and conditioning of the new knowledge that helped make the consultants' legitimation possible. In other words, there is distinct emphasis placed by the client on how the consultants met their organisational needs as they were represented in the information gaps or strategic plans.

On a different organisational setting, the below client refers to his experience with consultants on a leadership-training program. In asking the interviewee what made him keen to accept the consultants' proposition, emphasis is given on the content of the advice and the accredited body of knowledge that it is associated with. In particular, the client places his trust in the belief that the particular consultants' work on leadership was up-to-date, and that it was communicating methods and techniques that were effective. In an effort to persuade the client, it is clear from the following excerpt how consultants used rhetoric and other marketing techniques in order to promote their idea and win the business contract. At the same time, we find that the client's legitimation at the cognitive level, is based on the quality of the consultants' argumentation.

This scheme had been developed by CEM through a lot of work in America, and it was largely working with things that differentiated successful business leaders in the States, and what they found was largely that leadership and coaching and particularly emotional intelligence, was the things that were differentiating two managers who were operating almost with the same skills, but two different sets of emotional intelligence and leadership approaches. And there was a lot of research that showed businesses improved where high levels of leadership capability had been applied, not management capability, leadership capabilities. And the other thing that they threw in, not only was leadership styles important but one of the other differentiators between managers, is this idea of 'emotional intelligence'. Now I don't know if you've come across that, it's Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence and again they were just simply saying that managers that are shown to have high level of emotional intelligence they can demonstrate that they're more successful in their role maybe in the private sector, and again, they were offering that opinion (cl.27).

An important component to the above assignment, and which we will expand in the chapter on pragmatic legitimation, is the personal application of the consultants' work to the specific client and his organisation. The client became interested in the particular firm because of a public presentation the consultants gave to a number of different business

leaders, amongst whom the below individual was present. At this stage, the client was impressed with the clarity and application of the consultant's ideas which started a longer business relationship. The reason the client brought the consultants was because of their alleged expertise in the area of leadership. The features the consultants promoted were based around issues of leadership styles, and did not seem to offer any unique insights from what might be already known in the field. However, it is the client's knowledge gap on the subject and the reasoning through which the consultants presented their claims that helped win the client's trust.

The consultants' input in the above client concentrated on a set of particular managerial models/techniques that were more relevant to the individual rather than the organisation as a whole. The client is representative of the organisation, but he is the immediate buyer of the consulting service. It is him, the consultants aim at convincing, before any other member. The successful outcome of the consultants' intervention led to a larger scale project and which we will cover in more detail in the following chapter.

Moving on to a different client, we discuss the case of a Human Resource (HR) manager where the orchestration of the department's incoming business tasks created immense difficulties for the employees. There was not clear structure of evaluation from which the tasks would be categorised and given priority. The client refers to the consultants' methodology, and makes particular reference to his trust in it on basis of the consultants' successful application of it with other clients. However, even though the client is positive about the potentials of the framework at a conceptual level, the implementation of it became a very different process. The main issue of the dispute concerned the different organisational environment in which the methodological framework was applied before. Also, how the consultants were not aware enough about the HR's needs, complexities, and demands that *differed* from those other client organisations. Despite the above difficulties the below comment clearly illustrates the legitimisation of the consultants' advice on the basis of the premise of their methodology. This is seen from the point where the client qualifies his statement at the end.

From my perception, I trust them within the framework of their methodology completely because I know how long it took to develop and I know how many times they've been round the block with that methodology so it must work, so, I trust them from that point of view. (cl.24)

In an interview with a different client, a similar point to the above is made in discussing a consulting project that required the restructuring of a local theatre's management by the public sector. The client discusses the experience of the project, and the difficulties the organisation was facing, with attracting enough customers. Its organisational lack of attracting well known artists and marketing its performances to the public, led to a decline of revenues. At some point, the public authority intervened and hired the service of a consulting firm in order to assist the recovery of its deteriorating performance and help increase profits. As the statement below indicates the consultants' research and recommendations about the institution were proposed on assumed sound evidence and they were positively received by the client.

There's an example, the AVA theatre in [that city], which is the flagship building for the City Council that's, it's been heavily publicised, the financial difficulties that that building has had. The Council brought consultants in initially to form a view on how best to manage, operate, the AVA theatre, - and that was before the project was built. The consultant came in and said, you want an arms length management team, you need to bring private sector involvement into this, private sector expertise, and that decision was made and validated by the Council, and agreed... So, there was a fundamental decision that was made based upon advice given by a consultant, who came in and looked at the whole thing and said, 'right, to make this thing work you don't have experts on running theatres, you've never ran a theatre before, the only way to make the AVA theatre work is to bring a team of specialists in from the private sector, and these are the benefits of doing that'...and that arms length private sector company failed within three months of opening the AVA, and now they've had to bring the AVA theatre back into council management (cl. 7).

The issue we want to underline here is that the consultants' validation of advice takes place on the grounds of the consultants' argumentation. The success or failure of the project was not known at the beginning of the project. Hence, the clients' came to depend on the consultants' suggestion, and alleged market research. The management consultants managed to cognitively legitimise their knowledge claims by indicating the logic of plans which theoretically could alter the organisations' future performance. However, the outcome of the consultants' suggestion did not help recover the theatre, and produced an outcome opposite to what was expected. The failure of the project resulted in the public authority's intervention which re-established its old management structure. The failure of the project only became apparent after the implementation of the advice, and while realising that the City Council could not incorporate the changes as any other similar

commercial organisation. We want to argue how the consultants' achieved legitimation at a cognitive level, should be viewed separately from the aftermath outcome of the project. Consultants managed to win the clients' buy-in at the time where the actual outcome of their intervention was not known. In this sense, we propose how deconstructing the different dimensions of legitimation, in terms of the different levels in which it operates, is important for appreciating its complexities for its application. Furthermore, the consultants' cognitive legitimation is not only dependent on the quality of their arguments. It is also dependent on the clients' existing knowledge framework that might be inadequate compared to that of the consultant. The consultants' cognitive legitimation takes place because it seems to complement the clients' knowledge gaps and not necessarily because of its inherent positive future prospects.

### *6.2.2 Consultants' Views*

Apart from the clients' experience and views on cognitive legitimation we find a similar trend of argumentation by the consultants. In the course of justifying the credibility of their knowledge-claims, consultants engage into a course of making competing claims about the state of the industry and about what this means for the client. We start the exploration on this issue by looking at the experience of a senior consultant, whose study and practices have engaged large corporations and large-scale strategic projects. In asking the consultant about the means by which she justifies her credibility to the clients, mention is made of the knowledge-base from which she draws her information and how that is in turn presented to the client.

The questions were along the lines of, 'so we work in this sector, who do you see as our other major competitors?' What do you think of this merger that's happened between these two German firms? Questions like that, very factual questions...Obviously I'm starting with lots and lots of objective data so it's helpful at those points to be able to point back to the data and say this is why I'm saying this for you. It helps them see that I'm not just plucking stuff out of thin air. Whatever spectrum of consulting you want to think up in terms of there's a point of that spectrum which is expert knowledge, I am way in the extreme end of that expert knowledge. So they'll kind of say, ok if you're saying this about the industry, we'll believe you...I guess it's a variety of things, in fact I can think of specific instances where I can see there have been people in the audience that have wanted to challenge my credibility. The most obvious source of it would be the research I do. If you do that much research then it's very hard for anybody to argue with the conclusions that you've drawn because it's way ahead of any kind of research that they've got. So I'd say one thing is the research and I would use all of that data and I've an advantage in that a lot of it is very quantifiable, so you can immediately say '75% of people think this' (con.27).

The consultant places strong emphasis on the credibility of her research from which she develops her ideas. This knowledge-base is grounded on research and publications. This becomes a legitimate factor in her conversation with clients and especially when her credibility is disputed. The legitimation is based on her understanding and knowledge of the industry from which support is provided to justify her claims. Under the cognitive realm of legitimation, such consultant-client conversations are limited to the verbal argumentation between the two parties. The consultants' ability to convince the client is clearly situated on her degree of demonstrating the 'facts' and 'figures' against which the client cannot dispute. In this context, the thesis of our proposition is further supported as the clients' degree of acceptance or rejection, for what the consultants propose, is situated at a cognitive level. In this process of argumentation the clients' situated meaning-relations, assumptions, beliefs, come to be reflected upon as well as challenged. The consultant refers to her endeavours to translate her knowledge to a level that is in alignment with the client's cognitive schemata. The consultant is not simply presenting her evidence to the client. The exemplification of legitimation in such conversations can be characterised as an arena of dealing with the aspects of uncertainty, presuppositions and hidden expectations governing the clients' thinking. Even though preparations might be undertaken by the consultant in order to think and identify the way of presenting her case, it is during the actual interaction between the two parties when a possible alignment or misalignment of thinking will emerge. Even though the consultant might endeavour to understand how to address the client's issues, it is during the time of the conversation with the client that the consultant tries to bridge her approach on the issue with that of the client. The below statement underlines the importance of congruence as represented in areas of agreement. Moreover, the consultant manipulates her knowledge to communicating a message that is in alignment with the client's cognitive schemata. As Suchman (1995) argues cognitive legitimation is about co-sharing a way of reasoning conditioned in comprehension/understanding.

One of my challenges is always to get the complexity across with out bamboozling them with too much stuff.

*Interviewer: Simplifying it?*

Yes, but to do it in such a way that relates to the points they're interested in. I have to make my body of knowledge relevant to their particular circumstances (con.27).

In the below statement the consultant recognises the importance of her limitations to convincing the client. Also, how the emergence of disagreement is often an inevitable outcome. The consultant emphasises the importance of grounding her views on what she believes the client should take into account without implying a change of view in order to convince the client, or maintain her business contract. In sharing her views with the client, the consultant ensures a degree of uniformity which makes her future legitimisation possible. At the same time, the process of challenging the client and bringing accounts of knowledge, that are not internally shared/represented in the client poses a challenge of legitimisation, in that these new claims need to become relevant to the members' cognitive beliefs, assumptions and interests.

I think there is an interesting fine line that one walks, especially those day workshops where you have to be enough in agreement to where they think they are for them to feel comfortable having you in the room. But not so similar that you don't challenge them in some respects. In a sense why buy me because I sound similar, because I share their opinions and yet part of my job, I think, is also to challenge them on those opinions...I can also see circumstances where that's not worked particularly well. There was one company who again invited me to do a half day session and however politely I tried to phrase it, and they had a big group of people there, it wasn't just the senior management it was about fifty people an away day for their senior people, I didn't agree with the strategy of this company and I was trying to focus on two or three issues I thought were important and not talk about my disagreement but this one person at the end said, 'I have this feeling you don't agree with the way our overall strategy is going; to which I had to say, I think there are some real drawbacks with it'. (Con.27)

In an interview with a founder of a small size consulting firm reference is made on a similar issue to the above example. The particular consulting firm specialises in the area of knowledge management. The consultant advises clients on identifying potential rewards from the internal knowledge resources as represented within the client members' experience or documentation. Furthermore, the consultant provides direction for how such knowledge resource can be manipulated to enhance the client's performance or provide solutions. The consultant makes explicit reference to the fact that knowledge management is abstract, and many different interpretations have been given by authors and institutions. In selling a consultancy project the consultant argues for the importance of not allowing the theoretical and abstract qualities of knowledge management

jeopardise his conversations with the clients. By placing emphasis on the notion of 'making the business case' the consultant argues that apart from what knowledge-management may represent as a term, the consultant needs to translate such qualities in a way that they are evidently supported. In doing so, the consultant clearly alludes to the idea of how the process of legitimation is dependent on the proposed evidence, and which at this point can be cognitively evaluated, supported, or rejected.

My only response to that is that when we're called in to look at the organization and to propose how they can improve their performance, and, how knowledge management can help them better achieve their objectives, we have to present that as a business case, we have to make the *business case*. In the beginning people said 'that you can't measure this it's something Fussy it's something that'. And we very quickly realised working with companies around the world, that unless you can *prove* to them in a business case where you're going to make some savings, or, some improvements they're not going to bother. So, the way that we get organisations to embrace it is if they accept our business case for it, but, if someone in an organization recognises its importance and they don't have much influence, I agree with you it's not easy. It is not easy (con. 24).

*Interviewer: How important is the business case with convincing the client of what you can offer?*

Very important to us. I mean, I think I would say that the clients that we're working with now. In the earlier days if they were told by the chief executive who'd heard from a friend that knowledge management was the next thing to do they had to do it, because the chief executive said so. It's not the case any more, it's very, very rare. For us the business case is the *reason* that we're engaged and if we can't come up with demonstrating the business value then we shouldn't be engaged, and, that's my view (con. 24).

If the application of knowledge management might require the creation of new policies in the client, this will take the form of technical or organisational changes whose success or failure is not known. The point of cognitive legitimacy is that the degree of acceptability comes to be situated in the consultants' way of producing and presenting the argument to the client. In asking the consultant about the pressure that he and his company are facing in the process of making the business case, he argues how important it is to demonstrate the added-value during the early stages of interaction with the client.

Well, first of all I would say that there is *definitely* pressure on the consultants to deliver value because that's what we're about. We've got to be able to deliver value to the client, and, there is a pressure, we are keen to deliver and create the greatest value we can, and, there's nothing certain, we can't go into a client and know with absolute certainty that we're going to produce, with them.

To what extent is such pressure encouraging the consultant to make purely rhetorical statements that only aim at serving his business interests, and which might not be feasible



to the client? It is difficult to give a definite answer to this question as we do not know the magnitude of the consultants' factual propositions constituting the principle basis of legitimation. Also, how superficial the consultant's argument is that in turn helps create accounts of impressions so that the consultants' business revenues can be sustained. We want to argue how the use of rhetoric and symbolic management for achieving such persuasion needs to be seen in the consultant's overall process of crafting his propositions. This idea is supported from the experience of an ex-consultant who emphasises the often pretentious expertise consultants argue to possess:

Clearly a consultant cannot be expected to be an expert in the business but you *don't* have to be an expert in the business... if they have it, it's valuable, but I don't believe that they have that specific experience a lot of the times, because every market is different, every situation is different (con. 4).

Absolutely, because there is such a defined focus they can answer exactly the question that the decision maker wants to hear. So it may be that the decision maker doesn't want to hear about resourcing problems or procurement problems, whereas a line manager would say 'yeah we can do this but we need this we need that we need that, etc' (con.4).

The technical features of the consultants' advice are intertwined with the marketing features of their persuasion practices. In the framework of the functional literature the technical features should not be appreciated as the only dominating factor that influences the client's decision making and which allows the generation of legitimacy. At the same time and in relation to the critical literature, we argue that the consultants' practice of rhetoric should not be simply interpreted as substituting the managerial changes that are genuinely required to be made in the client.

A similar argument to the above is also expressed by a different consultant. This participant explicitly makes reference for how the parent firm was placing pressure on the individuals to sell ideas to clients. This is part of the consulting firm's need to survival in the market, and it is an inevitable economic need that the firm needs to meet. In presenting the below quote we do not want to argue that simply consultants play the role of salesmen. This is not a holistic representation of the consulting role. However, what the below comment indicates is the type of economic pressures that are part of the consulting work, and which can influence how the generation and communication of advice takes place. As a result, the need to sell yet another assignment becomes an inherent economic need of the consulting work, but which can be regulated/managed

differently between consultants. The consulting process takes place amidst an amalgamation of a number of business and personal interests that are not explicitly discussed in the literature. In contrast to the detachment of self-interests with which the functional approach often presents the consulting work, there is a need to realise the direct impact that such business interest make on the consulting process. From the below comment we can see that the size of the consulting firm can impact the motives behind the advisory process. From the literature we find that the size of the firm is not often recognised as an attribute that can affect the consulting process. However, the reduction of the economic need by the parent consulting firm to create revenues for covering its consultants' salaries and overhead costs, seem to also affect the consultants' felt 'selling need'.

Arthur D Little went into Chapter 11 in 2001, so, I left, became independent, set up my own consultancy with the aim of developing a network of people around the Globe who work together on assignments as needed. There are various advantages to that business model in that you're not carrying large amounts of overheads, the cost of people, 'on the beach', as we say in the consultancy world. *But more importantly* it was actually down to something in my own style as a consultant which was that I got to the point where I was a director in Arthur D Little, where my job was primarily selling consultancy, *not so much delivery*, mostly *selling*. (con 9).

### 6.2.3 Summary

Our discussion of cognitive legitimation indicated how congruence and conformity is dependent on the making of argumentation and competing claims of knowledge representation. Consultants are able to justify their claims to clients because they have robust information resources about a subject area. Furthermore, they are able to pitch their knowledge schemata in a way that corresponds to the client's way of reasoning over the issue. The alignment or misalignment between the consultants' knowledge representation in the client helps determine its perceived feasibility or value. At the same time, we argued that the consultants' knowledge-claims to clients are not free of rhetoric and superficiality for what they entail. The process of convincing can be understood as a form of amalgamation that contains credible information and knowledge, but which is also projected in some form of management fashion. The clients' acceptance or rejection of the consultants' advice is highly dependent on their existing knowledge possession

over the issue, hence making the existent information asymmetrical. We argued how clients are not passive recipients of the consultants' knowledge claims, and often create resistance and challenge statement with the result of compelling the consultants to modify their projection of knowledge advice to clients.

### **6. 3 Cognitive Legitimation and the Re-identification of Clients' Needs**

The consultants' competing claims of knowledge representation can account as one of the means by which cognitive legitimation becomes possible. In the following section we discuss a different context of cognitive legitimation which is based on the consultants' conversations with clients through which the initially expressed/identified needs are re-established/re-defined. A dominant theme characterizing the consultants' way of access to the client's problem-situation concerns the detection of the clients' 'real' issues, versus the 'presented' issues. Consultants see as a prominent feature of their work the need to situate the cause from the symptoms, so that their contribution has an effective impact in the client. The consultants' process of re-establishing the nature of the client's managerial needs is critical for the way consultants come to validate their aftermath knowledge claims. The way consultants redefine the client situation does not only add new perspectives to the given problem, but also provide a new way of perceiving/approaching the reality of the problem. Such approach can be influenced by the consultants' subjective values or expectations, and which are submerged with the individual consultants' political or corporate interests. However, the clients' way of sharing the consultants' perspective on the problem clearly helps regulate the relationship as roles and expectations are influenced by this process. The above theme is expressed in the below statement made by the head of a medium-size consulting firm. The view that clients often do not have the internal knowledge or clarity to detect the 'real' problem is supported by the premise of being 'too close' to it. The alluded notion of 'visibility' seems to encompass more than the notion of awareness. In contrast, the consultants' corporate competency to pragmatically detect the organisational issue is emphasised.

There are two answers to that. One is that some believe that they know what their problem is. Others have no idea and so they'll say, "I have low productivity," or "I have problems with keeping people." Our style is that we go and do a diagnostic, and we identify what we call the "exam question." What is the real "exam question?" (con.26)

Even the ones who have said that they know what the problem is, 9 times out of 10 it is something else. They think they know what it is, but the reality is that they're too close to it – they say you can't see the wood from the trees. If they're in the organisation, they actually can't see, usually, what the real problem is. (con. 26)

According to the above consultant the visibility 'impasse' by the client becomes an important parameter for the consultants' intervention and potential value of service. The consultants' more accurate representation about the state of the client's environment creates the 'distance' for the arena of advice intervention. The above view is also supported by a different consultant whose experience during the early stages of the client contracts echoes the above theme. At the heart of the argument is the clients' often misled understanding about the 'real' organisation issue(s). The consultant sees himself as an important mediator to helping the client identify the difference between the 'expressed' from the 'real' issue. In doing so, the consultant sees his contribution of value addition to the relationship with bringing insights to issues not identified by the client.

I want to do some kind of diagnostic work and get to know, to see whether their view of the problem is actually what I think their view of the problem is, because most of time I think they don't really know and they kind of guess, they're not very good at understanding what their problem is. So most of time they come up with a terms of reference and my first job is to kind of unpick them and change them because, you know, what they're actually buying when they bring you in is an ability to *make sense* of how their organisation works; and actually what they're not very good at is understanding their own problem, but they want to kind of define that and just let you get on with it. (con.30)

From the above quote it can be seen that even though the level of understanding is not made explicit by the interviewee, the consultant seems to imply how *his* understanding becomes a new point of reference for the client. The consultants' legitimation of advice is produced at a conceptual level. There is not empirical evidence to testify the proposed claims. It is through the consultants' conversation with the client that efforts are made to convince him/her about the non-detected organisational needs. As a result, the *re-encapsulation* of the clients' needs is purely dependent on the new or different cognitive representations that the client may choose to accept or reject. A further implication of the above, however exceeds beyond the grounds of cognitive legitimation as the process of convincing the client creates a power relationship that is not just limited to conceptual

persuasion. An important aspect of the consultants' legitimation is the broader power relationship that he/she gains, and which can exceed to decision making aspects about the overall progress of the assignment. The above theme is highlighted by the below continuing comment of the above consultant, and his emphasis on the partnership dimension. The consultant recognises the potential of *vulnerability* by the clients and the power distance is implied through the previous excerpt. Through working with the client in joint partnership the consultant refers to his efforts of equality on the power relationship, as something that is co-emerging versus being led by the one party.

My initial feeling is that I want to bring them back again so that we can actually get a, jointly make sense of what their issues are, and therefore, work out the intervention that they need, together, rather than kind of say 'there it is, get on with it, me do the work' and then at the end of it say 'well actually you haven't solved the problem because you haven't conceptualised it correctly in the first place' (con.30).

In an interview with a long-term experienced consultant whose research interest and have an active presence in the academic literature mention is made about a similar case example. The consultant refers to the point of the client's articulation of his concern that even though presented the subject area of the problem did not address the real issue. Confronted with a situation of a high labour turnover the client believed that the problem is with the firm's incentive systems. The client required from the consultant to advice on how to improve it. In entering into the organisation the consultant identified a plurality of issues that are not just limited to the incentive system. In coming to re-address the client situation the consultant became a point of reference for how the organisation issue needs to be approached/treated. The client's point of accepting the consultant's interpretation of the situation helps to create a collective understanding that enables the business partnership to move to the next stage. However, the point of importance concerns the consultants' recognition of an issue that was not detected by the client and which helps to shape the perception by both parties.

Let me give you an example, there was a company who came to us some years ago and said, 'we have a very high labour turnover and we really can't afford to do that, there's something wrong with our incentive system, we want you to come in and look at our incentive system to see how we can reduce labour turnover'. And, well, I mean you can guess the situation, the point was that labour turnover was a function of many problems that the company had, but particularly, problems of structure and organisation and powerlessness and so on, and incentives were not, that wasn't the real issue. So we then had to go to

client and say 'look we think that it would be useful if you could open the thing wider than the incentive system, then we'd be happy to work with you' (con. 12).

It is only after the consultants' actual involvement and thorough questioning of the company's employees that a better picture of the situation emerged. It is also important to qualify that in making the above statement the consultant does not imply how this process of finding the 'real' issue is to be understood as having a knowledge-superiority, that is not existent or obtainable from the client. The consultant might attribute the client's lack of understanding to a lack of effort to pursue the different causes of the problem, probably as a result of the various daily responsibilities or time limitations. Nevertheless, the consultant's experience in coming to disentangle the operational areas that were not regarded as being part of the 'issue' helps fuel the consultant's assertiveness for providing insight to need identification.

An additional case to the above example is also supported by a different consultant. Here, the individual was involved in a project regarding the decentralisation of the parent company's offices and the employees working in them. The client's approach to seeking help from the consultant was presented as being a supportive mechanism for the change implications the employees would experience. Coping with a decentralised form of organisational function meant that employees may have felt uncertain about their way of relating to the corporate governance of the firm as well as their superiors. The consultant's positive attribute to the project, as recorded in the following quote, shows the change of understanding he brought to the project. The consultant realised how the client's way of perceiving the consultants' needed support did not involve helping the client merely adjust to the new changing environment. It was providing a new understanding for the wider implications of the decentralised system. For the consultant this was the real and foremost issue which the client needed to realise.

Yes, I did a lot of work over about a three of four year period. Basically the job could be seen as Change Management Support to a number of different offices, company offices in the Department for International Development. They had gone through a process of decentralising, so, all of the offices in Southern Africa, so they had a kind of central regional office, and all the people were based there and then they went down to different countries they worked in. And then what actually happened was they changed their organisational structure to decentralise that group into the different countries themselves. So they went from one regional office to four decentralised country offices, and the job, the terms of reference, the tender that we put in was to provide change management support to these offices. What actually kind of came up when we got to them was that the

problem wasn't just change management support. It was actually getting them to understand what working in a decentralised way *meant*. Over a period of a year we kind of almost re-diagnosed the situation and what they actually needed wasn't just kind of little bits of support here and there, it was actually someone working very closely with the senior team, almost kind of a mentoring and coaching role, just to kind of get them to think about what their job was, to set up authority structures and then to almost set up separate offices in each group rather than just kind of blanket support which they felt they needed for everyone. So that is probably the best and immediate example I can give (con.30).

To what extent did the separate office and authority structures make an actual difference in the client? What were the potential problems emerging from this process that needed to be addressed? Even though it is part of the limitations of this research not having the opportunity to testify claims made by consultants, from the client party, the consultant's felt contribution is made in bringing a new realisation about the organisational problem that is not adequately appreciated by the client. It is not clear how much the consultant's new contribution helped the overall success of the project. However, what is clear is the consultant's way of justifying his contribution to the client with enriching the client's understanding for what the project actually meant.

### *6.3.1 Client views on the reconceptualisation of organisational needs*

A theme that emerges from the clients' experience concerns the internal organisational complexities that often makes the location of the organisational needs a politicised process. Clients recognise the manipulative power consultants often want to exercise towards them. The different internal competing plays of interest between client members, often makes the decision making process dysfunctional. In this sense, the clients' lack of clarity in the firm to some degree supports the thesis of the earlier argument. In a large public project regarding the regeneration of the client's demographic and economic conditions, the below client refers to the members' competing and often conflicting views. The project required the representation of different public authority members, some of which were more integrally involved into the project than others. Political as well as corporate interests varied between the representing members. Their participation was nevertheless a necessary requirement of the project. The following client was the immediate person responsible in managing the business contract with the consultants. His position was sensitive for maintaining good relationship with the client members in order

to secure the needed public support. At the same time, he needed to maintain good relationship with the consultants for managing the progress of the project. The multiplicity of the internal voices, between the different internal public authority parties, meant a lack of uniform view as the below statement indicates.

So I'm afraid in terms of securing a uniform view, and, a uniform view as to how to move forward, I don't think that we have handled that terribly well...Yes, and so, quite understandably the consultants would be a little unsure as to how to proceed with this. So, in fact, I think sometimes you have to have client self-management, especially when you have a number of people involved in the commissioning body. So what exactly do we want? What exactly have we agreed as to the steps in the work of the consultant and how this will be done? And I don't think we had agreed enough of those things, or made sure they were understood by everyone involved. So, that meant that actually the consultant could, quite understandably, feel very confused, who were they talking to? What were they talking about? Very fundamental questions! (cl.1).

The client discusses the lack of a uniform partnership and attributes responsibility to the client members for not making the necessary effort to reach an agreement. It is interesting how the client values this internal decision making process as an integral part for dealing successfully with the consultants. As both of the following excerpts indicate the competing voices in the client created an array of difficulties for reaching decisions that would be collectively supported. The political complexities associated with coming to such an agreement can be argued to help create the lacuna of ambiguity seen earlier. The client's lack of 'clarity' does not connote an absence of interest/knowledge/objectives at a cognitive level, but an absence of uniformity at an action level. The consultants' power to change the below tension is limited in the below case. As a result, the consultants engage into an advice making process without having clear awareness of its receptivity by the client members. This is supported by the below comments made by the above client:

Because at the end of the day the partnership cannot agree within itself what to do next. And, often all that a partnership can agree is that 'oh I think we'll have some consultants to look at it'. Consultants are only useful if the clients knows what it wants to do, but may not know how to go about doing it. If the client is not even persuaded of the need to do something, the consultant has a very difficult job affecting the outcome (cl.1).

But on the other hand that you do need to be flexible, that you do need to be *clear*, if you're not clear as to what you want, then the consultants are going to find it very difficult to give you what you want, because you don't really know yourself (cl.1).



A similar view to the above is also supported by a different client in discussing his experience with consultants during various assignments. The client refers to the clarity with which the people responsible approached their own organisational needs in the particular project. The client makes clear that in the past the experienced lack of clarity, between the client-members themselves, should not have given consultants free range. The client had to undergo large on unnecessary expenditures on consulting fees because the clients did not have enough self-awareness about their own organisational needs. They did not have a clear scope for how consultants are to produce the maximum positive outcomes. The consultants' lack of efficiency in the client is often the result of the clients' decisions and not that of the consultant. The client indicates how his accumulated learning over the years made a difference for how he dealt with the following consulting assignment. The close relationship between consultants and clients, and the power relationship between the internal client members played a significant influence for how the particular client perceived the consultant. The need for a greater degree of clarity between the various client members seems to be driven by the client's own initiative. Negative experiences from the past have become an important lesson for demonstrating scrutiny over the design of requirements the consultants have to perform.

I think as an organisation there's lessons learned with previous experience. Sometimes when consultancy hasn't worked as well, it's quite often when we haven't been as clear about what we wanted them to do. In this case, we were quite clear, 'that's what we wanted you to do, we didn't want you to flood us with more consultants'. We're spending a lot of money on lots of initiatives and what we said was if this is going to work, it has to be done by the people within the organisation. And so, we were a lot clearer about the remit than I would say in other arrangements we've had in the past. Particularly sometimes around IT, when we haven't been able to articulate our requirements for IT systems. Then you have down something as being 'X', but only when we get it we realise we wanted 'Y'. That can then become quite expensive to change that into what we want. So, I think the biggest single difference this time is that we clearly articulated and we said right from the outset that 'we don't want this organisation to provide all of the solutions, we don't want a consultant assigned to every team, we want that team to be responsible for improving, and changing the culture within. So that's the single most important part. (cl.20).

A complementary theme to the above concerns the ambiguity regarding the clients' *identity* as the immediate purchaser of the service, and the associated power to determine the parameters of the contact. We turn to a consultant's experience who makes particular reference to the experienced difficulty to locate the organisational needs as often emerging from multiple organisational actors or 'competing voices'. As the following excerpt indicates consultants are often faced with uncertainty in the way that they are

introduced to the problem. The immediate purchaser of the consulting service, that represents the 'client party,' plays an influential role to shaping the consultant's way of perceiving the presented problem. In this context, the consultant does not have immediate access to the situation as views are 'filtered' through the role of the organisational actors.

Sometimes the *expressed* need is not the *actual* need. For example the client will say "We've got problems with not coming up with enough innovative ideas for new products", and, you talk to the chief executive because that's his presenting problem, and, when the chief executive leaves the room you then talk to the vice president of innovation, or, product development or whatever and he or she says to you "We come up with lots of good ideas for new products, it's just that 'he' and 'the board' won't invest in them because they can't see that they're absolutely guaranteed to give return." (con.9).

The consultant's ambiguity during the 'sense-making' process concerns the different voices that often emerge about what the client problem is, and how such voices are echoed by the members at the various layers of the organisation. The consultant emphasises the political dimension and the exercise of power by the more senior client members. Also, how the views by the lower level employees are not taken into account. The captured frustration is clearly expressed in the below statement, and refers precisely to the consultant's role in trying to reconcile such conflicting or competing views.

There's a risk associated with that and then you immediately have a challenge, because you have a senior saying "I want you to come in and help our people come up with more new ideas" and the people who are responsible for new ideas one level below, say to you *privately*, "We come up with lots of new ideas, the last thing we need is more ideas, what we need is senior leadership to know how to evaluate and choose which ones to back and which ones not to back" (con. 9).

From the following excerpt we see that the consultant's realisation of the difference between the 'expressed' from the 'actual' need is possible, *because* of his interaction with actors at the different levels of the organisation. Views expressed by the employees and which are not taken by the more senior managers, come to gain a new sense of validity/credibility as they are now uttered through the consultant. The consultant's privileged position from not being immediately part of the client's political fabric is argued to help produce insight and awareness that might not have been feasible otherwise. The consultant sees his acts in a mediatory role to reducing the distance or conflicting views within the client party. The above discussion brings to the fore the assumptions associated with the extent of the consultant's originality of insight as has been described between the contrast of the 'expressed' versus 'actual' need. The way

consultants generate such an insight is not necessarily their own invention. The consultants help raise opinions that already exist in the client. The consultant's valuable role can be argued to account in the way of reconciling the different/competing views in the client. Furthermore by legitimising their credibility with being external to the organisation and detached from the members' internal differences. The consultant's 'insight' can be understood as dynamic which is already existent in the client, however, the client-parties might not be able to arrive to a mutually accepted solution by means of reconciling their views and/or differences.

Another theme that can be seen from the above example is how the consultants' 'reality' and 'rhetoric' of advice are not clearly distinguishable in the consultant's experience. The consultant might use forms of argumentation that help expose the different power differences between members. The consultant's advice for what the client should do differently is not necessarily situated in the providence of new groundbreaking information. The consultants' nuance of understanding and the attached credibility by an outsider helps legitimise a particular view that might be already in existence. The reality aspect of the consultants' advice is not solely produced by the consultant's thinking, reflection, and service, but emerges from the already existing stock of internal knowledge in the *client*. Alleviating such knowledge to the level of corporate decision making is clearly important for the overall progress of the business assignment. However, the issue of how we are to interpret the consultants' practices, (as already alluded from the functional and critical perspectives), seem to need to accommodate the 'reality' and 'rhetoric' dimensions as co-emerging/co-existing traits, rather than separate camps of practice. Consultants make use of statements that also help create impressions that are rhetorically sustained. At the same time, it needs to be appreciated that the consultants' knowledge contribution does not alter the clients' position because of the new positions/insight that consultants produce. The consulting 'image' that helps legitimise the clients' already held views can be understood in the context of rhetoric. The actual changes that clients are committed to undertaking through the change or creation of changes can be understood in the context of having a measurable impact in the client hence being characterised as 'reality' (Zbaracki, 1998).

### *6.3.2 The consultants' manipulation of client needs*

Apart from the clients' recognition of how internal competing voices might foster the lack of clarity, we also want to present the clients' experience of the consultants' legitimation characterised for its superficiality and often vulnerability on the clients' expense. We have demonstrated the case of consultants where their discourse of legitimation was equally supported with clients' experience. We also want to argue about the clients' experience where the consultants' alleged clarity is often aimed at servicing the consultants' business interests. The justification of knowledge-claims is not made on basis of the possible internal misconceptions of the client, but on the exercise of creating impressions which are often misleading. The above issue can be illustrated from the experience of the below marketing manager whose experience with consultants expanded to big projects and with making large scale investments. In referring to his previous experience, mention is made about the importance of having control over the consultants, and their way of exercising their service in the firm. Repetitive emphasis is made on the importance of 'managing the consultants carefully' and how the client's own lack of clarity, about the consultants' substance of claims, can lead to unnecessary projects and extra work.

One of the things I've learned very carefully over the past 15 years, using consultants, you have to manage them very carefully always on a project management basis, to extract the value you want to do out of that situation...Well, again this is where the learning experience comes in because I've been in situations where we've had McKenzie in, or, Bain in and they've come up with a plan, and, if you have a hands off relationship they will go away and they will produce you a plan on what ever it is, they will do a survey of the market place and say your know there is this opportunity and you can do this and you implement it and you find it's not implementable, in other words, that's happened, that can happen...Yeah. So you need to manage consultants very, very carefully (cl.8).

Asking the interviewee about his dependency on consultants the interviewee said: "If you are not careful consultancy can undermine the confidence of the organisation. They can." It is interesting how reference is strongly immediately made to the vulnerability of the client, rather than to the client's degree of dependence, as the question was initially asking. Despite the assumption of how consultants serve supporting the clients' needs they can also take a manipulative approach towards them. This theme has also been discussed in the literature on a similar tone by Werr and Styhre (2003). The authors discuss how the consultant-client relationship often shifts from a bureaucratic managerial

approach to network-organisation where power and control is not just situated within consultants and clients but is shared between them. According to Werr and Styhre, (2003) the bureaucratic managerial approach indicates how consultants play an instrumental role for outlining what the client needs do and how. Consultants are the primary source of decision making from which clients perform their activities. At the same time, the network-organisation approach indicates that power is a sharing attribute, which means that clients can exercise a power influence of the consultants as well as vice versa. From the previous quotation we detect that the client's experience over the years has shifted between the bureaucratic and network-organisation approach. The client has worked with consultants that wanted to have primary influence over the client's reception of the business assignment and strategy for action. However, at the same time the client feels that the consultants provide a very valuable resource when they are equally 'managed well'.

In support of the above theme we present the reflections made by another consultant. The questions posed in the following section are made in a way of challenging the often self-made assumptions that clients only operate within their allocated budget, or the boundaries of the particular project. The questions are made in irony and in order to highlight how the consultants' way of legitimising their service at a conceptual level, contains rhetoric and impression management which fail to deliver in reality. The consultant clearly highlights how consultants have the opportunity to often prolong the duration of the project or to move to directions that will increase the initial non-anticipated costs.

I think there are two things that I would say when you're looking into your research. The first is: When all these consultancies were all bidding for a piece of work, how many times what they deliver at the end of them when it's finished, is what they were originally asked to do? ... Sometimes, that might be in the consultants' interest, sometimes it might be in the customers', but, how many times did that [consultants moving to a different direction from what was initially agreed with the client] happen? I think the second one is, linked to that, how many times has the contract ended within the original budget that was set for it? How many times has the contract been delivered within the original budget? Then you're into what I was saying before about, well if you're not clear on what you want at the beginning there is a greater potential that you will go over budget (con. 5).

### 6.3.3 Summary

The discussion and analysis provided in this section indicates that a complementary dimension of cognitive legitimation is the process of redefining and reconceptualising the clients' needs. In this context, consultants operate as a point of reference in the client for helping produce afresh understanding about the business situation. The multiplicity between existing interpersonal differences, in the client, does not allow them to voice a uniform view. This contributes to making their engagement with the business issue dysfunctional. Consultants are able to legitimise their service to clients by providing new or different conceptualisations to the issues faced. The consultants' instrumentality for identifying decisions, for which the client is not aware of, creates a scope of interaction where decision making can be delegated by the consultant. Clients come to accept the consultants' advice because of the new meaning-making relations that have been produced. At the same time, we argued that this process of *re-conceptualisation* often creates vulnerability because of the new power dynamics that are created in the relationship. Consultants are able to convey a point of view because the consultants' work comes to be understood as a new or more reliable point of reference about the business assignment. At the same time, it is possible that consultants can manipulate the client's situation to their business interests.

### 6.4 Cognitive legitimation & consultants' reputation

In this part of the chapter we turn to a third arena of cognitive legitimation. Competing claims of knowledge representation are justified on the grounds of the consultants' background, repertoire of working practices and successful projects with similar clients. Even though cognitive legitimation continues to take place at a conceptual level the grounds of legitimation shift away from the client's immediate situation to the consultants' credentials. By making reference to the consulting accomplishments the effort is made to create the conceptual links with the success of specific business assignment. The logic that is developed from this discourse is causal and implies that because consultants have demonstrated their successful quality of work in different assignments, they can be trusted enough to demonstrate such potentials within a new project.

#### *6.4.1 Clients' views on reputation*

In an interview with two clients about their working relationship with consultants during the early stages of the project, we enquired about the various reasons that encouraged them to buy their services. The client makes reference to the consultants' background experience from having worked with other clients.

Secondly, is there evidence that they've applied a similar if not identical process in other companies and if so, what was the outcome?... I think, the reality is, that part of the strength of a consultant is the experience he can bring. So one of the reasons a client will choose a consultant is that they can evidently experience and projects in businesses, if not the same, then have some relevance, some similar challenges... I think that the consultant's job is to intellectually substantiate their claim and then emotionally substantiate their claim, and intellectually it will be built around smart models and some analysis but emotionally it will be built around experience in other places (cl.19).

I think that the authority comes from the fact that they've worked with other companies, they have got a level of expertise and you trust them to have that level of expertise. and, don't get me wrong; I've worked with management consultants before who have never been able to understand what you're trying to achieve, whereas these consultants did. (cl.23).

In the experience of the above interviewee, the consultants delivered a number of presentations during the early stages of the project, which communicated their plans of action. In an effort to establish credibility for the quality of their work and service, reference is made to past working experiences. The expressed idea of how the clients have to 'trust' the consultants when making such claims, indicate their limitations as audience in being able to testify/falsify such claims. The performance aspect of the consultants work provides the paramount opportunity for creating positive impressions in the client. It is important to qualify that we do not argue how the consultants' performance can be regarded as the only critical dimension to the overall process of legitimation. The clients were in fact very unhappy with the consultants' content-aspect of their intervention to the problem. The clients challenged the consultants' approach and encouraged them to change the way their methodology would be communicated to the employees. This became an important factor to the clients' overall process of buy-into the consultants.

In a different interview with another client the above theme is further supported. The client places emphasis on how the consultants' background provided assurance among the client members that the consultants were capable to deliver against the demands of the project. References are made to trust and confidence that are particularly

important for our understanding of justification, as these are perceived organisational traits that make a difference in the internal decision making of the client.

Partly it was their background. They claimed to have a very strong track record in economic consultancy and environmental consultancy, and they had been used by a number of other clients in similar areas. So, in terms of their track record and background, this was sort of inspired trust and confidence in that way (cl.1)

In this series of well articulated comments from the same client, we see how consultants come to use the already accumulated experience as potential proof for the similar quality of work they could deliver to the current client. In doing so, the consultants rely on their argumentation and the use of rhetoric that is sub-merged with the technical features of their work. In this context, consultants should not be understood in their effort as only trying to create impressions of value that are not well founded or exemplified through empirical examples. Clearly, the presentation of the consultants' work indicates positive features of experience and knowledge that are grounded in their repertoire of consulting assignments. The quality of the content of the consultants' work can be characterised as being the technical feature that indicate a well networked and experienced consulting firm.

They were able to refer to work that they had done for others like [AA] in similar sorts of policy areas. The research they conducted did seem to be current, up to date, have a number of international examples that were more or less relevant, sometimes you did think, 'is this really relevant for us?', but, on the whole they were relevant. So they were able to prove that they were knowledgeable and knowledgeable in *this* field (cl.2).

They convinced *me* on the whole. There were days when I did think, 'oh gosh, is this really right', because they had a very good track record, they were clearly knowledgeable of their field. Because, even if you don't know something or know an area particularly well, somebody can convince you that they are knowledgeable, I don't know if you know much about geology, but if somebody talked to you about, you know, the Igneous Rock, and volcanic formations and compared rocks and Mars, you'd think, 'wow, this man knows his stuff'. If he talks about 'well sometimes there are big rocks, sometimes there are little rocks', you might be less convinced. So they were knowledgeable, they had a good track record, and they were, I thought, professional in their dealings (cl.2).

In both excerpts the client makes reference to the consultants' rhetoric use, and often doubts, for spicing up their image and expertise. This argument can be understood in the context of information asymmetry argued by Clark (1995). The client acknowledges his knowledge limitations on the various content areas that the consultants made claims for. The idea of 'appearing' and/or 'being' knowledgeable is an interesting comment for how



the boundaries between the two is often blurred (Clark and Salaman, 1998). Clearly, the language by which consultants talk about their experience to the client implies accounts of knowledge for also possessing that technical expertise. The idea of appearing knowledgeable, - because of the way consultants may have responded to the clients' questions/challenges, aims to give the impression that this is not simply a superficial quality of the consultant, but an *embodied* technical feature. Furthermore, the client's reflection about the often direct and indirect relevance of the consultants' various claims, about their specific situation, expresses elements of doubt. Twice the client repeats the idea of whether particular references were relevant to their project. The client addresses, in part, how he dealt with them in his mind by trying to find support from those other qualities that would indicate traces of professionalism and transparency. The above idea provides further support to our argument for how the clients' testability over the consultants' claims is an issue dependent on the performance context of the consultants' conveyance of ideas. The client provides a balanced, overall critique of the consultants, throughout the interview and compares them with a different consulting project where the other consulting firm appeared less knowledgeable and less convincing. Even though it is difficult for us to speculate the extent to which the consultants might have adopted a superficial approach to convince the client, we rely on the client's above interpretation of events.

#### *6.4.2 Consultants' views on reputation*

In questioning the consultants' views on the subject, we find a similar trend of themes that confirms the clients' experience. In the process of demonstrating their potential added-value to clients, consultants see as an important part of their legitimation the demonstration of already achieved results with previous clients. Consultants endeavour to legitimise their knowledge claims on basis of their background experience and reputation. Such legitimation occurs at a conceptual level as clients do not often engage in testifying the credibility of the consultants' claims.

The *first* thing was about having some sort of *reputation* established through testimonials from some other parts. The *second* thing is establishing you know what their problems are and you can come up with a solution. You've got to prove your credentials haven't you?

*Interviewer: How do you prove that?*

Experience, examples. Get them to talk to your other client that you've done similar work for, your reputation in the marketplace. (con.1)

Clearly, there are complexities in the operational logistics of the above process as it is the consultant who may determine which clients are to share their experience with such a new client. There is an element of bias that even though is not made explicit in the interview should be acknowledged. By making reference to their reputation as testified by other clients and the successful outcomes of different projects, consultants help shape the reality of the clients' understanding for placing trust in the consultants' ideas/recommendations. The use of the consultants' repertoire of clientele has a direct impact to issues related to organisational uncertainty and the elimination of risk. That is, the possibility that the consultants might fail to deliver against the clients' expectations. The use of already performed assignments becomes a way of managing client perceptions and also affirming the already placed trust by the client. The context of the following excerpt is made by discussing the process through which knowledge claims are validated in the consultant-client interaction. The clients are clearly in need of generating stability within their assumptions about the consultant and/or the introduction of new practices. The generation of the perception that the applied organisational models have been used before provides a much needed conceptual link which relates the particular assignment with a broader set of experiences. As a result, the potential challenges and carried uncertainty of the isolated experience/assignment becomes contextualised when related to those similar practices. Similarities between success and failure are consequentially made at a conceptual level and add weight to similar course of success. The consultants' emphasis of success and the elimination of examples dominated by failure, we assume, dominate their argumentation with clients as the disclosure of negative experiences might discourage clients from buying into their service.

The other things is that they like to pick tried and tested solutions, they nearly always ask give me three or four project examples where you've tried this before. Now then, bearing in mind what I said about everybody being different, we can give them project examples, but then you say to them, but you're different, you're going to try something different here, you know

if you just do the same as everybody else, you'll be the same as everybody else, you won't actually get out of your organisational issues, and some go for that, and others go for that but couch it round, and others are very wary (con. 3).

A complementary theme to the above is also expressed below from a different consultant:

Where you draw it from is your own experience and also what you've done for other clients...the tools and methods that you're familiar with (con.13).

The size of the consulting firm and its accomplished reputation in the market becomes a complementary factor to the successful argumentation by the consultants. Such consulting reputation is sustained by making reference on the experience of various client assignments. The firm's brand comes to also support the nuance of discourse that consultants want to develop in using such examples. It is not only how the particular *individual* consultants dealt with the clients at a particular point in time as success does not become an outcome of the individuals' activities. The consulting firm seems to acquire ownership of its consultants' achieved success and somehow embodies this in its conversations with future clients. Even though consulting firms want to make associations between the individual consultants' work with their own quality brand, there can be seen differences characterising the above relationship. The client's ambiguity for the consultants' expected quality of the work can be somehow substituted by showing the trust in the consulting firm.

Differences exist between how the consulting firm might generate and sustain levels of success at a corporate level, with how consultants might be performing on the ground with clients. It can be argued how the definable features of a successful assignment are situated in the specific competencies, creativity and constraints of the particular business context. However, the nuance of successful reputation that is accomplished at a more general level becomes some kind of asset that the firms use for winning new clients. The above idea is supported from a discussion with two representatives of a consulting firm who specialised in knowledge management. Even though the consultant making the following statement was not engaged into everyday consulting project himself, nevertheless, makes reference to how his firms' consultants might respond to the issue of validation in general.

...we pull upon the size of the network, the level of expertise we have. The fact that we are globally representative, the fact that we do have very significant experience in pretty much all the areas across the globe, across the solution lines, and so on. Past experience, the level of firms that we've worked with before, and really it's just a question of putting together, looking at what they require, and, actually putting together what we believe will actually be the best message. (Con. 19)

A similar idea is expressed in the below statement when asking a different interviewee: "How do the consultants manage to maintain this element of expertise or image of expertise?"

Because they have a strong brand name I would say. If you look at the big consultancy companies they rely on brand name, and, that's again this is my personal view, but my view is that that's the only way how they can command these significant payments yeah? Because they are clearly many times in excess of what you would pay internally for somebody who isn't delivering 10x the value, let's say. They may deliver more value than the line manager but certainly not the value to the charge out rate. So what do they do? They rely on a strong brand name because when a decision maker wants a PWC or KPMG or PA consultant, or, whoever it is, they are buying a brand yeah? What is the difference between the man who works for PA and the man who works in [BB] for a smaller business? Now you could argue that they are more experienced because of PA and that's what the consultants would argue (con 4).

In our discussion of the above client we have seen how reference to the consultants' background and reputation, of successful assignments, has helped legitimise the consultants' services, at least at a conceptual level. We have argued that there is a strong element of performance action in this process where the use of rhetoric becomes often an inevitable part of selling the service. The questions remain for how accurately representative such experiences are made to the clients? How much do the consultants market the positive traits of their achievements and hide their failure? Even though we have been cautious to qualify the degree to which consultants use rhetoric, this theme comes to be exemplified more strongly in the below statements. Even though we have touched partly on the rhetoric and reality dimension in the client part of our discussion, we come to briefly look how consultants often acknowledge their own manipulative role in trying to persuade clients to buy their service. Even though consultants may make reference to the previous successful client engagements, at the same time they can interpret events in a way that favours their interests of the client.

I think it's by example actually. By reference back to somewhere else that's succeeded is the most successful way of doing it. Your client is like this other set of clients. They didn't know that because they've never been exposed to anybody else, but, we can simply bring some examples in and say that 'they did it this way, and, this is what happened. The result was good.' Your

choice could be to go down that road as well, and the way we suggest you go there, is like this'. Perhaps the carrot and stick approach is 'if you don't do this', this is what happened to these people. Look at Enron. Look at Microsoft. Look at Enron. They did it all wrong. (con.13).

*Interviewer: They also have to be knowledgeable for how to do that as well?*

You have to have sales techniques. But the makeup of the people that I know who are good at it, 'omni-capable' - they could actually probably do anything. Maybe they perhaps couldn't mend a car or something but even some of them will know how it works. They'll know about aerodynamics and they can talk to you about that. All those sort of things which are way outside their field and they will have a good conversation. If they don't know...I had a fascinating conversation with somebody about hydrographical surveys with somebody on an airplane and it was absolutely fascinating and I found I actually did know quite a lot about it but I didn't, but I know an awful lot about it now. But we had about a six hour conversation on this plane back from America. And not everybody is a consultant of course. Not everybody is a consultant, and, a lot don't make it (con.13).

While the above consultant makes reference to building his 'case' to the client, the degree of severity for what might happen if the client does not buy the service becomes an issue that is dependent in the making of the consultant's argumentation. At the same time, there is clear reference to the fact that persuading clients is part of the sales process. This issue is expressed by a different consultant who argues how his colleagues often want to differentiate their managerial models and techniques in order to get the buy-in from the client.

But what I've seen happen, or, what I've been told by clients has happened is that they get one of the big guys from Deloitte for example and say: "come and talk to us, we think we have a problem in Knowledge Management, come and talk to us about it". So Deloitte, in a sense like Deborah and I do, If they're clever they'll get clients to talk about themselves for as long as they're prepared to do it, because, that's your fact gathering area and typically they will then suck their teeth and look very stern and say: "well, this is a really big problem you've got here!, of course we can help you because we've done something very similar, not entirely similar", because they don't like to say they're doing the same thing again and again, or, learning on other peoples' experience and cashing bank accounts (Con. 16).

Authors that have argued for the power relationship consultants want to create by targeting the client's areas of uncertainty have interpreted the performance character of the consultants' conversations as governed by making of impressions (Clark, 1995; Kieser, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Alvesson, 1993; Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997a; Clark and Fincham, 2002). Authors that have supported the critical perspective are largely drawing their views from case examples where the consultants' manipulation of the clients' understanding aims at only fulfilling the consultants' business interests. Such arguments are well grounded in spectacular and widely acknowledged examples where consulting

intervention led to disastrous results (see O'Shea and Madigan, 1997; Pinault, 2001; Kihn, 2006; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1998; Craig, 2005).

In this context, the representation of previous case examples might be used in order to highlight the consultants' managerial competences. At the same time, such competences are also spiced up with making claims that might not be feasible to implement or which do not represent accurately why events took place in the way that they did. At the same time, other authors tend to interpret the consultants' activities in a more positivistic way arguing for the genuine added-value of and moreover for the significance of independence/objectivity brought by an outside party (see Block, 1999, 2003; Greiner and Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 1976; Czerniawska, 2002; Czerniawska and May, 2004; Margerison, 2001; Sadler, 1998). We do not want to underestimate the technical features of the consultants' intervention which may have a very positive outcome to the client firm. However, we want to underline that in the consultants' making of conversations, the creation of a client understanding can be seen as partly dependent on the consultants' way of positioning their contribution. We argue how views that may support the different and often conflicting approaches, emerge from a broader discourse of *narratives*. In them, authors (Czerniawsk and May, 2004; Kihn, 2006) come to interpret consultant-client stories of success or failure providing their own critique based on their experience as well as assumptions. Our thesis is that the consultants' manipulation of clients' perception/understanding can become a reality, but, is not necessarily an inherent extension of consulting practices. In this context, we want to argue how the consultant-client relationship exists in a state of *tension* where corporate-organisational interests co-exist and/or are often submerged with personal and political interests. Furthermore we think that the management of such interests is a dynamic and not static process. It depends on the intentions between actors as they are subject to potential challenge and criticism, and, which may contribute to the success or failure of a project. In an effort to illustrate the premises of the above thesis we turn to the discussion of our empirical data.

## **6.5 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine how cognitive legitimation takes place in the consultant-client relationship. We have focused on three different areas that represent the

key arenas where competing claims of knowledge representation are made, and, which the client party is asked to accept, challenge, or/and reject. In the first part of our analysis, we have focused on the making of consulting conversations where the grounds of competing claims is supported by those cognitive schemata that are believed to represent the reality of the client's environment. Here, consultants endeavour to legitimise their knowledge on basis of the factual validity of their claims, as they are supported from industry practices, or the competitors' behaviour. The effectiveness of the consultants' competing claims is not dependent on the content of the frameworks that they communicate, but, on the clients' position of knowledge, understanding, and needs. Cognitive legitimation, at this level, occurs because of the alignment between the consultants' alleviation of propositions to the clients' situated needs. The second arena of cognitive legitimation examined the consultants' process of redefining the clients' needs, and, in rectifying initially made assumptions. In this section, we discussed how the making of perceptions is a critical aspect of cognitive legitimation because expectations and roles are shaped at this stage. As a result, consultants may endeavour to legitimise their service on the grounds of positioning the focus on what comes to be regarded as the 'right' organisational area for the client.

Finally, we discussed for how consultants legitimise their advice by making use of their background work and reputation built upon from testimonials by working with similar clients, and, by producing successful results. Here, we argued how legitimation takes place away from the client's particular managerial context, and, by trusting that the successful previous encounters, in some way, represent the current dynamics and challenges. What characterises the dynamics of the justification process is the client's lack of immediately testifying the consultants' claims. Whereas in client-centred practices, the locus of justification is found in the distribution of methods and techniques that are relevant to the client's particular circumstances, here the consultants place emphasis rather on the *performance* aspect of their work. That is, in demonstrating their credibility of brand, quality of professional practices and evidence recorded satisfaction from clients that have hired them. The fact that the clients are not in a position to immediately test the credibility of the consultants' making of such knowledge claims, places them in a position of becoming audience whose aftermath critiques/reactions (of

the consultants' performance) are important, but, not immediately obvious. We underline how our discussion of the consultants' non-client practices needs to be seen as complementary to the overall discussion of justification, and, from which the client-centred practices as well as the following chapter, are part of.

Throughout our discussion of the above key areas, we have argued how the consultants' making of proposition takes the form of argumentation and which is intertwined within the 'rhetoric' and 'reality' features of their knowledge representations. We have argued for the 'reality' dimension as constituting those particular organisational practices, procedures and changes, to which the client needs to incorporate into the firm's structure. As a result, legitimation takes place by form of institutionalisation, but, which is crafted at a conceptual level. On a similar tone, we have argued for the 'rhetoric' dimension as constituting the reiteration of evaluative claims, and, which can be conclusive for the success or failure of particular strategies, without having empirical support or evidence to justify such arguments. Hence, consultants often endeavour to maintain the credibility of their knowledge-claims by projecting points of view to which they do not have knowledge about the outcomes that they claim to know.



## Chapter 7: Aspects of Pragmatic Legitimation

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter turns to pragmatic legitimation (Suchman, 1995) which emphasises how conformity and congruence occur in the way members of an organisation seek to fulfil their immediate interests against their situated expectations or anticipated outcomes. The group of such members is understood to represent organisational different actors and shareholders who have a vested interest in the firm's long or short term profits (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). In the consultant-client relationship pragmatic legitimation takes place in the context of the interpersonal interaction and the fulfilment of business interests that each party holds towards each other. Clients have vested interests in that the consultants will deliver a service that fulfils their particular organisational needs. Consultants have vested interests in delivering a service that will be of satisfaction to the firm and which can help sustain their future clientele relationship. The premise of pragmatic legitimation take place not only in what the consultants may propose at a conceptual level, but how they demonstrate that their intervention will have a 'visible' impact on the clients' organisational state of affairs. Clients are not seeking to accept a consulting proposition on the possible theoretical soundness where it is aligned with an ideology, values and beliefs. Pragmatic legitimation occurs on the grounds on which the consultants' work is able to meet their immediate needs and interests of the client.

This chapter is divided into the following two sections: The first section examines how consultants demonstrate their pragmatic legitimacy by means of helping create solutions with which clients approach a particular challenge. Consultants engage into a socially constructing process of resolving the clients' issues and provide recommendations which are perceived as feasible and executable. We argue how this is a crafting process that often takes place in a fluid and unstructured way. Consultants do not necessarily project a management model/technique the client is asked to buy into. The consultants' output can help provide stability and a decision-making platform that is ingrained in the client's aspirations, as well as, expectations of the desired outcomes. In this process consultants may adopt already used ideas from previous assignments, but the solutions produced come to be embedded in a way that changes are made in the client's

organisational structure and policies. The consultants' pragmatic legitimation is achieved by the immediate *perceived* results achieved from such changes and which are in alignment with the client's interests.

The second section discusses the exemplification of pragmatic legitimacy in the context of the consultants' operational competencies. Such competencies concern activities like, a) the swift gathering and processing of information, b) the producing of reports to meeting set deadlines, and d) overcoming internal stagnation through the possible lack of motivation by the internal employees. Consultants manage to legitimise their service to clients on the grounds that they can produce results which require commitment and resources. Such operational competences can already exist in the client but are not necessarily exercised to achieving their objectives. The consultants' outputs for producing pragmatic legitimation are accomplished through various managerial practices that are not necessarily unique to the consultant. Consultants can be seen to provide a complementary managerial role to the client through forms of organising and execution that demand the designation of timeline and the setting of specific objectives. Our argument is that the consultants' ability to meet the clients' immediate operational interests helps create pragmatic legitimacy. Such legitimacy needs to be viewed as complementary to the cognitive, moral and discursive dimensions, and not as isolated and responsible for the consultants' overarching achieved legitimation.

## **7.2 Pragmatic Legitimacy through the Providence of Solutions**

One of the means by which consultants achieve pragmatic legitimation is with providing solutions that can meet the demands of the specified client members' needs. Such pragmatic solutions can take the form of the design of a set of activities that can meet a designated set of objectives (Czerniawska, 2004, 2002). Solutions can take the form of providing technical answers generated through the providence of factual information. Solutions can take the form of well defined frameworks in which initially neglected alternatives or unspecified causes of confusion are put into perspective. What differentiates the above type of legitimation is the perceived *immediacy* with which ideas and solutions can make a direct impact on the client's state of affairs. The proximity and adaptation of the proposed solutions are not only entertained because of the theoretical

soundness of the frameworks from which they are drawn. Legitimation occurs because the proposed conceptual frameworks or courses of action come to be perceived as feasible and executable.

An important parameter to pragmatic legitimation concerns the process of embeddedness with which new ideas become part of the client organisation (Granovetter, 1985). Consultants do not simply try to sustain their competing claims by making references to qualities of validity and credibility about the content of their ideas. There is a rather distinct shift of engaging with the client and investing effort to making the content of the ideas relevant and personalised *within* the meaning-making relations of the client. As a result, qualities of validity and credibility come to be perceived because they are well tailored in the beliefs, ideology, and expectations of the specific actors. Such embeddedness is not limited to the conceptual understanding of what the ideas represent as it is often argued in the literature (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). But, as Zbaracki (1998) argues, there can be changes in the organisational structure and procedures of the client which creates locus of discourse that enables the achieved perceived value of the service provided.

We identify two broad patterns of pragmatic legitimacy from the data. The first one places emphasis on the inquisitive stages from which solutions emerge. Consultants come to produce their solutions by acting on a similar managerial role to the client, and in trying to define solutions out of the presented problems. Methodologies and suggestions emerge out of the consultant's direct dealing with the client's state of affairs, by means of evaluating alternative options and by socially constructing propositions that are perceived as feasible.

The exercise of pragmatic legitimation has been differently argued from within the functional and critical perspectives. The functional perspective argues how the consultants' competence to producing solutions evidently indicates the added-value that clients gain from this business service. As a result, the consulting managerial frameworks and tools are not only used to sell yet another idea but genuinely help the client (Maister et al., 2000; Curnow and Reuvid, 2003). At the same time, the critical perspective has argued that the attached credibility on the consultants' solutions is not necessarily addressing the real needs of the client. The consultants endeavour to generate managerial

frameworks, so that they can reduce the existing uncertainty in the client, yet without having knowledge of whether the suggested solution will have the anticipated outcome (Ernst and Kieser, 2002a; Kieser, 2002b). The crafting of solution becomes a rhetorical exercise (Fincham, 1999). Authors argue how the credibility of consultants is in some ways dependent on the actors' performance demonstration of that perceived value (Legge, 2002; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002).

### *7.2.1 Clients and the crafting of solutions*

One of the key themes that characterises the crafting of consulting solutions concerns the nature of engagement from which consultants respond to the clients' needs (Werr et. al., 1997). One of the key activities we identify, is the simple but vigorous methodological inquisitive stages under which consultants seek to come to grips with the problem, in a similar way to that of the client. There is a clear process of socially constructing their ideas by identifying parameters, providing evaluations, and creating 'points of view' from which the clients' issues can be tackled. As Weick (1976, 1995) has argued this is a social constructing process of sense-making and which is constructed by information gathering and analysis. Consultants create benchmarks against competitors' practices and provide recommendations that the client is asked to implement. Such process is also heavily characterised by the intention to contextualise the problem and take decisions in which actors are bound to act upon (Weick, 1995).

We illustrate the above theme through the below comment from a client who is referring to a strategic project for restructuring his corporation. The client discusses his experiences after the initial stage of discussions with the consultants. The immediate solution consultants helped provide was an overarching plan for action, in which detailed activities were designed under set deadlines. Even though both consultants and clients had become aware of the socio-economic changes in the industry and the need for action, the consultants provided a 'path-road' strategy.

They helped us formulate that strategy, because until we'd had the discussions with them, and, analysed the rate of growth in, say the freight market, we hadn't actually nailed our colours to the mast in terms of saying, freight is growing, that's what we need to do, we need to carry much more freight, we have to capture our share of the growing freight market, tourist day trips are in decline, so, stop chasing tourist day trips, change the on board offer as a result, make it much more streamlined, make it

much more professional, offer a retail range which appeals to people going on longer holidays not day trips, etc, so that one thing led to another (cl.13)

In delivering the above service the consultants used their already accumulated experience of the market and from similar projects. The more specific managerial methods were not developed from scratch. However, there is a clear nuance of organisational *embeddness* for how the situated ideas had to be translated in the client (Cohen et. al., 1969; Granovetter, 1985). The client recognised how this was a turning point in the overall project. It helped bring the necessary progress from which the consultants' work was being made legitimate. The meaning of practicality, pragmatism or application, echoed in the above quotation also reverberates in the below excerpt.

They did tend to understand our needs, they did seem to understand the industry, and they did seem keen to give a practical demonstration, 'so at the end of the day this is what you need to do, these are the steps to take' (cl.13).

A similar idea to the above is also expressed from a different client in a similar strategy related project but on a smaller scale. The interviewee is the chief executive of a large corporation and he refers to the decision-making-stages of when the consultants made their propositions. The project heavily involved Business Process Reengineering (BPR) initiatives. The client places emphasis on the qualities of the consultants' suggestions. How well consultants had grappled with all the different project-related issues would have been critical to the project's success or failure. The client refers to the consultants in presenting their course of work as 'feasible', because of the detailed evaluations over its content, timeline and alignment with the firm's culture. Even though the consultants' argumentation takes place at cognitive level the consultants' offering of specific operational features triggered a *perceived* immediate solution to the challenges.

Firstly, why would we choose to go a particular route; it would be based on the clarity and structure of the proposal, so 'does it seem to be appropriate? Does it look as if it has a well constructed case? Does it have the right timeline? Does it have the right measurements of performance? Does it have the correctly defined success criteria?' and so on?...What [the consultants] were able to do was help us construct the technical solution to ensure that we realised the tax and the NI (National Insurance) benefits, the tax for us and the NI for the individual and just got that in place as something that technically resolved the ambition that we had. (cl. 19).

To what extent the consultants delivered against each of the above various objectives is not fully discussed. We don't know in detail how much the consultants achieved to satisfy the client and his senior members' ambitions. Furthermore, we do not want to imply that the consultants' pragmatically legitimised their service because the project became a success, or because the consultants had known that their propositions would deliver against the desired outcomes. Certainly, the client did not know if the various objectives would be met. There is a strong element of uncertainty for what is the best way to overcome the various challenges. Our argument is that the consultants project solutions that seem to be satisfactory against the immediate interests of their members, and this is how they legitimise their services. The clients' immediate interests can vary between tangible benefits (e.g. profit) to intangible returns (e.g. recognition or power of decision making). Nevertheless, the consultants' 'solutions' are supported with specific action plans, timelines and comprehensive evaluations, which managed to win the client's buy in.

We turn to another consulting assignment and the experience of a client in need of strengthening his leadership skills in the business. There are two dimensions to the below discussion. The first one has to do with the consultants' intervention in supporting the particular client's personal leadership weaknesses. The second has to do with testing the idea of whether the identified leadership qualities could be transferred in the rest of the organisation, which represents an educational institution. The client is keen on the idea of incorporating such leadership qualities to his institutions. His staff could improve their leadership skills in dealing with the students and also improve their performance in the classroom. The dimension of pragmatic legitimacy is expressed in the personalisation process of the consultants' advice to the culture and personality of the individual and his institution. At one level, the client is satisfied with the overall performance of the consultants and their ideas about leadership. However, he is interested in the application of these ideas to his own setting. The exemplification of pragmatic legitimation began with a methodological framework where consultants devised a set of questionnaires for the employees. Through this survey, the consultants identified the employees' unexpressed but personally hidden opinions about the organisation and him. From this, the consultants went to propose a set of recommendations that could help improve his

leadership qualities. It is acknowledged by the client that the knowledgebase about leadership, the consultants presented, were general principles found in educational or management resources. However, the consultants' efforts to *contextualising* what these principles meant for the client, proved to be the most useful aspect of the work and which the client found most value in.

No, actually the leadership programme that they did was a combination of group activities by individual coaching and mentoring, and it was at the individual level that it was very, very effective, and the kinds of activities that they were doing were capable of being delivered in a group without diminishing the impact of what they were doing. But it was a very personal programme, it was essential an individual coaching and mentoring programme, but we happened to be all together as a group. There was only about eight or nine in the group, and it was very specific to each of us, and it worked, for example, leadership styles, there was a personal assessment of my leadership style, now before I could understand what my leadership style was, I needed to understand a lot more about leadership styles. So there was a group discussion about leadership, leadership styles, different styles of leadership, what they mean, where they're effective and so on, so once you understood that it was followed up by a personal one to one interview about my specific leadership style which had come from a direct assessment of what I was doing. So it moved from general to very specific, and it was an appropriate way to do it, without the general it would have lost its impact. It was very skilful, it was a very, very well done programme, one of the best consultancy events I've ever been to actually (cl.27).

There are two points that we want to argue for here: The first has to do with the methodological framework in which the consultants decided to assess the client's leadership style and provide their recommendations. The 'solution' consultants produced was a logical-rational methodological approach following a clear segmentation of information gathering and analysis. There is a process of shaping the client's understanding about his situation that needs to be noticed here. As a result, the consultants' value of service and knowledge is being appreciated against the client's limited knowledge about leadership styles<sup>18</sup>. However, such action is very much relevant

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<sup>18</sup> They helped me to understand how just as managements got many dimensions and they're all important. Leaderships got many dimensions and they're all important. What [the consultants'] research had shown was that people's profiles as leaders you can profile your leadership style. You've got one, I've got one. It's based on how you are now, you may have deliberately constructed it or it may be a deep seated natural position that you adopt and unless you consciously do something isn't likely to change. So they allowed me to understand what it was and what my personal profile was. I could explain partly why my profile was like it was at the time. I was a brand new Principal coming into a brand new organisation with a whole series of problems that needed to be dealt with, fast. And I'd adopted a particular style, I wasn't aware of this at the time, but when I thought about it and reflected through the process that they took me through that's the conclusion that I came to

to the client's needs, and by no means, the consultants seemed to try and impose an outside managerial model.

So all of the conversations that they were having with me around leadership styles and emotional intelligence were based on this, they could say to me 'this is what the climate looks like at our institution now. This is what your staff have said, your leadership style and your emotional intelligence has helped to create. So, that again for me was quite a useful way of baseline because it was saying right that's where we are now (cl.27).

What the consultants first find about the client's employees and then present back to him, becomes the basis of their argument for what needs to change and how. The client repetitively emphasised how the consultants' communication of advice did not take place in an instructive way with him being a 'passive' recipient. Even though the data collection methods, consultants used, might have been drawn from previous clients the consultants seemed keen enough to operate in a more fluid and unstructured way from simply 'selling' their service. The theme we want to underline is *how* the consultants' way of action in the client becomes accepted or conditioned by the client. The second point we want to argue concerns the personalisation of the consultants' advice in the client. Pragmatic legitimacy occurs because the qualities of the consultants' knowledge are well ingrained within the knowledge-gaps of the client. Such *embeddedness* (Granovetter, 1985) of advice and information is critical for our understanding of pragmatic legitimation, as the impression created is the fact that the clients' interests are being fulfilled. The second dimension of the client's experience concerns the consultants' service in relation to the organisation, rather than to an individual. The client was keen for the consultant to translate their knowledge, about leadership, to the teaching staff. As the following excerpt indicates the client did not know whether this could become possible or not. The consultants dealt with the above issue by providing a series of training and workshops to the teaching staff making them aware about the particular qualities of leadership and their application in the classroom.

We were experiencing a problem in classrooms around motivating and engaging with young people, well adults and young people, and what we wanted to test was, could the same principals that applied in management be applied to the activity of teaching. Are teachers managers of students? And do those skills that apply in management context, you know in the business context, translate into the classroom? And that was the hypothesis that we were testing, and, [the consultants] worked with us through a funded project to validate that, that was the case... It's becoming a very tried and tested approach, but at the time for



us, we were working on the possibilities, we knew it worked in management, there was a lot of evidence to show that it worked in the private sector, the issue was: could it transfer and make the improvements in the way that our teachers underwent their duties as a teacher and a manager of student learning? (cl. 27).

Consultants manage to produce pragmatic legitimation because they demonstrate that they can fulfil the clients' immediate organisational interests. The consultants' work of contextualising their meaning in the client, helps create some form of embeddedness that can be further translated to creating new/different organisational structures, policies and procedures. The solutions consultants produce can vary between the degrees of their 'closeness' of interaction with the client. By 'closeness' we mean the degree of the client's involvement in the consultants' solution making process.

In contrast to the above example we also find the case of where clients are less interested in the operational stages through which the consultants came up with the solutions. They are rather interested in the outcome of the advice, and how *feasible* it is for them to exercise its content. This is illustrated from the statement of the below client:

Yes. His [consulting] role was: having got that data he then, if you like, collected it in various strands that ran through the thing, and was able to sort of present quite a succeed document that said look, 'you know, these are all the peripheral things here, you can sort those out very easily, these are some of the major issues that underlie the things, need a lot more thought and effort and so on'. On the easy stuff we just put a team of people together and said, just do it, on the more difficult stuff he would facilitate meetings of that board, for example, or senior directors around the operations, to come up with solutions. So, for example, on the management of the fleet, we'd ended up selecting our best operators, we picked three of them, and he worked with those people to get a result, or a possible solution (cl. 13).

*Interviewer: Solution to what?*

To an issue, whatever it was – cycling the fleet<sup>19</sup>, which was a big issue to us. We got our best operators together, he worked with them, came up with a possible solution to simplify that, we then, he then helped us take that round the company to the key players. He also worked with the board on issues to facilitate discussion or to get us to address particular issues. We couldn't have done it without the guy, that's for sure.

A similar point to the above is made in the following statement but more emphasis is given on the external tools and techniques the consultants brought to the business.

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<sup>19</sup> By referring to the 'cycling the fleet' the interviewee refers to the turn around of the vehicles that would have been transported between the different centres and which we would have to be redistributed to the various centres again.

Yes, with our involvement, at least for the first year, [consultants] designed most of them, brought in the best practice from industry to us, tools and techniques they are using, good bits of industry (cl. 22).

As both of the above quotes illustrate consultants are able to legitimise their service because of the specific business recommendations they generate. These are based on specific processes of analysis where consultants manipulate existing information residing in the client. Also, they are based on the providence of specific methodological tools that the client does not have internally. The achieved managerial 'path-road' becomes an instrumental asset for the client's experienced uncertainty. The meaning of the advice, consultants communicate becomes relevant for the client's situation. The client's new competency to introduce changes in his/her working practices, as a result of the consultants' aftermath interventions, has pragmatic dimensions in the sense that it has fulfilled the clients' immediate interests.

### *7.2.2 Consultants and the crafting of solutions*

Consultants argue that the value of their service to clients is dependent on producing outcomes that meet the individuals' organisational needs. On a similar tone to our above discussion consultants place emphasis on their methodological input and independence that helps create direction, structure, and order. This can be seen from the following statement:

It's very difficult for people to go round the edge if they don't know where the edge is and who's on it, but, working with us, they can fire a question at us and we can actually find out what they really mean, and then, we can point them at one or two other people who've done similar work. Now that's incredibly high value add. (con. 16).

In examining how consultants pursue their approach to develop such solutions however we are presented with two distinct and also overlapping images that we discuss in turn. The first has to do with when consultants place emphasis on the fluidity with which they produce their advice, and which does not follow certain business models that are simply tailored to the client situation. Consultants argue that the fulfilment of the clients' needs is dependent on satisfying the needs of the principal organisational actors. The consultants' course of service is thought to be a lot more defragmented than it is

often associated with in the literature. Consultants are primarily keen on identifying solutions that meet business needs by concentrating on the narrow context of the client's experience and environment. According to this view consultants manage to sustain their satisfaction in the client through forms of service that are innovative, adaptable, agile, and manages to fulfil the specified need. At the same time, we are also presented with a complementary image to the above where consultants acknowledge their use of business models and packages as they are often defined by the values and strategy of the parent firm. Consultants acknowledge that in their experience of serving clients they have acted as instruments to channelling ideas that were exercised in previous projects. Consultants are keen to point out how business model packages fulfil an important marketing role in that they specify the features of their service, and create a sense of tangibility in contrast to the vague nature of the client's problems. Consultants argue how the adoption of such models helps contextualise the client's needs at an operational level, with producing tangible results. Even though consultants acknowledge the superficial attributes that are often attached to the consultants' models and techniques to market their practices, they also acknowledge the functionality that they provide in terms of helping create direction and structure. Moreover, consultants acknowledge the exercise of rhetoric and manipulation to clients. Consultants argue how their own practices have been guided by the creation of popular management fads that have influenced how they think of their role as problem-solvers. This issue is in alignment with the argument proposed by the critical approach in the literature we discussed in the previous chapters. It is important to qualify how consultants identify the exercise of such manipulation as being dependent on the initiatives of the individuals and the firm, and they are not inherent extensions of consulting practices themselves. Consulting activities should not be characterised for their features as representing a homogenous body of practices and which are equally represented between individuals. Consultants operate very differently between them regardless of carrying the same title. By showing the differences between the consultants' practices and the different channels with which they aim to produce pragmatic legitimation, we want to highlight the distinct differences between the consultants' practices. Also, how the literature has mainly concentrated on studying the consultant-client relationship as representing a homogenous body of practices.

### 7.2.3 *The Consultants' fluid character of advice development*

How consultants produce solutions is often enabled by the fact that they are not restricted by specific managerial models, but they are rather keen to detect the behavioural dynamics of the client organisation and to respond to them in a way that seems satisfactory to the key members. We come to illustrate the above idea through the case of the following consultant who argues that his value is not in producing codified knowledge brought from the outside. But, it is rather creating a detectable impact by bringing order and structure from working with the client. Such clarity is not to be interpreted as superficial or one that exists at a cognitive level, but that has dimensions that extend to the actors' decision making arena. As a result, the consultant's generated clarity helps produce a way of making sense of an issue that assists clients to make decisions.

What I bring to it [client assignment] I think is clarity. I can help with enormous clarity about linking the big strategic objective, with the specific set of actions, for a specific team. But it definitely takes a different sort of skill, and, that's why you have thousands of brilliant business strategies out there and relatively little implementation. Almost all businesses for example believe they can grow faster than the background market can and very, very, few of them actually do...For me consulting is more about asking questions than it is about telling answers. It's very much my approach that I ask lots and lots of questions and ultimately I hope that puts up the mirror to my client and they can see where their shortcomings are or whatever, and, figure out their own answers. I see adding value from me, is not telling people things, its helping my clients figure out what they already know. (Con.17).

According to this consultant, pragmatic legitimation occurs at an action level, and where initiatives are clearly linked to implementable outcomes. By questioning the possible causes of the client's incompetence, the consultant helps to produce reflexivity which may influence the way initial assumptions were made. The consultants is committed in helping link discussed ideas with the follow up of implementation so that tangible results can be produced. The consultant seeks to outline the difference that he makes to the client, and which is difficult to put into a definable context. We see this from the below statement from the same interviewee:

So I would be in a position where, because of the process that I have introduced the client has come up with some sort of perspective on the world and certain decisions about what they're going to do. It is then my challenge to help them actually *do it*, which is very different from deciding actually to do it. And to help them figure out what the work schemes are, who's going

to take on what, who's going to do what by when, and so on and so on and so on. There, yes I will push them a bit, but I'd be pushing them because I'm reminding them of what they already agreed they want to achieve. (Con. 17).

In an interview with a different consultant and whose experience in the industry has varied from working for large corporations to smaller firms, the consultant talks about the need to identify the causes that often prevent actors from actualising on the decisions taken. Throughout the interview the consultants argue for meeting the client's subjective needs by placing emphasis on his relationship with the members, and before communicating the content of his advice. The consultant believes how the production of a set of advice needs to be somehow embodied in the client's culture and decision making. This is not by recognising the need by someone to change his/her behaviour, but also having the commitment to move to action. By spending time in understanding the client, the consultant believes that he sets the ground for enabling the new incoming advice to become effective in the organisation. The issue we want to highlight is the consultant's recognition of a lack of structure for how this is achieved. The consultant recognises that he might not have the answers but is willing to work with the client in a collaborative relationship (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Such findings question the assumption that consulting approaches tend to 'fit' the clients' diverse needs under the same umbrella. The consultant's reference to 'former' and 'latter' practices refers to his earlier experience and approach to dealing with clients in selling a well predefined business package.

I think that a lot of it depends on empathy, ability to understand how they perceive the problem, what's really concerning them, helping them to see other dimensions of the problem that they might not otherwise see, particularly other dimensions that relate to the way their colleagues see the problem because again if I'm fixed on my view of the elephant and I think I'm right and your fixed on your view and you've got it's leg and I've got it's tusk, unless we both understand we've both only got pieces of the picture, and, I think again for consultants it can be particularly hard to admit 'I don't have the answer but what I can do is I can help you look at the problem more deeply in a way that means you're more likely to get the solution that works for you' (con. 9).

And I think that the more experienced I've become the more I feel the latter is valid, is more valid as a consulting intervention than the former, because, what I think for the type of work that I do, which involves people changing the way they look at things, the way they think, the way they interact, for that to happen in an organisation doesn't happen because some expert comes along and tells you it should any more than someone who needs to lose weight loses weight because a dietician tells them they need to lose weight or a doctor tells them that they're going to have problems with their heart later on. It happens because they go through realisation for themselves and I don't know of any way of 'mechanistically' forcing somebody to go through a realisation for themselves. (con. 9)

On a similar line of thought to the above argument, the following consultant makes a similar statement to the nature of his intervention to clients. In particular, how consulting models that are often entered from the outside, are 'foreign' to the client's internal dynamics, with the result of not becoming non-actionable.

Fundamentally value for a client, as an organisation, -separate from the conversation around individual commissioning executives – the value for the client as an organisation occurs when action occurs. And action in an organisation occurs, shifts, changes, when the mental model of that organisation runs to changes. Many consultants, I think, try to change that mental model by sort of sticking a bit of their own mental model in there. Either in the form of you know, like a point recommendation – 'buy the business, don't buy the business - build the plant/don't build the plant'. Or, a more comprehensive, all-encompassing set of, you know, kind of mental DNA. What we do, is try and shift that mental model in a different way... I don't want to make it sound like we never bring new content to a client. But if you look at the balance, it's overwhelmingly helping them look at and articulate their mental models (con. 20).

The consultants' endeavour to make a difference to the clients' situation is not with bringing something that is radically different from the client. The consultant's emphasis is placed on the client's internally emerging qualities that enable to produce the desired difference. How consultants manage to achieve the above described clarity in detail, is not made transparent from the interviews. However, the emphasis is placed on the flux nature of working with the client, and in maintaining a continuing awareness for what is that needs to be done and how. This approach to pragmatic legitimation, brings into the fore a subjective and almost phenomenological sense-making mentality by the consultant. The clients' satisfaction, from the consultants' work, is ingrained within the various organisational dynamics which are difficult to isolate in a causal manner. For example, how a client may feel the difficulty to introduce changes in the employees out of fear of resistance, and how the consultant might help provide a way of thinking to responding to this need by eliminating the perceived fear or by challenging the client's assumptions, is an issue situated in the actors' subjective understanding and interpretation of the situation. Even though we cannot provide a definite explanation for how the consultant may produce the above accounts of clarity, we nevertheless seek to appreciate the complexities of the organisational environment in which the consultant seeks to make his contribution.

#### *7.2.4 The use of business consulting packages*

A complementary dimension to the creation of solutions, by consultants, has to do with the distribution of ready business models. Management consulting packages help define the clients' needs against the consultants' solutions. From the critical perspective the distribution of such commodified knowledge has received criticism for its superficiality and the making of promises that cannot be fulfilled in the client. The use of business models helps generate certainty and eliminate the experienced ambiguity. Kieser (2002a) argues that this is a mechanism for reducing anxiety and for creating the impression of self-control. He argues that the misleading sense of control continues to remain ambiguous despite the efforts for making it explicit.

Carter and Crowther (2000) argue for the marketability of consulting packages that aim at attracting clients that are subject to similar advertising procedures as other commodity products (Carter and Crowther, 2000). As a result, the implementation of business packages helps define the parameters and identity of the business relationship. Even though the above premise might well hold true, it needs to be noted how consultants are also concerned for how a purposeful pseudo-sense of control in the client will prove the opposite results for what is desired. Consultants might be able to sell an assignment but loose credibility in the long term. Hence, consultants feel that the outcomes produced in the client will eventually determine the clients' perceived quality of their work. As a result, consultants realise the crude limitations of such packages, and avoid being dependent on them as the only channel of their service. This can be illustrated from the experience of the following consultants.

And I think almost, you've got that kind of paradox of requiring a package tool to get in, but if you're careful the package tool ending up being the thing that causes you not to be successful because it prevents you doing your job properly, which is building that relationship and doing firm good diagnosis and using appropriate tools, not pre-designed, or pre-thought up ones which you have, kind of, already worked out what you're going to do before you actually know what the situation is. (con.31)

That's the problem with packages, that's the dilemma, that's the contradiction. The contradiction is, on the one hand, clients want packages because they want to know what they're buying, on the other hand no one package can ever fit each organisation's, the politics and the culture. And that's why, to me, the job of the consultant is to get in the middle of those two contradictions, and I've often seen clients who say we want cutting edge knowledge here, and, actually they can't use cutting edge knowledge, so there's no point providing them because if you do, they say, 'great advice, couldn't implement it, therefore we've not got a good service'. That's I think why, what my view is that the art of selling consultancy is provide enough of a

package to give them the security of what they're getting, but without it being so firm that you can't change it to meet the culture and the politics of the organisation that you're working with. (con.31)

yes it gives me sales, and they know you're after sales, but no, I'm after a good solution because that gives me better credibility in the market in the long run, and in a market that's changing, because I've seen it from when I used to employ the big five, through, the markets changing, as I say, people are becoming much more demanding of the management consultant. (con.3)

### *7.2.5 Summary*

Our discussion of pragmatic legitimacy has been based in the decision making processes by which consultants work with clients in order to produce frameworks of thinking, as well as, addressing organisational issues. Our argument is that consultants produce pragmatic legitimacy in the client by demonstrating that their ideas or knowledge has direct and immediate relevance to the experienced business issue. Consultants are able to make their services relevant to the client by moving away from the selling of predefined ideas and business packages. Consultants are eager to show agility for accommodating the clients' issues and adjust their locus of service for address their needs. In this sense, consultants provide a similar managerial activity to that of the client, by grappling with the presented business/managerial problems. Consulting solutions take the form of sense-making that provide structure and direction. Pragmatic legitimacy does not necessarily take place through forms of expertise that are foreign to the client. They can be characterised as problem-solving activities that the client could undertake in a similar manner. However, we find how the internal politics, within the client organisation, often creates distinct challenges for making decisions against which the consultants' externality helps bypass. The selling of business packages is promoted by consultants to justify their service to clients. Clients often challenge the selling of a customised business idea that is not well tailored to their needs. At the same time, clients invest on buying customised solutions because of their attractive marketability or fashionability.

### **7.3 Pragmatic Legitimation through Operational Competences**

In the previous section we discussed how pragmatic legitimacy is performed on the grounds of the outcomes that the consultants produced for the clients, and which are perceived to fulfil their immediate interests. In this part of the chapter we move to discuss



how pragmatic legitimation is based on the operational resources and competencies that the consultants are believed to bring to the client. Operational qualities may relate to the speed with which activities are undertaken and the clear focus and commitment consultants show to achieving the clients' assigned objectives. From the client's experience, we find that prominent emphasis is given on the vigour, attention and energy, consultants bring to the client party. Also, the fact that consultants help bypass internal political barriers which may often have produced a sense of stagnation and rigidity between members. In this part of the chapter, we argue how pragmatic legitimation needs to be seen in the context of the operational resources and efficiency with which consultants conduct their interventions, rather than the successful degree of accomplishment with which business outcomes turn out to be<sup>20</sup>.

From the consultants' experiences, we find that prominent emphasis is given on the idea of the client's politicised environment. Consultants argue that the clients' perceived pragmatic legitimacy is mainly based on the grounds that they are external to the organisation. The consultants' 'neutral' political position and the fact that they are not part of the client's culture and history are argued that allows them to become efficient. This is a theme that is equally expressed in the moral dimension of legitimation and which we will look at the following chapter.

In this chapter, consultants argue that their externality gives them a distinct sense of responsibility that is accounted for their commitment to meet tight deadlines, as well as, bring resources that the client does not have. Pragmatic legitimation is not produced because consultants are external to the client firm. It is the assumed competencies that they possess with being instrumental in the unfolding of a research project that matters to clients. Value is believed to reside in specific operational outcomes that the client might be able to produce himself/herself, but does not do so because of reasons that are often realised but also less understood.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, consultants may be asked to undertake to produce a benchmarking analysis between the marketing activities of a client in its relationship with its competitors. Also, to produce a set of recommendations for how the client can improve its marketing strategies in order to strengthen its current marketing practices. The consultants' operational competencies to producing such an outcome can be appreciated by the client despite the fact that it may not be implemented.

### 7.3.1 Client Views

We turn to illustrate the above proposition by looking at the experience of a client and his use of consultants on a public-authority related project. The client makes detailed reference to the consultants' work in regards to the content of the advice. In asking about his working relationship with the consultants, reference is made to the interpersonal qualities and efficiency, the consultants demonstrated. The fact that they could meet tight deadlines and overcome the internal bureaucratic delays helped increase the pace of the project which was important for the client's interests. Furthermore, the consultants helped bring resources to the project in terms of people which were working simultaneously on the various parts and hence intensifying its completion.

The value that I got from the consultants it was a learning experience working with these people. I was very impressed at the efficiency by which they undertook certain projects. Things that would normally take the local authorities finance department a number of months was taking a number of days. So, they could channel their resources in, they could pull the resources in from anywhere, and, they hit very, very tight deadlines. I was very impressed with their professionalism and how they dealt with members at a very, very professional level. (cl.2).

The operational feature of efficiency is also characterised by a different client. This represents part of the extracted value from using management consultants:

*Interviewer: How would you characterise the value that you eventually got from the consultant? If you could sort of describe that?*

Objectivity, discipline, facilitation, those are the kind of things, and specific expertise, if it's an HR matter. Those are the kind of things I would expect to get out of it (cl. 26).

In an interview with a client from the private sector, emphasis is placed on the operational competences of the consultants and their experience from similar different projects. In the below statement the client argues for the consultants' management related activities in organising procedures and overseeing the desired progress within projects. There is a distinct emphasis for how consultants constitute a resource, not only in what they can bring to the organisation, but also because of their association with the parent firm that makes such resources available. In the following statement, it is interesting to note how the client associates the consulting practices with being instrumental. The client does not treat the consultants as being superior in their knowledgebase or in the quality of advice which allows them to be efficient. He rather places the consultants on a similar

organisational level with himself. The client recognises how consultants help bring the operational competencies that his organisation might be lacking.

There is another aspect of what they do in the sense that they are an auxiliary resource. So, for instance, I may not have the resources internally to do a specific task, say for instance we are going to create a database system, and they can very quickly put that into place because they have got the resources to do it so they can bring in people and that can happen very, very quickly, so they are acting in an auxiliary way as well. So in other words if you are trying to get something done within an organisation it is a lot easier to bring these people in specifically because they're spare resources to actually get things done (cl. 8).

In the following excerpt, the client clearly argues how consultants helped fulfil his immediate interests in a project. We argue how the exemplification of pragmatic legitimacy is clearly evident in the client's own satisfaction for what the consultants provided against his needs. Furthermore, it can be argued how it is not so much the order of the detailed operational activities the consultants undertook that matters for the client. It is rather the fact what they produced that which was needed at the particular time.

I've brought the consultant in: a) to do the compilation, b) to get everyone together in the same room c) to facilitate the debate d) to work with me and work out what's the agenda and how we are actually going to get these guys and these departments together is very important tasks.... I couldn't do that on my own, so, that's *sheer value*; and that's where I said you bring in people to augment the resources you haven't got in your organisation (cl.8)

Yes I do, I think they add value in terms of their input and stimulus, in terms of their strategic insight into a particular problem and how to tackle a problem. They add value in the sense that they can execute, implement certain things and produce certain things which you haven't, that you can't do internally because you haven't got the resources to do it. Ultimately, I suppose it's in the quality of the thinking and the detail that goes into the solution and the execution (cl.8).

At different points the client refers to his relationship with consultants as being on a similar level with his own members of staff. The distinct focus, drive and commitment to see projects through, is a competency that might exist within the client but is not necessarily actualised by the firm. This is probably because of the lack of motivation within employees, or the lack of support that other leaders in the organisation should have shown in their role to managing others. Nevertheless, the client argues how the consultants' operational efficiencies are not to be substituted with the belief that the consultants' solutions are simply acted upon in faith by the client. As a result, the client does not imply that the consultants' operational efficiency should be understood as the primary means by which the consultants legitimise all aspects of their service. For

example, and as the following quotation indicates, the client makes reference to how he needed to question the consultants' propositions after conducting their analysis on the data and without underestimating the importance of their efficiency.

And so that's happening all the time because the first iteration in terms of where we're saying 'well this is what the road map's going to look like, with the consultants' I'm saying it's *not* going to work for us because its going to be too complicated. I mean they've come up with something that is not feasible (cl. 8)

According to the client, the 'road-map' the consultants produced was not seen as feasible to execute and it needed to be changed. Consultants perform a managerial role in producing such pragmatic legitimacy for the client. What the consultants bring to the project could have been equally produced by the client. Authors in support of the functional perspective often propose the argument for how the consultants' operational efficiency can be seen as an indication of solution that the clients cannot produce themselves (Curnow and Reuvid, 2003). We want to argue that the consultants' operational efficiency does not necessarily indicate a higher managerial capacity or competence from that of the client.

Taking into account the stagnation of public government related projects, the following client goes to make specific reference to the political dimension that governs his relationship with the other members. The highly bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of the public sector contains a clear set of power relationships that the local officers can have difficulty challenging or expressing criticism against. The overlapping interpersonal interests and such political sensitivities however, often make it difficult for the member to make decisions without ensuring the support of the members. It is widely argued how such political organisational features are more evident in the public sector than in the private sector (Lane, 1993; Brooks and Bate, 1994; Stewart and Walsh, 1992; Waterhouse et. al., 2000; Brooks and Bate, 1994; Fisher, 1980). As a result, the often occurred delays within the operational processes of a public authority body can become problematic. Organisational actors have to be more aware not only about the fulfilment of their intentions, but also for the counter-impact that this might create by those colleagues that may be more or less supportive. The above political and interpersonal tension is very clearly captured from the following statement:

In some respects when I deal with members it's more of a subservient type of relationship. When they deal with members, 'this is what you've paid for, this is what you've asked for, and this is what you're going to get, whether you like to hear it or not, this is what we're going to tell you, those are the facts'. Now, I sometimes, have to soften things out and be a little bit more tactful and diplomatic when I'm dealing with members, they don't have to be. If a member raises a point that is totally invalid or inaccurate, they'll just say to the member, you know, 'I'm sorry but what you've just said is an absolute load of rubbish, and I'll tell you why'. Now I'm not in a position to do that, I've got to sometimes sit back and try and tactfully convince members that what they're proposing isn't the right way forward, I can't be as direct, it would cause difficulties, and that would have a negative impact on my sort of future progress within the department, because it can cause tension. So they brought that in (cl. 2).

From the above excerpt there is clear recognition for how decisions do not only have a temporary impact on the career of the public authority officers, but can also affect their future career. The fact that consultants are external to those internal political interests provides an important medium of breaking away from the fear of becoming explicit or avoiding the fear of offending other members. The consultants' intervention provides a clear input of managerial support that *affects* the decision making of the client. As a result, the ability to confront the organisational issues of the members, without being constrained by the political sensitivities, becomes an important area of interest which the consultants fulfil in the client. A similar statement to the above is expressed from a different client with high seniority from the private sector. The client makes specific reference to the operational competences of the consultant to overcome the internal barriers which the client members are experiencing. The below quote incorporates the organisational features with the interpersonal ones, and emphasises the importance of discipline, commitment and enthusiasm. The client clearly argues for the importance of organisational culture and also for the presence of stagnation in the members' felt 'urgency' or 'seriousness' with which it undertake responsibilities.

Yes. And that probably goes back to where I started from, you know, we've tended to use consultants either because they have a specific expertise in a discipline or they give us structure and focus and I think that's definitely what this was, and a methodology. You know sometimes these guys have a very good way of getting to the facts and assembling the information and cutting through some of the bullshit, you know. But I don't think, I've not yet found a consultant in 30 years that's come up with something revolutionary. (cl.26).

The client argues for how consultants bring a sense of structure and focus in the project which is also related to our earlier discussion of the providence of solutions. In the above case the client refers to the consultants' work on the HR side of the

organisation, and particularly in the screening and recruitment stages of new employees. Furthermore, mention is made about the creation of evaluative schemes between managers and their selection to more senior administrative positions. A similar view is also expressed from a different client below:

Because clearly if a management consultant thinks a business is going out of business he will tell them, whereas a financial director maybe would say 'oh no we are ok we will find a way out of it' (cl.12).

The interpersonal relationship between members of an organisation can be influential to the business decision making process, at an operational level. How challenges are tackled can often be dependent on the sensitivity by which interpersonal interests are also managed. The above excerpt alludes to the consultants' detachment of the client's environment and how this enables the consultant to project a firm intervention that can challenge already vested interests. The clients' fear of confronting their own business issues, out of fear of exposure for their own lack of contribution or committed mistakes, legitimises the consultants' intervention. The client's failure to produce outcomes is not a justification for the consultants' quality of intervention. The client values the consultants' contribution *because* it can bypass the interpersonal silo that often prevents people from challenging their own colleagues. Such internal stagnation does not help explain the consultants' successful or failed outcome. What the client appreciates is the possibility of having such a consulting intervention possible.

### 7.3.2 Consulting Views

Apart from the clients' experience on the subject, we now turn to examine the consultants' views. We argue how consultants believe they fulfil the clients' immediate needs through their operational effectiveness and competencies. However, we also note how consultants place emphasis on the internal politicised environment of the client. The consultants' operational efficiency is possible because of the fact that they are not part of the client's culture. This poses an interesting complementary view for how consultants perceive the reasons for their own efficiency. That is, whether they view it as being dependent on their strict rigorous organisational discipline, or whether it is an attribute from the fact that they are outsiders to the client's state of affairs. In an interview with the

below strategy consultant the argument is made for how clients are often well aware of the things that they need to do, but they lack the commitment to actually do them. The consultant sees an important part of the value he delivers to clients, the ability to ensure that the desired objectives are achieved. The consultant repetitively argues for the positive features of process consulting that he delivers. That is, in working through the actual implementation stages of the ideas proposed with the client. The consultant views how the essence of his legitimacy to providing a strategy service is by ensuring that already designated plans are operationalised and executed. In making the following argument, it is interesting how the consultant describes his role in the metaphor of being a 'personal trainer' to the client. The consultant provides the discipline and focus that trainers are thought to provide as any sport-related trainer would do. The consultant uses this metaphor as complementary to his operationalising involvement in the execution stages of a project.

And that's where I see the role of consultant. In some cases the clients don't even know that they should be eating five pieces of fruit and vegetable a day, metaphorically speaking, they don't even know that. But in most cases they know what they should be doing; they just need somebody to help them do it. A lot of the business books that are out there tell you what to do, but actually you *already know* what to do, most people know what to do, most clients know what they should be doing, they just *don't do it*.

Well I think, yeah, I mean I think there's nothing to stop the clients doing what I do themselves. But *the point is they don't*. So I'm like a personal trainer in one way, I'm helping people to get fit. It doesn't need a personal trainer to help people get fit, you know, all they have to do is get on a running machine and run for thirty minutes, they don't need a personal trainer. But people have personal trainers, anyway, and the reason that they have it is that they, for whatever reason, if they don't use a personal trainer they don't get fit. So, the ultimate question is whether or not they have the knowledge, whether or not they have the inclination to do something, but ultimately it comes down to whether they have the *will* to do it without somebody there to help them do it. I think actually the basis to a lot of this is psychological rather than business like (con.17).

We notice how the consultant alludes to the notion of organisational commitment and persistency with which strategic ideas are not only designed but also implemented<sup>21</sup>. Why clients may lack such a commitment can have various dimensions that are not necessarily business related, but can also be personal and psychological related (Schein, 1988). The consultant sees himself in a more personalised way for meeting the client's needs and in supporting the various reasons for the lack of such a commitment. Such consulting

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<sup>21</sup> This issue has been discussed in the strategy literature as organisational actors do not necessarily implement the ideas they design (Mintzberg, 2004).

approach however moves away from the assumption that the consultants fulfil their clients' needs through the generation and distribution of advice and knowledge. The consulting role can be characterised more for its mentoring and coaching qualities, where personal *care* becomes an important factor (Maister, 2000; von Krogh, 1998). In a separate interview with an ex-management consultant mention is made about the various types of organisational needs consultants fulfil. How consultants are asked to provide solutions with a normative character for what is the 'right' thing to do. Here, clients become satisfied when consultants provide clear direction that is based on factual information and validity. Also, regardless of having prior assurance about the high or low degree of its aftermath success/failure:

Some projects the client just wants a specific problem resolved and it is a very yes, it's a yes or no kind of outcome out of it (con.17)

In an interview with a different consultant the theme of the consultants' bringing of clarity is also repeated. However, emphasis is also given to the internal political issues within the client members. Clients often become 'dysfunctional' in their decision making processes, not because they lack competency to deliver results, but because of the competitive interest they face with colleagues. This is an important political barrier that often hinders individuals from performing in a project, and which we have also encountered in the previous section. It is believed by clients, that consultants play an important role in disclosing information, or in obtaining data which the organisational actors would have encountered difficulties obtaining from colleagues. For example, the issue of time becomes an important variable for when managers have to be involved and simultaneously accountable for running projects. The consultants' detachment of other responsibilities freedom of focus to deliver on what has been designed, becomes an important motive for their ability to become efficient. Furthermore, the repertoire of the consultants' scope of service from similar business assignments is also thought to indicate a good degree of experience for knowing how to deal with the various procedural issues. The above idea is illustrated from the below client in referring to the consultants' flexibility and detachment from other responsibilities.

The only benefit that a consultant can give is they don't have these distractions stuff, they don't have all the competing



demands on their time and they also don't have the history, because when people are in line management roles, it is difficult to challenge all the time it's a mind-set to challenge all the time. So a consultant can come in and that's his job to challenge he has only got one thing to do. So it is difficult for me to break those two because 'yes you are paying for an additional resource' but an additional resource who has a very defined term of reference. A very defined objective that is delivered by the, that is given to him by a decision maker (con. 4).

The personal frustration that line managers may experience in challenging the authority of their superiors, as the following excerpt illustrates, places emphasis on the internal dynamics of the client rather than the 'superior' qualities of the consultant. As a result, consulting credentials, associated with the competency to deliver results as the functional approach often argues (Curnow and Reuvid, 2003), are not necessarily to be linked with the consultants' instrumental or innovative ideas for what the client needs to do differently. The below statement touches on this issue and underlines the equal managerial competence between consultants and clients and the importance of the different social setting, in which organisational actors exercise their roles.

The only additional knowledge that a consultant would have, from my point of view, is that they may be intellectually better but that doesn't prove anything about solving a problem. A lot of it is that they will have the time and the focus to deal with a specific problem, whereas, a line manager has a range of activities. They are looking after staff, they've got conflicting interest so something that, let's say, the chairman thinks is number one priority is actually number four priority for them, and, part of the problem is that the chairman doesn't communicate effectively to the line manager to say 'this is your number one problem you need to sort it', the chairman gets all irritated and frustrated because his line management team are not delivering what he things they should be delivering so he calls in a consultant. But really what really a consultant is bringing in there is an additional resource, from my point of view. They are in no better position, from my view, to solve a specific problem (con.4).

The different nuance that the above comment adds to our understanding of pragmatic legitimacy is the notion of how the production of efficiency is not always the direct outcome of the consultants' intentions in the client. It is often the product of the social and political circumstances in which clients are restricted to perform, because of the interplay of political conflicts or interests. As a result, consultants become efficient in the client because they can often overcome the internal barriers detached from those personal interests that may restrict the lacuna of the members' decision making. In making the above argument we also want to qualify the premise of how consultants' projected efficiency is not always transparent or detached from the actor's interests.

### *7.3.3 Consulting motives & interests*

We have argued that consultants may strive to fulfil the clients' interests in order to produce pragmatic legitimation. However, the discourse about the consultants' efficiency can also become a politicised phenomenon in itself as it fulfils certain members' interests but not others. We want to argue for the presence of rhetoric in narratives about the consultants' efficiency and as they are constructed by the various organisational actors. The notion of operational efficiency can be able to legitimise the operational needs of some clients but not others. This brings into the equation the broader set of power relations between members. The rhetoric of efficiency becomes very clearly illustrated from the case of the following consultant.

Certainly when I was a consultant there were lots of times when we had access to lots more information than the line managers had. And we also had a direct route into decision makers. Whereas it may be difficult for people in bigger organisations to one, get access to that information, but also, to have the direct route into a decisions maker. Because, from my point of view, it is easier for a board member, lets say a decision maker, to take one, to take one direction from a consultant because they have a nice report that says 'go this way'. So, if it all goes wrong they can say, well we paid a lot of money to a consultant to do this, yeah? So it's about risk and personal risk on that individual...if they take it from their staff there is *more* risk on the individual, on the decision maker. So I think there is a bit of risk aversion in there, there's a bit of if you only ask for one person's view it is easier to make a decision. Whereas in the normal course of business you have many, many views about what should be done, about the route forward. And sometimes it is difficult for someone to make a decision that way (con.4).

*Interviewer: Which brings into contrast the objective view that we were taking before*

Yes absolutely, definitely. Definitely! And that's where consultants need to be very, very aware of the client writing the report for them because sometimes the consultant is brought in to deliver a message... (con. 4).

The consultants' efficiency is intertwined with the competing political interests between organisational actors. However, the politicisation of the consultants' efficiency to often favouring power relationships, should not be argued as substituting the experienced reality of clients for when the consultants' operational competence are not solely used in order to favour the interests of the more powerful party. In the context of the critical perspective and the consultants' symbolic management practices, that often project a 'perceived' rather than 'actual' reality, we argue that the client's perceived satisfaction needs to be taken into account. The fact that consultant manages to legitimise their service by fulfilling their clients' immediate interests, indicates how clients are not simply buying into a service where impressions of value guide their decisions. Clients

seem to have clear realisation of the pragmatic and superficial features of the consultants' competing claims. In discussing the politicised environment of the client and the consultants' nature of intervention against issues of interpersonal conflict and interest, the consultants' origin of efficiency need to be attributed to the client's situation, rather than to the consultant. This theme is in line with our earlier discussion about the competency status of the consultants and the given interpretations which often portray consultants for being a 'better' manager. Authors in support of the functional approach often tend to interpret the consultants' activities of efficiency as being derived from organisational competencies that the client can obtain from outside (Greiner and Metzger, 1983; Rassam and Oates, 1998; 1998; Reuvid and Mills, 2003). Our discussion about the complexities that constitute efficiency possible can be seen as clarifying the homogeneity of the above interpretation (Rassam and Oates, 1991; 1998; Reuvid and Mills, 2003).

#### **7.4 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the dimension of pragmatic legitimation as it is expressed in the consultant-client interaction. The dynamics of legitimacy outlined by Suchman (1995), argues that it occurs at the perception of members whose immediate organisational and personal interests are fulfilled. Pragmatic legitimation places emphasis on the area of obtainable outcomes as they are socially constructed in the interaction between the organisation and its environment. In the consultant-client interaction, we have seen how pragmatic legitimation takes place because of the way consultants manage to fulfil the client members' interests.

We have operationalised the study of legitimation by looking at two broad areas of interaction. The first one, has to do with the clients' methodological needs where the construction of solutions becomes a critical factor to the clients' satisfaction. In this section, we have identified that in the course of a business project, clients are often faced with a number of different organisational and technical challenges. Such challenges can take the form of methodological frameworks in which a clear layout of action is often designed and evaluated. Clients are faced with technical needs, some of which can be produced from working with the clients, or be brought from the outside. We argued how

consultants manage to satisfy the clients' needs, not only in the constructing of the solutions, but also in the embeddedness to the client's policies and procedures. Even though consultants might rely on managerial tools and experience with other clients, the significant issue is the personalisation of their knowledge to the client's needs.

We argued how clients are not primarily concerned for where the ideas are drawn from or how accurate they are in relation to the knowledgebase they represent. Clients are rather interested in what the solutions mean within the subjective and situated context of their needs (Salaman, 2002). We argued how consultants have relied on the use of rhetoric and the distribution of popular managerial frameworks that seemed attractive to clients. As Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argue such practice increases the consultants' marketing strategies to clients, and helps maintain sales and sustain profits. Even though the above practice still remains popular, a considerable number of consulting firms are clearly deviating from it. Here, consultants are keen on producing solutions whose outcomes takes place in a more fluid and unstructured way than we have seen with some of the large consulting corporations.

In the second part of this chapter, we discussed how pragmatic legitimacy is also performed in relation to the operational competencies consultants bring to the client. We argued how consultants satisfy the clients' immediate operational needs through qualities of administrative efficiency. Such efficiency allows them to meet tight deadlines and also make use of people and technological resources that are not available in the client. The client's pragmatic needs are concentrated on the production of outcomes against the set expectations.

In a similar way to the above, we have seen that clients are not always interested in understanding the detailed procedures consultants follow in order to produce such outcomes. Clients are rather interested in the competency of the consultants to produce outcomes against their expressed expectations. An important part of the clients' organisational effectiveness has to do with the politicised environment and the competing and often conflicting interests between client members. The consultants' operational efficiency is not necessarily a direct outcome of the additional resources or technical skills, but of the already power relations within the client members. The distribution of information between managers might not be transparently communicated, and decisions

are often delayed within existing hidden tensions. The consultants' presence and detachment from such political interests provides the space to be more challenging to decision making than already existing members. We have also argued for how the consultants' efficiency is a phenomenon that is also politicised, as the consultants come to share the interests of particular individuals in the client.

## Chapter 8: Aspects of Moral Legitimation

### 8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we examined the dimension of pragmatic legitimacy and how conformity and congruence occurs based upon the actors' satisfaction of their immediate interests. In this chapter, we explore the moral aspect of legitimation as outlined by Suchman (1995). Contrary to the fulfilment of self-situated interests, moral legitimacy is based on the actors' ethically shared values, which help promote the perceived collective wider good (Watson, 2002; Moore et. al., 2006). A managerial decision is not supported because of the immediate obtainable financial results it can generate for its members. The consequences of the decisions taken place are important for whether members might show support for it or not. Even though the idea of 'moral' or 'ethical' legitimacy can seem to have an inherent normative character for what it represents such moral values should be seen in relation to the assumptions, beliefs, and norms that are socially constructed between members (Tsoukas, 2005). As a result, Suchman (1995) argues how focus should not be placed in the pursuit of identification of the objectified substance of moral values but also in their collective representation between members.

The members' sharing of moral norms (e.g. fairness, transparency, truth and, justice) can influence the members' behaviour in terms of either showing support or rejection over such decisions. In the consultant-client interaction the dimension of moral legitimation plays an integral part in the context of the acceptance or rejection of knowledge claims, since the distribution of advice is part of a professional service whose outcome represents the interpersonal interaction between actors (Nachum, 1999, Clark, 1995). As a result, the accomplishment of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, can be argued to be situated in the qualities of the interpersonal relationship that helps produce the service (Gabel, 1996; Neely, 1999).

In the literature, the moral dimension has mainly been discussed in the context of business interests, consultants often pursue at the expense of the clients' needs (Poulfelt, 1997). Academics and practitioners have widely discussed on the type of professional code of conduct that needs to govern the relationship (Loeb, 1984; Newton, 1982; Peacock and Pelfrey, 1991). Also, whether the establishment of institutions which are

thought to regulate the consultants' practices, only help fulfil a superficial role and without preventing the consultants' manipulation of clients (Greenwood et. al., 1996; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Other authors have also argued for how the increased scrutiny and positive intervention of such professional bodies help regulate the consultants' practices and protect the vulnerability of potential clients (Barker and Curnow, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Woodward and Williams, 2003; Exton, 1982).

The aim of this chapter is to examine how moral legitimation takes place in the consultant client relationship. We are interested in deconstructing how normative values are created and collectively shared between members. In doing so, we make use of Suchman's (1995) typology and, concentrate on two broad areas of discussion drawn out of his four dimensions: a) evaluation of outputs and consequences, b) evaluation of techniques and procedures, c) evaluation of categories and structure and d) evaluation of leaders and representatives.

In the first part of the chapter we discuss how moral legitimacy is performed in relation to outputs and consequences clients pursue to achieve in relation to already established power relations. Clients place emphasis on outputs and consequences that challenge the exercise of power between actors sharing equal or more senior authority. In the second part of the chapter, we concentrate on the dimension of procedural legitimacy where emphasis is given on the moral character with which activities and procedures are undertaken to produce outcomes. We identify that in procedural types of legitimation clients place emphasis on the emergence of impressions and how perceptions of power relations and vested interests get established (Lavin, 1976). In contrast to the first dimension, moral legitimacy is argued to be achieved when consultants help alleviate internal political biases that organisational actors seek to avoid. This is in order to continue to experience the support of their members or to achieve their managerial objectives.

Overall, the chapter identifies a strong correlation between the exercise of moral legitimacy, with the consultants' perceived image of independence, objectivity, and political neutrality towards the client's domestic competitive interests. At a broad level, clients make use of the above normative values in relation to consequential, procedural, or, structural decision making areas. We argue that the implications of the consultants'

image are intimately related with existing power relations between client members. In this context, clients can use the consultant's assumed normative qualities of objectivity to win support over the making of a decision. We differentiate the context in which moral legitimation has been discussed in the literature from the framework of a professional code of conduct. Instead, we identify how moral legitimation is not just subjected to the locus of the interaction but to the political interests and intentions as manifested within the client members themselves. The consultants' moral legitimation is not only determined by how consultants govern their activities with clients, but by the internal subjectivity of the client which can determine how the consultants' interventions are *interpreted*. At this point, we identify how clients with limited authority, exercise pressure against their superiors. To what extent such pressure can be characterised as 'moral', or 'immoral' is subject to further interpretation. However, contrary to the often expressed view of how the consultants' image only serves a symbolic management arena and which is governed with the projection of management of impressions, we argue how the client's use of consultants plays a more instrumental and substantial role in the organisation's state of affairs than is often represented. We illustrate the above thesis not only by demonstrating the occurring organisational changes in the structure but also in the power relations between members.

## **8.2 Moral legitimacy and the professional codes of conduct**

In a recent article published by the *Washington Post*, O'Harrow (2007) refers to the experience of the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the US, and their contract relationship with Booz Allen Hamilton. The project started from \$2 million and over the course of the next two years grew to £124 million. DHS's increasing dependence on Booz Allen Hamilton and the lack of entry from other competitors meant an unprecedented degree of expenditure being loosely regulated by the people on the project. O'Harrow (2007) states that: "By December 2004, payments to Booz Allen had exceeded \$30 million – 15 times the contract's original value. When department layers examined the deal, they found it was "grossly beyond the scope" of the original contract, and believed that the arrangement violated government procurement rules. The lawyers advised the department to immediately stop making payments through the contract and



allow other companies to compete for the work” (p. A01). Even though the above dispute did not take further legal dimensions as it was DHS’s responsibility to regulate their relationship with the consultants, the *moral* side of the consultants’ increase of fees (\$124 million from what was a \$2 million project) came to question.

The study of management consultancy has been characterised for its sensitivities in the way consultants address the clients’ organisational needs. The ambiguity that governs the term ‘professional service’ and the absence of a commonly accredited body of knowledge from which such practices are exercised, has given rise to discussions for the clients’ possible vulnerability (Gable, 1996, Clark, 1995). Claims of possessing ‘knowledge-expertise’ are not regulated through a legal framework, but through institutions having local or international presence.

The creation of accredited bodies, like the Institute of Management Consultancies Association (IMCA) are recent and important initiatives to counteract the above absence. However, the adoption and exercise of the management consulting title is still subject to individuals’ initiatives when changing careers, or entering into the industry (Newman, 1993). In management consulting activities the distribution and communication of advice co-emerges through the dialectic relationship between organisational actors (Clark, 1995; Nachum, 1999, Newton, 1982). The process of meeting the clients’ needs cannot be simply predefined or confined within the features of a product/package (Brignall et. al., 1991). It is rather subject to the interaction and the means which consultants detect and satisfy the clients’ needs. The potential vulnerability of the clients however, is an issue that has been extensively discussed in the literature (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). This is mainly because such professional service is governed by power relations and uncertainty which makes difficult to measure the nature of the clients’ needs against the consultants’ service (Shapiro et. al., 1993; Poulfelt, 1997).

Schein (2002) argues how any consulting interaction is subject to a power relationship between the one who is believed to provide the solution against the one who recognises the need for help. Schein (2002) describes the above power relationship saying: “Just being asked for help is a tremendously empowering situation in that it implies that the client endows the consultant with the capacity to help...” (p.23). The process of

delivering an advisory service is highly subjected to the actors' way of managing the projected positions of 'need' as well as 'support'.

### *8.2.1 Professional code of conduct*

One of the ways in which moral legitimation has been discussed in the literature has been in the context of a professional code of conduct where the specification of clients' needs is somehow regulated against the consultants' distribution of service (Poulsen, 1997; Høivik and Føllesdal, 1995; Loeb, 1984). Such regulation cannot be determined by written frameworks or through the creation of 'quality standards'. However, the adopted principles are thought to act as ethical guidelines in which consultants need to demonstrate qualities of: fairness, integrity, transparency, and the avoidance of manipulation (Newton, 1982; Hagenmeyer, 2007<sup>22</sup>; Coulson-Thomas, 2003).

A professional code of conduct can concern dimensions like: a) keeping terms of confidentiality for the information disclosed and preventing its distribution to competitors. b) Showing qualities of integrity and honesty through which consultants conduct their daily practices (i.e. showing transparency for the information produced). c) Avoid efforts to manipulate the client with representing different realities and in order to sustain/extend the business contract (Ozley and Armenakis, 2000; De Sonnaville, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Exton, 1982).

Barker and Curnow (2003) state how the demonstrated behaviours of professionalism and ethics should contain features where the consultant: "Ensures professional advice given is technically sound and relevant to client needs, values diversity in terms of culture, religion, race and gender, is courteous, reliable and responsive in dealing with others, respects confidentiality, engenders trust" (p.74). The creations of such professional codes of conduct are aimed at securing the clients' trust in the consultant. Also, to discipline member that do not comply with it. Consulting firms that are not part of such bodies usually adopt their own code of conduct as they themselves regulate the

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<sup>22</sup>Hagenmeyer (2007) illustrate the value in having a professional code of ethics stating: "The guiding idea of an integrative management consulting ethics provides consultants who want to understand themselves as people of integrity with a compass to guide them through their daily consulting activities. It helps them to reflect on their own self-image and arrive at independent judgments among the potential conflicts of interest they encounter in practice. It also helps them identify ethically justifiable courses of action" (p.112).

parameters that constitute it<sup>23</sup>. Apart from the positive benefits such accredited bodies are thought to generate for their members, there has been an increased demand for the emergences of institutions that provide accreditation practices (Goode, 1957; Hall, 1968; Greenwood et. al., 1996). Such institutions aim at producing a professional identity and legitimise consulting practices which in turn help secure the consultants' perceived credibility (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Fincham, 1999). Such legitimation however is characterised for its superficiality because it helps create certainty that favours the consultants' business interests and does not protect the vulnerability of the client (Kieser, 1997; Alvesson, 2001; Byrne, 2000). As a result, the consultants' power to create impressions of value and the intentions to manipulate the client's understanding are very much existing features of the relationship. Authors that support this critical approach argue how discourses about accreditation practices help reduce the bad publications the industry is often associated with (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). Nevertheless, the significant issue concerns their associated influence to legitimation. Clients are encouraged to embrace consultants who are following such a professional codes of conduct from those who are not.

### **8.3 Moral legitimacy & the consultants' image of independence**

Most of the discussion around moral legitimation has focused around the context of the interpersonal interaction between the two parties. As we have seen, the credibility of the consultant is assessed against their immediate actions their overall perception by clients.

Apart from the above approach however, we want to propose that an equally important aspect of moral legitimation is situated around the clients' internal organisational environment, and the relationship between members in which competitive interests and power relations are at play. We find that there is a strong correlation between the clients' internal political tensions with the consultants' image of externality, independence and objectivity. The fact that consultants do not share the history, culture, and interests of the organisational members is thought to provide a sense of objectivity which moreover shares an inherent authority of morality and credibility.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, prestigious strategy consulting firms, like McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group, are not members of IMCI.

### 8.3.1 Moral legitimization & Independence

At this level of analysis, we propose that the consultants' qualities of independence and externality are used within a *moral* connotation by clients, which helps create credibility. Such moral dimension is also used in order to provide a wider array of collective responsibility and for which support is required by other members. Moore et. al., (2006) characterise the above political activity stating: "political lobbying will be less unseemly and more persuasive to the degree it can be plausibly justified in terms of the broader social good" (p.16). As a result, personal initiatives, or project interests, are not perceived as selfish attempts to satisfy individual interests.

Moral legitimization is precisely achieved because of the moral attributes with which the consultants' image of independence and objectivity are associated with. In proposing the above argument, we draw support for making the above relationship, by the work of Moore et. al., (2006). The authors' study concentrated on the use of external auditors from large accounting and consulting firms (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers, Arthur Andersen) and their use by corporations like Enron, WorldCom, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Fast Track Savings and Loans and others. Their study concentrates on examining why the creation of government policies and the institutional establishment of similar bodies by the US government have led to the experience of disastrous results. Moore et. al., (2006) argue how the experienced failure of such business cases can be attributed to conflicts of interest, and a lack of appreciating how the perceived qualities of 'independence' cannot be achieved through the establishment of institutional bodies that are thought to regulate practices. The authors propose a theoretical framework that is based on the notion of 'moral seduction' and 'strategic issue cycling' in order to explain the above. Both of the above theoretical dimensions are also apparent in our study and help support our thesis.

By 'moral seduction' Moore et. al., (2006) argue for how organisational actors make attempts to construct conceptual links for how the auditors, or the consultants' independence, contains ethical attributes that help justify their actions. The authors describe the above stating: "moral seduction proposes that ethical lapses are more likely to occur gradually, as the result of the process of escalation, than they are to occur rapidly. Given that ethical standards often create gray areas of ambiguous ethical propriety, people will find themselves crossing into the zone of ethical violation after

they have first committed actions that are ambiguous in their appropriateness” (Moore et. al., 2006:22). The notion of ‘moral seduction’ is used to characterize the ideal and normative attributes that corporations want to ascribe to external auditors, but which through them also want to fulfill their own corporate interests that might not be morally based. In our study of the consultant-client relationship, we can think as to how this could apply in the way clients help legitimise their own actions towards their members, by demonstrating their association with the consultants’ perceived independence. Clients are believed to be in a better position of defending the validity of their propositions/actions, by widening the scope of the interests to moral and collective implications.

In addition to the above, and through the notion of ‘strategic issue cycling’ Moore et. al., (2006) argue how the substantiation of such alleged moral claims are gradually embedded into the cognitive schemata, or organisational structures. As a result, when claims are made about the consultants’ independence/externality and their attached moral attributes, such claims can contain elements of ambiguity that are not directly made apparent/explicit to members. Rather, there is a gradual process in which the ambiguity becomes accepted through conversations over time. As a result, the use of ‘issue cycling’ is used in order to explain the integration of perceptions of independence by auditors/consultants, in a way that does not challenge the alleged credibility by the actors that pronounce it in the first place.

The authors support the above by stating: “the theory of issue cycling outlined...implies that special interest groups will be more effective at achieving the interests of their members when their motives for seeking special advantage for their members are effectively veiled behind explanations that invoke more virtuous motives. Indeed, the direct and declared attempt to pursue one’s self-interest at the expense of society as a whole will be rare, because such naked power grabs are both unseemly and ineffective” (Moore et. al., 2006:22). This notion of ‘issue cycling’ is not being made explicit used because actors want to simply manipulate and deceive others to support a given decision. But, as Moore et. al., (2006) claim, it is a psychological outcome where the individual’s inherent belief and personal bias makes it logical for them to want to generate support or defend their ‘right’ position: “People appear to evaluate evidence in a selective fashion when they have a stake in reaching a particular conclusion” (p.17). We

will discuss more about the authors' distinction between 'conscious and unconscious bias' later in the chapter.

#### **8.4 Moral Legitimacy through Outputs & Consequences**

We have already discussed how the attributes of moral legitimacy are characterised for the normative and ideological values through which propositions are justified. Moral legitimisation is not situated around the obtainable outcomes which satisfy an individual's personal interests, but in the collective shared beliefs between members in pursuit of the normative collective welfare. Suchman's (1995) qualification of outputs and consequences concentrates on the goal-oriented activities an organisation invests to accomplish. Also on the aftermath of an organisation's actions that help legitimise its presence in the environment.

From the interviewees' experience we identify how such desired outputs relate to an established political presence between members that is difficult to change. We find how the clients' perception of the consultants' objectivity is also made in relation to the power restrictions they cannot directly bypass. This is often because of the position and level of authority the individuals have in the hierarchy of the organisation. The clients' desired outputs often concerns the inability to generate gradual changes to such an already politicised establishment. As a result, clients endeavour to bring resistance against a network of relationships, where direct conduct with the individuals for dealing with such issues, seem futile. Such endeavour is also expressed within a moral fabric of duty as there is an understanding of the 'rightness' of their action. Discourses of the consultants' objectivity are made in relation to the new power dynamics that the clients can now exercise over such members. We note how clients are sensitive in disclosing the inner political dynamics of the organization. Client conversations about 'objectivity' help create a 'safe ground' instead of talking about 'crude resistance'.

##### *8.4.1 Clients' Views*

We come to illustrate the above proposition through the below client whose experience we have touched upon in some of the previous chapters. The client's situation concerns the deteriorating performance of his firm with loosing profits and sharp criticism from the stakeholders. The client refers to the experience of an organisational and personal

struggle to go against an almost established 'status quo', where the members constituting the senior leadership found difficult to change the organisation. The senior members were not willing to introduce new organisational structures that would go away from the strict hierarchical structure. The firm went through a number of different reviews through which it was clear that radical changes were necessary in the way it run its operations in order to survive in the market. The experienced difficulty to introduce changes has been the result of the senior individuals' attitude to maintain their exercise of power.

The tension between members eventually led to a personal as well as political struggle for power in which various senior members needed to intervene, in a way that would not create direct resistance within the Board of Directors. The main premise of the clients' use of consultants was in recognising the need for the firm to be rescued from the rigid bureaucratic, managerial and organisational structure. In a company that is producing revenues of several millions of pounds a year, the firm's declining performance led to the need to create resistance and also introduce change. The consultants' service to clients has been expressed at different levels with producing research and analysis on the industry. Also, with making recommendations to support decisions, and with helping to set deadlines that the members were bound to keep.

However, we are particularly interested in the moral aspect of the consultants' legitimation, and the clients' use of consultants to produce outcomes that would help recover the company from loosing its market share. As the following comment illustrates, the presence of the consultants' created a set of new dynamics, in which the client was able to disclose and obtain information. Also, to make decisions in a way that it did not directly clash with certain organisational members. What drives the clients' moral legitimation in using the consultants is the collective awareness of the need to change. It is the belief in having to create resistance for the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders.

But don't forget the human dimension here. The human-political dimension which sometimes prevents companies from doing what it is that some people *know* needs to be done. And other people won't allow to be done. And that is one of the most *valuable* reasons for bringing consultants in — because you get accelerated change at the human level... And the role of the consultant in that process really is no more than to *validate* the thinking.

*Interviewer: Put differently, certain individuals would not change doing certain things unless they were told by an outside party, which would be recognised as credible*

Exactly. It's the appointment of a third party, a first division, skilled, autonomous entity, which adds credibility to the process of analysis, such that internal stakeholders can't argue with the facts. They can't distort the facts.

That would be true of a senior or middle management level. There were probably individuals in the company who had a vested interest in keeping things the way they were for as long as they were going to be employed here, for example. That's what happens in big companies. And we didn't have the structural flexibility to know how to organise ourselves to make the kind of changes we needed to make in order to go forward in a profitable way.

Yes they would, but when you bring in a consulting company it gives you the opportunity to turn over a lot of stones and see what's underneath. And the incumbent directors and senior people can't do anything about that, they have to allow that process to happen. Whereas if you try to do that internally, it's sometimes very difficult because they're protecting — you know, you don't get all the information. If they know there's a potential agenda which may have an adverse effect on them, you won't get their cooperation; they just won't play with you. Whereas, if the consultants come in, they have a somewhat free rein to look in any cupboard, to ask any question, to take an objective view that you don't otherwise get when it's all being done internally (cl.13).

One of the key ideas expressed from the above statements is the power the client can exercise over senior members through the consultants' involvement. Clearly, the consultants have a much closer relationship with the team that was initiating the business project from those members to which resistance was expressed. It can be argued that the structure of the consulting assignment, to some extent, became part of the individuals that wanted to change the status quo of the organisation. The clients' characterisation of the consultants' objectivity cannot be just interpreted in a normative way as consultants are clearly influenced by the client members who are in control of the project.

However, the client's belief in the consultants' objectivity also contains a normative character which is expressed against the purposive and manipulative exercise of power and authority by the other senior members. The fact that individuals are not willing to acknowledge that their leadership style has had a negative effect in the organisation, to the extent that wide support from stakeholders might be lost, creates a kind of *moral duty* to the individuals who are not willing to compromise with this behaviour. The client's use of the consultants' objectivity contains more than accurate representation and transparency, as the above statement illustrates. It rather points to a new power scope of action in which certain individuals face difficulty with bringing the same old resistance towards them.



As a result, the clients' feel the moral duty to act against a deteriorating organisational performance and selfish political structure that only favours certain existing members, defines the moral legitimation process. The client's association of the consultants' objectivity with having a moral dimension becomes an unrealised output of his own belief, and in the rightness of his actions. As Moore et. al., (2006) argue such a behaviour needs to be understood within a psychological context and where the creation of bias is unconsciously made: "moral seduction is facilitated by automatic (unconscious) psychological processes. Because few people think of themselves as intentionally corrupt, our theory predicts that corruption more likely will occur when the cognitive processes can operate unconsciously and the individual can preserve a view of himself or herself as moral" (p. 22-23) We treat the 'consequence' and 'outcomes' aspects of Suchman's (1995) qualification as the need to generate resistance that could have an actual affect in the organisation's performance. At this level of analysis, moral legitimation occurs on the premise that consultants help the client to provide such resistance.

The following client discusses his experience over a business project where the consultants' contribution helped to create credibility for the propositions made. Apart from the positive contribution the consultants made by the distribution of market analysis and information gathering, the client indicates how consultants added a degree of credibility to the project. The needed collectivism for the decision making stages in the client helped to move things forward. The client's perceived value for the consultants can be seen in terms of their role in creating a form of stability. The fact that the following client is referring to his public organisation provides an additional dimension to his argument. This has to do with how the stakeholders represented in the project can exercise decision making power over the project, and without being fully members of the organisation in the same way that decision making is delegated within the private sector. All the below statements come from the same interviewee.

So you need to have people to 'win over' other senior decision makers of the *validity* of this case. So almost a consultants' report can then be used as a 'trump card' in the argument. So *they added value in that sense* because it is no longer just the council or the usual suspects, green environment saying this, see we have this economic consultancy to say this. (cl.1).

And secondly, even if we could come up with quite good answers, within our own jobs, and sort of within our own time, we may not have the clout and the track record to sell this, because bosses would look at us and say 'but you're not a business

expert, you're a waste management officer'. Then you would say 'but, as part of my work, I have investigated the opportunities for waste recycling on a commercial basis'. But unless you can *persuade* people that you do have some credibility then *you will not be listened to*, and *I think councils are very hierarchical organisations and they tend not to listen to people that they don't expect to have to listen to.* (cl.1).

So I would probably be too junior to sell this message, even if I was right and knew I was right. Whereas the more senior people in the organisation they may well be slightly in awe of consultants, 'they are the consultants, they know'! (cl.1).

The consultants' moral legitimacy has to be seen in relation to the qualities of objectivity and independence over a given issue. The interpersonal, political, personal and organisational differences between members, creates some kind of vacuum for the consultants' external role.

#### 8.4.2 Consultants' Views

Apart from the clients' experience on the subject, we find a series of complementary views by consultants that support a similar threat of argument. The following consultants refer to the interpersonal differences between actors and how competitive interests often create a 'blame culture'. The consultant argues for how interpersonal interests are created partly because clients operate within two sets of managerial 'identities'. The one identity is in relation to their departmental functions in which they feel that need to protect its interests. However, individuals have to also exercise their corporate identity where departmental interests often have to be compromised on the grounds of the interests of the corporation. The main issue is how members of an organisation come to deal with their interpersonal differences.

For the consultant, organisational actors come to an impasse of collaboration that might not necessarily be explicit to other members. As a result, the failure to disclose or share information and the lack of willingness to support decisions are indications of the existing political tensions in which blaming others eventually creates a kind of operational dysfunctionality. It is for this reason that the consultant sees that an important contribution of his service is not just the operational distribution of advice itself, but in playing a type of mediatory role to helping members deal with their differences.

What you've got in an organisation is a strange thing, because if you've got a typical organisation with a chief executive, and functional directors which are on the board, these people have to wear two hats: one hat is as a collective team on the board for the strategy of the business – to drive the business – but they also wear another hat, which is their own function. Now, when they go into a board session, ideally they've got to lose that hat [of their own function], and just wear the other hat [for the overall strategy of the business]. But the majority of people in UK organisations can't do that. (con.26).

It maybe that there's a clash between what manufacturing wants to do and what finance wants to do – and we and they have got to look at what's especially best for that business. Not what's best for the man who runs finance, or the man who runs manufacturing, it's what is best for the business...There is so much office politics taking place in some organisations that people try to hide things from the guy at the top, and therefore, he'll never get the straight answers to his questions. Often he won't even know which questions to ask. So you may be an accountant, or the chief executive, and if he's in a manufacturing company, for instance, he actually doesn't know the processes, so, he doesn't know the real questions to ask – so what he'll get told will sort of skew the truth from him. That's basically acting in a blind culture (con. 26).

What helps produce the dimension of moral legitimation according to the above clients' experience is the sharing belief that consultants are external to their interests of the members. The client places trust in the consultants' intervention to challenge individuals in ways that internal members themselves have difficulty in doing so. The fact that political differences come to be alleviated from a situation of 'impasse' to a situation of 'action', is part of the consultants' produced outcomes in the client. The consultant's value is seen against the internal competitive interests. In an interview with a different client the idea expressed is how managers often show a lack of trust in what their employees tell them. The consultants' positions helps strengthen the position of those less senior members and make their requests more credibly recognised by their superiors. The employees' voice, as echoed through the consultants, is argued to allow the creation of changes that would have been difficult to incorporate otherwise:

Yes, sometimes you act as an attractor. Sometimes the senior managers aren't hearing what their staff are saying, 'oh, I don't know, we've got problems with staff, blah, blah, blah'. But then I go, and do a story telling workshop and I present those staff stories back to the managers, and, because I'm doing it, I'm acting as that kind of bridge, 'oh god, that's a real issue, and then staff go, oh well we've been telling, they didn't need to, we've been telling you that for ages'. So once we've done that the next stage for me would be to say to the managers, by the way, the staff have been saying this for ages, why didn't you, and it's a kind of moment of internal reflection on them. And the reason they probably didn't react was kind of organisational *culture* or blind spots, or deeply held value sets about where people see themselves in social hierarchies (con. 3).

Consultants try to deal with the members' differences by playing a decision making role on whether to support or challenge the various different positions. Consultants emphasise the presentational aspect through which they communicate their

ideas within conflicting situations. The consultants need to appear neutral to the members' interests but also help bring a resolution that does not seem to favour the action of one member/party. Impressions can be created that can jeopardise the consulting assignment as well as the associated qualities of objectivity and independence that consultants try to promote. However, our argument is that the consultants' process of justifying their position amidst the clients' competing interests, helps produce legitimation in the client. Such legitimation is morally based in that the client trusts in the consultants' neutral stand to the internal affairs. The following client refers to the careful orchestration of response to the members that feel vulnerable to their superiors and the need to create resolutions without blame.

Yes, you have to adopt an approach that does not put the blame or make the individual look like an idiot.

*Interviewer: But what becomes very important then is how you present that to the board without making it look like it is the 'peoples' fault or interests the cause for where they are.*

Absolutely, which is why I come back to relationships. We go in and establish relationships across that group...Now, so we go in and very often, from the very first time, is to take this group of people away and get them to understand what the issues are – because the issues might be in that guy's area, but he's not going to report them here, because that's going to make him look quite vulnerable. And therefore we try to develop straight away a "no-blame" culture within that team. (con.26).

According to the above excerpt the idea of objectivity is discussed in the normative qualities that it represents. That is, in the consultants' being transparent, fair, and honest against the client's state of affairs. The consultant does not make reference about how the nature of the relationship can create a degree of bias for his later evaluations. Instead, the emphasis is placed on how the consultant might recognise the pitfalls behind the clients' selfish actions and their effort is to bypass them in search of a more collective resolution. However, as we will see later in the chapter, the notion of the consultants' exercise of objectivity is challenged by authors as well as consultants who acknowledge the degree of bias that governs consulting evaluations. In this sense, it is argued how consultants are to an important extent influenced by the clients' internal political situation. The consultants' perceived independence is possible to favour one party's decision making over another. As we will see, consultants can often decide to align themselves with particular client members and take advantage of the objectivity they have been associated

with. We cannot generalise by making the above proposition and we do not want to imply scope in which consultants can manipulate clients. However, we want to address the complexities in which the subject is discussed by the interviewees, and how conclusive statements cannot be taken as representative of all consultants. At the same time, we do not want to underestimate the importance of the consultants' perceived valuable contribution in having the opportunity to provide support, and often resolution to the clients' internal tensions.

One of the features that characterise the dimension of moral legitimation, which can be seen in contrast to procedural or structural legitimacy dimensions, has to do with how power relationships are already invested in the organisation (Suchman, 1995). Organisational actors seem to already have knowledge about the other members' political interests, positions of support and exercise of authority. In this sense, members of the organisation can explicitly express their rejection over a given proposition. This might take the form between employees and their superior managers but also between individuals with equal degree of seniority in the firm. The intensification of the political tension seems to create some kind of a power-impasse which the members themselves cannot bypass.

In some way the clients' use of the consultants' intervention is used to create resistance or counteract the exercise of power towards actors. In such situations actors are not necessarily keen on changing their colleagues' views/support over a given issue. They are rather concerned about challenging the existing power structures in which such relations are exercised. As a result, the clients' moral legitimacy, over the consultants, is found in the consultants' ability to confront and challenge the invested power relations that they cannot themselves change or can only have limited influence upon.

Outcomes of such efforts may concern the fulfilment of their own organisational interests, or some kind of change against the already existing status quo. We want to emphasise how the notion of 'outputs' and 'consequences' as qualified by Suchman (1995), needs to be seen in the context of the results clients try to produce against the clients' politicised environment. The below statement provides support for how consultants seem to recognise their access to client members and how part of their responsibility is to challenge/confront individuals.

He knows he's got a problem, he knows it relates to one particular bit of his organisation, normally, he does not stand back and because of the issues, - to come back to this thing, and, because everybody is working in their corner, it takes us to say, 'but if you do this thing, then, it will come back to that area there'...it's quite legitimate for us to go and ask, so, often all we are is a *conduit* between the bottom and the top. Had they possessed the intelligence or the capacity and the wherewithal the people at the bottom could have got to the people at the top before they came to us and might never have needed us...That happens at times, there's no doubt about that, and you've got to take it face on, that's what you're being paid for. (con.6).

The consultant is explicit about the employees who happen to have less power and authority in the organisation, and seek to voice their opinions and persuade superiors for what they think. In the interview it is repeatedly discussed how senior managers do not 'listen' to the lower levels of the organisation, because they are too preoccupied with acting on their own agenda. Consultants provide an interesting institutional challenge to such senior managers and help provide legitimation over existing concerns. Moral legitimacy can be produced in the above context when the consultants' criticism over clients seem to change a course of action that benefits the employees and which employees do not see feasible to implement themselves.

#### *8.4.3 Summary*

Moral legitimation can be understood through the outputs and consequences which are produced through the consultants' involvement in the client. The consultants' attributes of independence and externality are often used to challenge already existing power relations. When such established forms of power are challenged in faith of producing benefits for the wider number of members, then the consultants' externality gains moral legitimation. In this context, knowledge claims consultants communicate to clients are being legitimised because of the already existing socio-political context in the firm. This is because the consultants' knowledge claims are not just assessed for what they entail, but in light of their wider influence to the members' interpersonal competing relations.

#### **8.5 Procedural Legitimacy**

A complimentary dimension of moral legitimacy is based on the procedures with which management decisions are made or the ways in which strategic plans are executed. In contrast to outputs and consequences, Suchman (1996) argues how procedural legitimacy

concentrates on the ideological values, members of an organisation share, for how operations *should* be conducted. Such values have been distilled through normative beliefs and the interpretation of ethical qualities like, truth, justice, and fairness. In discussing the nature of legitimation, in regards to transnational organized corporations and civil society organizations Beishim and Dingwerth (2005) argue how: “procedural aspects include the inclusiveness and transparency of decision making, the accountability of decision-makers to decision-takers, and the deliberative quality of interaction among participants in the decision-making process” (p.5).

Discussing procedural legitimation in the context of governmental legitimation, Coglianese (2005) states the term “is defined in terms of democratic accountability, with elections being the principal defining characteristic, and also in terms of institutional arrangements like separation of powers, transparency, and rule of law principles intended to combat abuses of power” (p.3). Society plays an important role for the construction of what such moral values should represent and how corporations should incorporate them within policies and procedures. The creation of regulatory public bodies in Britain, like the Office of Fair Trading (OfT) helps impose standards with which firms should conduct their competitive activities. Furthermore, to ensure the exercise of anti-trust laws and the penalisation over firms that want to monopolise their market. A recent example of a company that failed to legitimise its actions concerns British Airways (BA), and its illegal price-fixing with Korean Air and Virgin and Lufthansa<sup>24</sup>. The *Economist* (2007) argues that BA’s failure to legitimise its competitive practices did not only have a negative affect on its internal actors, but also in relation to the customers’ perception of it as a worthwhile airline carrier. Procedural dimensions of moral legitimation mainly concentrates on the creation of organisational frameworks and procedures that aim to secure a line of action that is not serving the interests of the individual, but the collective

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<sup>24</sup> In a recent article by *The Economist* is stated how negative this cartel has been for BA’s reputation as it was hit in its increase strive to become the peoples’ ‘favourite airline’. BA was fined £121m from Britain’s Office of Fair Trading (OFT) and \$300m from Department of Justice (DoJ) of United States. The language used to describe BA’s practices, is interesting for how the company was perceived to fail to legitimise its actions. *The Economist* states, for example, how “Philip Collins, the OFT’s boss, boasted that the large fine would “send an important message about our intention to enforce the law”. The DoJ was blunter, describing the arrangement as a “conspiracy”.” The one statement places emphasis on the OFT’s aggressive strategies to prevent companies from using similar cartel practices. Whereas, the second statement places emphasis on BA’s intentions to break the law and places responsibility to the organization as a whole. In either case, the overarching theme is BA’s failure to legitimize its practices against the government regulations. Moreover, and against BA’s experience we have the rescue of Virgin’s reputation which was the first one to contact DoJ about BA’s practices and did not occur a fine as yet. *The Economist* interestingly states how; “Not only was the airline saving itself from the risk of prosecution, but it was also grassing up a rival with whom it has had a bruising relationship in the past.”

interests of the corporation. Moral legitimacy is argued to be achieved when clients justify that the means to achieve objectives is in alignment with the firm's normative values.

In the consultant-client interaction procedural legitimation has been discussed in the context of which consultants implement the contractual features of the business agreement (Poulfelt, 1997). Ethical norms characterise the creation of business structures through which they execute their consulting practices (Poulfelt, 1997, Lynch, 2003). Assessing the consultants' success or failure to achieve legitimation is argued to be dependent on the qualities of confidentiality, transparency and disclosure of the information communicated (Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Lundberg, 2002). Furthermore, by the degree to which the consultants are committed to serving the clients' needs by complying to the ethical standards, and regardless of how such behaviour might be to the disadvantage of their business interests (Hùivik and Fùllesdal, 1995). Case examples of the above can take place when consultants have to restrict accepting new assignments with clients that happen to be rivals to their current clients (Czerniawska, 2002).

In addition, procedural legitimacy takes place in relation to the clients' internal competitive interests as well as political power dynamics. We find that in the context of the clients' operational-related needs consultants play an instrumental role through their assigned qualities of independence and objectivity. Such qualities become an important input in the course of decision making where the position of the members' interests becomes a sensitive dimension. Actors' interests can influence the nature of the organisational processes and outcomes that members with equal or superior authority are keen to accomplish. In this context, management consultants can be used to undertake particular operational activities and create a sense of detachment against the individual members' political interests. The alleviation of personal and political interests helps organisational actors persuade their colleagues to show some degree of support and commitment. Furthermore, to convince them in that the proposed decision is not subject to their own locus of interests only, but also to the collective benefits of its members. We do not imply that such objectivity is simply a superficial or that it is used as an instrument of manipulation. The clients' decisions to involve the consultants often results in outcomes that were contrary to the expectations or personal interests of those initiating



the business contract. Our thesis is that the consultants' input over procedures can help achieve the needed moral legitimation because of the distinct meaning that the consultants' independence helps create within the clients' politicised environment. We underline how such moral legitimation is not necessarily dependent on the clients' interpersonal interaction with the consultants, but can also be found in the political relations between members themselves.

#### *8.5.1 Clients' Views*

We come to illustrate the above proposition by examining the clients' experience. We begin with the case of the below interviewee operating in the public sector, and who is responsible for the initiative of a project that involves the collaboration of other closely geographically located local authorities. One of the key features of the project was to introduce changes in the structure and operations for how these organisations operated. The client initiated the idea and believed there were operational benefits, like the increase of efficiency and output, by working together with other local authorities. The client believed that such partnership would help reduce the use of overheads and unnecessary duplication of procedures with the result of reducing their spending. The partnership would help increase their quality of service to the public.

One of the key challenges the client faced during the early stages of the project, concerned the communication of the ideas to the other organisations. Moreover, the need to win their support and the credibility of the project as having a much wider interest and benefit from just serving the interests of his organisation. One of the key ideas underlined in the below statement concerns the politicised environment of such a public body, and how the competitive political interests are detrimental for the development of the project. One of the most important areas of the consultants' contribution to the project was the process of evaluating the initiative and also providing an independent critique of the existing advantages and disadvantage. This was particularly critical for the client, because the projected benefits would make an important difference among members for supporting or rejecting the project.

From the below statements the impression might be given of how the client's comfort is dependent on his close alliance with the consultants so that the other local authorities

could share his view. However, this was not necessarily the case. For the client, it mattered how the idea of the project is not only supported by him, but that there is a greater discourse of *evaluation* about it. In this sense, the client accepts how the consultants' views can support, complement or challenge his views he was sharing. However, the fact that the client was not seen as the only monopolising party for providing an evaluation on the potential benefits of the project, is the important feature.

But confirming the research and validating the research, *was vital for me, - that's where I got value for money*. Because there was concern that [AA] was seen to not monopolise the partnership, and what I couldn't afford to have was the other two partners thinking 'this is [AA's], [AA's] stamped its personality on this, this going to be [AA's] way', and that would create tension, so the consulting was to take pressure off me in this respect. (cl.2).

We wanted an objective view, some members were feeling very uneasy about the prospect, but what we wanted was to say, right 'we'll bring somebody totally independent in now to research, to check the research that's been done, and then to confirm that, and then develop a constitution and business plan', and that was the last sort of consultant that I employed (cl.2).

Some departments bring consultants in purely and simply to give a second opinion, not always to do the research, but to give a second opinion, and sort of an objective view on what we've done, because again, working with local members there's always a suspicion, particularly in local government, that 'maybe this isn't the right way forward, maybe someone else can think of a better way of doing this, and maybe we aren't fully informed, so we'd employ a consultant to come and just say right, let's have your view on this' (cl.2).

One of the key themes we identify from the above is firstly, the client's use of the consultants' objectivity in reference to the operational aspects of their work and secondly, in relation to the internal and politicised environment. Clients appreciate the vigour and detachment with which consulting evaluations are made. At the same time, they make connections for how such an externality relates to their own *interests*. The discourse that develops about the consultants' objectivity/independence, and how this makes a difference to the politicised environment, continues to be addressed under the normative qualities of objectivity and independence in the functional sense of the word. That is, the consultants being detached from the personal assumptions of the individuals, providing a 'fair and true' evaluation of the client's situation.

We argue how it is uncomfortable for the client to directly address the political internal tensions by talking about crude resistance, even though at times clients make crude reference to such power relations. We do not want to imply how clients simply manipulate the understanding of 'objectivity' to only serve their interest as this is often

not the case. However, conversations around objectivity rotate around the clients' operational as well as internal political needs. Clients can play an instrumental role for how conceptual connections are made, and for how the consultants' objectivity is interpreted in relation to the particular project.

We also wanted someone to come and form a view on, whether the benefits that we perceived through our research could be fulfilled, and, it was a matter of giving some level of comfort to some of our members (cl. 9)

A key feature that we also identify in discussions of procedural legitimacy by clients rotates around the notion of *credibility*. Namely, credibility about the way in which the different operational stages of a project have been conducted. One of the ways in which client members deal with their own uncertainty and for the perceived hidden and undisclosed tensions of the other party, is to often challenge the credibility about the process with which such facts have been constructed in the first place. As a result, clients face a hidden tension in the course of the deployment of initiatives, in being able to influence the presentation of facts, in a way that favours their interest. Clients believe that when consultants undertake the same operational tasks their presence projects an inherent credibility, that other members find difficult to argue against.

Moore et. al., (2006) argue that “when it comes to biased judgments, evidence suggests that people are more willing to endorse a biased proposal made by someone else than to make one on their own” (p. 17). This is not only because a common set of ideas are simply re-reiterated by the consultants rather than the client. It is the fact that the consultants' associations in producing their findings are not perceived to share the same invested interests as the particular clients. We can illustrate the above through the experience of the below client whose use of consultants helped verify concerns about the firm's operational structures. The following excerpt indicates how only one colleague supported the position against the rest of the board. The client suggested the use of consultants in order to verify or reject his propositions as the below quotes indicate:

Yes, or even to change the way we do certain things, you know, it's, you who get lots of different opinions and views and all the rest of it. Now you can tell people to do it, but if they don't buy into, you know, very often it can make it fail, can't it? So I think the way I looked at this project was here we are getting first hand evidence from the people in the field, therefore it's very difficult to argue with it. (cl.26)

*Interviewer: But at the same time you have the difficulty of how to channel that view to the rest of the members of the board.*

Yes, but I think having got the consultant involved and having got some evidence, I think people find it difficult then to say 'well I don't think there is a problem, because we were saying well hang on, 35 managing directors think there's a problem', so that's how it tended to work (cl.26).

In the above example, the consultants' process of verification against the client's expressed concerns is being justified within the board, because it was supported by an external party. Even though the particular client forms the minority in support of the idea, the power dynamics changed when the consultants supported some of his premises. The client's belief in the use of consultants, for bringing more accreditation to the project, can be interpreted as being part of his close political alignment with the consultant. As a result, it can be argued how the consultants aligned their position within the client's interests in a way that verification of the propositions were being possible.

However, another way of interpreting the above is also through the fact that the client managed to bypass what was believed to be an already existing and inherent bias by his colleagues, in supporting that this was not a real issue. This can be further supported by the proposition that they had vested interests for the operational procedures to remain the same. As a result, it can be counter-argued how the consultants helped verify the existing business case the board members did not want to accept. To what extent the client aligned himself *politically* with the consultant and in a way that they supported his case is unclear. We do not want to generalise further as the interview data does not offer detailed information about the political dimension between the board members. However, the important issue is how moral legitimation takes place as consultants add credibility to an issue that he could not get the board to accept.

A complementary example to the above is also expressed from a different client who refers to the political dimension between departments. The use of consultants helped alleviate some of the inherent competitive interests between members. The client makes reference to 'departmental agendas' and how a possible clash is possible when the representatives disagree or want to pursue their own independent aims. The client refers to this idea in two separate but interesting statements that we have attached in full below.

Very often it's when you are dealing in a large organisation you are dealing with a multi functional taskforce, so in other words, I'm sitting in the marketing and the brand area but I've got colleagues in finance and production, and investments and all the other bits and by bringing in an external person at that level, it alleviates all the political issues, in the sense, that you've got someone there that is independent, ok you're the sponsor and you know you've brought someone in to do something specifically but people can relate to that, because they know at the end of the day there is going to be a degree of objectivity (cl.8)

So in other words because you understand if you've worked in an organisation sometimes you get, you get 'agendas' basically, the IT agenda might be to build everything internally, whereas the best business practice would be to actually say 'well yeah we'll do certain things internally but really we need to bring in the experience of IT from outside' so they help to put together those cases and by and large, if you want to get things done and have successful projects and deliver on time it just helps with the project. So really we bring them in for project management skills and that helps. And then also, because they just add a, if you like, a different perspective on things as well, because organisations can become quite introverted, you know, inward looking in terms of how you do things (cl.8).

A keynote feature that we identify from the above comments, and which can be seen in contrast to moral legitimation as discussed in relation to outputs and consequences, is that relations of power are in the process of becoming *emergent* than having already been established. In procedural legitimacy, organisational actors are trying to use the consultants in order to help influence the construction of perceptions rather than to go against power relations that are explicit. Clients do not want to simply change the already existing status quo or challenge members with already vested interests. They are rather interested in positioning their actions in a way that impressions are created about their own political interests and which can be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

From this it can be inferred that the client's identity in dealing with other members, to some degree, is at stake for what other actors perceive them to be. We refer to the below statement from the same client in order to outline the above idea and how the emphasis is placed on the emergence of how competitive interests are perceived. The client who is a representative of the marketing operations does not want the IT department to assume that he has vested interests in his desire to outsource an IT project. The client's use of the consultants' objectivity and independence is blurred for whether presents functional or political qualities. Clients want the consultants to become independent evaluators of their proposed ideas, but at the same time they can influence how the consultants come to verify their propositions. To what extent the political or functional features of the consultants' involvement are representative is an issue that varies between clients.

the only political decision I have in bringing in a consultant is that external view, where basically you say, 'this is not marketing agenda politics, this isn't marketing politics, this is a business problem and we are bringing in an external person who will go across the top'. And that's to alleviate politics, if you like, you know, that's to overcome any potential politics so you are bringing in someone to say 'look we haven't got the skills in house, otherwise, if we had the skills in house we would probably do it in house, but generally you bring in a consultant to alleviate the politics rather than to [add something new] (cl.8).

#### 8.5.2 *Consultants' views*

The consultants' views on procedural legitimacy places emphasis on the operational qualities of their work and how their detachment from the client's politicised environment helps produce a fair evaluation over decisions. Consultants support the view of how their presence helps legitimise a set of propositions, because of the assumed credibility their position of externality brings to the client.

In discussing about their own objectivity consultants acknowledge the competitive interests within the client members. Some consultants are keen to underline how the quality of their knowledge service does not coincide with political alliances but rather *challenges* them. However, explicit acknowledgement is also made by consultants who support that they are often used as a rhetorical instrument to the clients' interests. As a result, clients tend to use consultants in order to often justify their own views against their colleagues. In a similar tone to our previous discussion we also find how equal emphasis is placed by consultants on the emergence of clients' reputation while decisions are produced. Consultants support the view that in aspects of procedural legitimacy clients are concerned with the crafting their identity. Such legitimation is sensitive for how colleagues construct impressions that can impact their future career.

We discuss the above theme by looking at the consultants' emphasis on their independence and objectivity, in the sense of detecting issues that were not apparent to the client members. Moreover in providing credibility to already expressed views, which nevertheless failed to be justified by the more senior internal actors. We discuss the consultants' view in acknowledging how clients can make use of the consultants' attached credibility to serving their political interests, and how such practices are strongly governed by rhetoric and impression management.

In the below statement the consultant argues for the relationship between his detachment from the client organisation, and how this can positively influence the quality

of advice produced. Even though the following statement can be thought of exaggerating the consultant's position, it nevertheless, indicates the fabric between the ethical nuances of legitimation.

But if you look at the consultant, from the consultant's perspective, the positive side of the consultant is he's completely unbiased. He is 'new'... he can take a completely objective view of that organization. And he can say, 'I've reached a judgement that needs doing this.. needs doing that.. needs doing that.. etc.' And there's no personality issue with him because he's completely new. And because he's experienced in doing this before, he'll say, 'Well, this worked last time I did this, that worked ...' So that's the *positive* side of the consultant. (con.5).

The consultants' externality to the clients' internal state of affairs is argued to provide some type of a privileged point of view, from which the consultants can make his/her evaluations about the client. The way in which the notion of externality is used is not only for characterising that consultants are not part of the organisation, but to emphasise how such detachment makes a *qualitative* difference for the advice that they are giving. This is illustrated from the experience of the same consultant who argues for the transparency with which views are constructed when entering into an agreement with the client. The consultants' interests are believed not to interfere with making a proposition. It is thought that this should be appreciated as a positive quality about the consultants' work.

Because they're not steeped in the internal politics. They can take a fresh look at a certain thing. It's like, you're going to some place and saying, 'Why are you doing it that way? Why not do it this way?' I'm trying to think of an example to give you. I think, for me, it's the completely unbiased, objective view that a good consultant would take in looking in that organization. (con.5).

In the context of procedural legitimacy, the importance of the consultants' independence concerns the decision making stages in which views/positions are formulated for what the organisational actors should adopt and why. As it is further supported below, consultants are argued to have a positive affect with influencing the client's perception to detecting alternative options or unrealised issues that matter to him/her.

I think they like the fact that there's someone who can give you impartial advice or offer impartial comment, who's able to see it from a different perspective than they can because they're in it everyday, they are in with it (con.5).

A similar comment is made by a different consultant stating:

But often people just need an outside pair of eyes to come in with no baggage, no history, no emotional attachment to it, and, just take a cold look at the business (con.8).

The conversations around *objectivity* and *externality* make an important assumption that is often not clear through the expressed statements. This assumption has to do with how objective and independent 'point of views' are not treated as simple consulting speculations or commentaries. The consultants believe to provide insight in a way that new are incorporated to action plans and can achieve results with detectable outcomes. As a result, consultants place emphasis on the qualitative attributes of the independence that is not just cognitively driven, but helps bring a new realisation that is currently absent in the client.

Apart from the consultants' emphasis on how their objectivity can be seen as correlating with the nature of advice communicated to the client, consultants also argue for the difference that their 'image' makes to the clients' decision making. As we discussed in a previous section, moral legitimation can be seen not just in the context of the consultant-client interaction, but also in relation to the clients' internal state of affairs. The issue of importance shifts the attention of how consultants generate insight through their independence, to creating credibility over the employees who have endeavoured to legitimise their position towards their own members. As a result, it is clear how consultants use the notion of objectivity in the sense of characterising the change in the power relations between members, while at the same time adopt the same term and its connoted meaning.

The following consultant makes the above point clear in arguing how managers fail to listen to the concerns by those at the lower layers of the organisation. The consultants have the opportunity to challenge those actors employees could not persuade. To what extent such credibility should be associated with the notion of objectivity and independence is subject to further discussion. However, consultants tend to associate that in the course of supporting a set of views, expressed by the internal client members, they also perform an important role to legitimising those views. As a result, consultants do not



simply become a means to reiterating what has already been expressed, but legitimise the content of the ideas in other party by making use of their authority as outsiders.

Some of the people I work with are extremely clever clients, brilliant people, very, very clever; know more about management than I'll ever know. Yet see the value of having somebody in who is not contaminated with the organisational history, to sit, and this is where things like 'borrow the watch to tell you the time', so I can go in say things, like in ACAS I've been working, and I can say things which they've already said, but because *I've said it*, things start to happen (con. 3).

The same is also succinctly expressed and supported by another consultant

You know, as exterior – as people who are external to the client's business, we can bring a different aspect, a different perspective, a different set of challenges. You know, one of the common complaints from people within client organisations is, when you've said something to their board, you go back to the client organisation and you will hear somebody say, 'well I've been saying that for years but nobody's listened to me'. And all of a sudden consultants arrive and you get listened to. And you do bring a sort of – the price tag that comes with the fees brings instant credibility. Now you then have to support it and prove it time and again, and, you're only as good as your last piece of delivery. But yeah, you're not bound by their fancies, you're not constrained by their limitations, no, you can bring a fresh perspective to things. (con.15)

The above consultant discusses the superficiality with which clients may buy into the clients' image as outsiders, and how legitimation is produced because of the trust in consultants. However, the consultant makes clear how such legitimation brings an element of risk that consultants cannot simply bypass in the name of their reputation. They have to effectively substantiate their claims and produce detectable 'results' through their actions. In the below discussion we concentrate on how consultants' acknowledge the rhetoric with which legitimation occurs in the client, and how their service is used in order to justify a decision that has been made by members. Throughout the various expressed views we want to also underline how consultants emphasise that their working practices live in a continuing type of *tension*. This is a tension in which consultants can choose to serve their business interests by supporting a point of view of a particular client member. This is a tension in which they also have to come in confrontation with client members that initiated their contract, or who may want to use the consultants' image of independence in a way that serves their interests.

To what extent consultants choose to serve the client's needs by adopting strategies that have a normative, ideological, but superficial character, varies between actors. Moore et. al., (2006) make an interesting argument by stating how difficult it is for auditing or consulting firms to know the future outcomes of their current actions. By

referring to 'plausible deniability' and 'escalation of commitment' the authors argue that: "While it is clearly true that accounting firms do have an interest in preserving their reputations and avoiding legal charges of fraud, it is entirely unclear whether these distant and probabilistic threats are sufficient to counteract real and immediate incentives to build relationships with clients and sell them services, especially given reductions in the threat of legal penalties" (p. 17-18).

In the following discussion we examine the consultants' experience in acknowledging the different reasons for which clients purchase their service. It is argued that clients use the consultants' services in order to legitimise a set of ideas that favours their interests. Consultants emphasise the plurality of causes behind the nature of clients' needs, and how the political dimension is one that experienced through various projects. In the below statement it is argued how clients need to project a positive image to stakeholders and protect their reputation. The consultant refers to the notion of *trust* and how reputation is established through the use of prestigious consulting brand. This is a theme that has been extensively discussed in the critical literature, and it often dominates the discussion as to how consultants operate in the broader scope of their service (Sturdy, 1997b, Grint and Case, 1998).

A lot of it is driven by the city. The chief executive might say to his board of directors, we have some problems. To get it through the city, for people to continue to invest in this company, shareholders will need to *show* that we're bringing in one of the big boys: Mackenzie, Booz Allen Hamilton, Accenture, PWC, PA, etc (con.26).

In the next interview reference is made to the internal political affairs between actors. In particular, individuals seek to satisfy the demands of their superiors despite their superficiality, so that they can maintain type of alignment or power relations that is to their interest.

Well, I guess the client wants activity to happen, which produces results that matter to the principal actors in the organisation or in order to impress its stakeholders. It's depending on what you measure. I mean, sometimes people measure things which are difficult to affect. I mean Scottish Enterprise for instance, like most of the enterprise agencies, has a metric which is in all of their annual reports, which is about jobs created and jobs maintained (con.16).

In discussing whether consultants tend to align their consulting activities with the interpersonal interests between members, we have shown how emphasis is placed on

their independence, objectivity and overall detachment with such interests. Next, we identify cases of when consultants might align their interests with what clients want to promote internally. It is difficult to provide a detailed interpretation for how 'ethical' or 'unethical' such consulting practices are. This is because the nature of the clients' needs can vary from wanting to support a decision that does not have negative effects to the interests of the members, to the one that does. As a result, we are keen to qualify how vulnerable the consultants' practices can be interpreted to be. Apart from the above however we also want to argue how consultants can exercise practices of rhetoric and impression management in order to help legitimise a client decision.

Correct! And they just wanted to say that it's come from somewhere else and that is classic. For example where they are not getting a response from the organisation where they are saying 'no we don't need to do that'. So they get a consultant in to say *what the client says* and because it's got a brand on the bottom they've got to do it yeah (con. 4).

Sometimes Chairman or Boards are very reticent to give appropriate information to their staff, to make the appropriate decisions. So a lot of the problem, I believe, is that the board/boards of companies in certainly when I was a consultant, didn't give the appropriate information down to the managers, and didn't delegate the appropriate *authority* to actually make the decision yeah?

*Interviewer: So that was within the organization itself?*

Correct. Whereas when a consultant comes in they are happy delegating the authority because they sold the story that these consultants will make things better. So, when, for example, a management consultant he'll go in to tender, they will come out with 'we will save 20% of your manufacturing costs', 'we will allow you to expand into new markets', 'we will look at alternative sources of supply, for example, yeah?' (con.4).

We discuss the context of the above quotes in reference to moral legitimation and not in the context of defining what moral values represent as if they are part of a normative set of beliefs that help define 'right' from 'wrong'. We discuss how moral legitimation is exemplified in the above statements with how organisational actors perceive them to be. As a result, clients that may want to achieve congruence with their colleagues may use a report produced from a consulting firm, and in this sense, help initiate moral legitimacy (Mills and Bettner, 1992). We do not argue for whether such actions should be defined as moral or immoral in themselves, but how they are understood in the subjective context of the clients' experience. To what extent is legitimate for a client to buy such service in order to increase his/her image in the firm is subject to interpretation. Furthermore, we

underline how the justification of the credible image clients want to project has a moral connotation to it (Moore et. al., 2006). The value which organisational actors perceive to obtain from relying on the consultants' reputation is associated with qualities of integrity which is socially constructed within that environment. The next consultant refers to his experience with clients that would buy into his service in order to appear professional, or in order to avoid criticism by their colleagues. It is clear how clients operate within an organisational 'mind setting' that it is perceived as credible. This creates a greater variation for understanding the reasons for which clients make use of the consultants' perceived independence and objectivity. Clients amalgamate the personal features of their own aspirations with the consultants' projected image and against the particular mindset of that organisation.

For example, in some organisations, your status and your seniority are to some degree indicated by how much you spend on the external consultants, and therefore, there can be a motivation to just buy in a lot of consultancy, to show that you're a senior and important person. Another motivation can be to associate with people that are interested in them as firms. So often people will go to a McKenzie or Booz-Allen or someone with a name in a field, simply because they want to associate with individuals from those organisations. So there can be a range of reasons why people [buy consulting services]... Absolutely, people make buying decisions for all sorts of reasons, some people do it to avoid fear, some people do it to say 'Well ok, I don't really know what I'm doing here but if we hire in a big name firm then if it goes all pear-shaped, I'm going to say to my boss, well we got McKenzie what better risk can you...' (con.9).

Concluding this part of our analysis we want to argue for the organisational affect that the consultants' image of independence make to the life of the client organisation. From our above discussion we have illustrated how clients use consultants against their internal politicised environment which is characterised by competition of personal or departmental interests (Moore et. al., 2006). We have shown how consultants are used in order to add credibility against already raised views from within members, and which senior individuals often fail to trust or take into account. Procedural legitimation takes place because of the moral dimension that the consultants' credibility gains. That is, from being external to the particular state of affairs of the immediate client. Even though discourses about the consultants' objectivity are interwoven with personal interests, we have argued how the consultants' independence is treated for its operational functions and with providing 'true and fair' evaluations which are believed to be unbiased.

We recognise that the effort to elicit how procedural legitimation is *interpreted* within its moral connotation is not representing the content of moral values as if they could be constructed against other ethical principals. As a result, we have argued how clients, from the one side, get hold of the consultants' attached objectivity as if it has an inherent authority in itself. At the same time, organisational actors try to incorporate such broad moral dimension while they pursue their own interests (Moore et. al., 2006). There are cases where client tends to manipulate this attached moral quality/authority to their own interests. Even though, we do not want to make conclusions about the normative character of the above practices, we want to argue how the actors' use of the consultants' image of objectivity and independence has a direct affect in the state of affairs of the organisation. Regardless of the superficiality with which the consultants' impression management practices are discussed in the literature (Ernst and Kieser, 2002a, Ernst and Kieser, 2002b; Heusinkveld, 2004) and with being dependent on ritual and rhetoric (Alvesson, 2001), internal power dynamics between members change often with positive affect.

As argued by Werr (2002) the consultants' image despite being perceived superficial does not have just a superficial effect. Furthermore, in cases where actors make use of their organisational power in a way that often becomes abusive to other individuals, the consultants' presence creates a kind of 'rescue affect' which the clients treasure. As seen from the previous examples, already expressed concerns by employees were not taken into account by their own superiors. The organisational position in which these individuals can find themselves can often be highly restrictive or distressing. For them the consultants' image and regardless of its often attached superficial credibility, serves a particular function. This is to challenge already established power relations or a set of vested interests that the employees have difficulty orchestrating themselves.

It is important to acknowledge how such client intentions influence the impressions created about the consultants' involvement. Moore et. al., (2006) for example argue for the importance of acknowledging the difference between conscious and unconscious bias, from auditors and consultants, in legitimising their clients' actions. The authors make good reference to this issue by stating: "in models of auditor independence, researchers have assumed that independence is a question of whether the auditor chooses to carry out

a thorough, unbiased audit or collude with a firm's managers. Psychological research on the impact of motivated reasoning and self-serving biases questions the validity of this assumption. This evidence suggests that intentional corruption is probably the exception, and that unconscious bias is far more pervasive. This distinction between conscious corruption and unconscious bias is important, because the two respond to different incentives and operate in different ways" (p. 16) As a result, the consultants' produced legitimization cannot take the same dimension of responsibility for when consultants often remain unaware of the impact of their actions in the client. Different interpretations can be given for how legitimate such reasons are in themselves and whether what the employees feel about their managers should be treated as fact.

## **8.6 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the dimension of moral legitimation as it is expressed in the consultant-client interaction. We have concentrated on discussing how moral legitimacy is expressed in relation to the collective interests between organisational actors. It is driven by those ideological values that concern the construction and exercise of social norms like, fairness, justice, truth, and rightness.

The application of moral legitimacy is argued not to privilege an actor's personal interests and his/her immediate obtainable outcomes, but the wider collective interests which are not necessarily measurable or financially driven. Studies of moral legitimacy often concentrate on understanding the professional code of conduct in which consultants deal with the client (Poulsen, 1997). As a result, emphasis is placed on whether consultants attempt to manipulate the client's perception of his/her problems by means of information reporting or with disclosing facts (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b).

Moral legitimacy has been mainly discussed in the context of whether consultants favour their business interests over the clients. Emphasis is placed on how the exercise of consulting activities, and the outcomes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, are situated in the nature of the interpersonal interactions between actors. The consultants' process of fulfilling the clients' need is situated in addressing the complex personal and organisational needs which may go beyond the immediate sphere of organisational problems and solutions (Reynolds, 2000). Interpersonal factors like, personality,

unrealised assumptions, and previous experiences, are thought to come into play and influence how the receiving party perceives the quality of the service (Brignall, 1991). As a result, it is argued how the nature of clients' needs is fluid, difficult to predict, and there is a strong presence of uncertainty for how consultants need to know the order through which to undertake activities (see Poulfelt, 1997). From the above, is inferred that consultants manage to legitimise the morality of their actions by applying principles which provide guidance for how to deal with above dimensions. For example, making of extravagant claims and requesting the client to make unnecessary expenditures for activities that are not required are believed to be practices that break away from such professional code of conduct.

This chapter has tried to examine moral legitimacy not only from the perspective of consultants' professional code, but also for what their practices *mean* in relation to the internal and often politicised environment of the clients. We argued that an important dimension for whether consultants succeed or fail to legitimise their competing knowledge claims are not necessarily situated on how they apply such a code of practice. It is rather dependent on how the consultants' externality and perceived independence is affecting the power relationship and competitive personal interests between client members. In this context, consultant might help generate dimensions of moral legitimation because their actions produce accounts of meaning-relations that are closely associated with the lacking credibility between members. We used the work by Moore et. al., (2006) in order to support our proposition and show how associations to moral attributes are made in order to foster a degree of credibility or create resistance. The consultants' independence is used as if it contains an inherent element of authority but which is interwoven with the individuals' interests and power relations.

We do not discuss the nature of the consultants' moral legitimation in relation to a set of normative or ethical qualities through which we can objectively evaluate whether they are moral or not. We have argued how the clients' conversations about the positive attributes of the consultants' independence and objectivity are closely associated with their own political interests. Even though there is reference to the consultant's role in helping produce such a moral legitimation, the clients' motives and interests for wanting to accomplish their aims might not be counted as moral, if assessed from a different set of

values. However, we argued how vested power relations between organisational actors as well as the exercise of authority, is often perceived as abusive/distressing for other actors. This situation creates an important opportunity to use consultants in order to generate resistance. At various situations there is a constructed sense of ‘moral duty’, by clients, to create opposition against colleagues. The use of consultants to accomplish such an aim becomes a valued resource. In this context, the consultants’ moral legitimation towards clients is highly dependent on the clients’ internal and politicised environment.



## Chapter 9: Discursive Legitimation

### 9.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters we examined the notion of legitimation as outlined by Suchman (1995) and illustrated in the works by Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) Palazzo and Scherer (2006). From this discussion we have identified that legitimation has different dimensions. Congruence occurs at different social contexts and with their own distinct ideological underpinnings. In the case of cognitive legitimation we can have the case of an audience accepting the making of a proposition by its management, on basis of its coherence reasoning, rationale and argument. Such actors might perceive that the proposition might not generate the potential anticipated outcomes or fail to produce the desired result in tune with their self-situated interests. Such actors may be willing to accept the premises of the proposition but fail to support, integrate, or implement them in praxis. A complementary conclusion to the above has also been that discussions of legitimation are often situated within 'positive' or 'critical' ends of interpretation. We have seen that authors argue how legitimation is achieved because organisations identify areas of adaptation and conformity, within the changing demands of their internal/external environment (Scott, 1995). At the same time, authors (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer, 1983; Meyer and Scott, 1983; Watzlawick, 1984) emphasise the superficiality with which organisations often tend to justify impressions to members, and how management is supported by practices of myth, ritual, rhetoric, and impression management.

In response to the above approaches, this chapter examines an additional dimension hitherto neglected in the literature which underlines the *discursive* dimension of legitimation. We exercise the theoretical premises of this dimension by drawing on Habermas's work (1984a, 1984b, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003). Habermas argued that legitimation can be understood not as an outcome that is achieved through forms of 'strategic action' or use of rhetoric and power, but as a phenomenon that is grounded on the dialectic relationship between actors, and where the inter-subjectivity of meaning provides consensus. Such consensus makes the social coordination possible, and can be understood by studying the forms of communicative social interactions where intentions

and meaning are expressed. We demonstrate our use of the above framework by examining two broad set areas of discussion.

The first one is developed in this chapter and explores how legitimation is produced through means of verbal and non-verbal communication. By verbal communication we allude to language usage which is not just a vehicle of expression of vocal utterances, but, a system of meaning-making relations whereby ideas are ingrained within the individual's system of beliefs, culture, and perceived reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2001; Watzlawick, 1976, 1984). The cardinal point of difference with the argument presented in the previous chapters is the *discursive* side of language (Giroux and Taylor, 2002; Toukas, 2005a; von Krogh and Grand, 1999). In this paradigm organisational actors are not to be seen simply as communicating a set of beliefs which need to be accepted or rejected as intended.

Habermas (1984a, 1998) argues how the dialogue and expressed critique over claims can alter their intended of communication. As a result, we argue that acceptance and conformity is not a result of prior knowledge for how the organisation needs to adapt to its audience or the environment. Legitimacy becomes possible when it becomes an outcome of a continuing discursive relationship whereby actors try to understand the meaning and actions of the other party. We translate the premises of the above idea in the consultant-client relationship where actors enter into a discourse with clients. Initially expressed beliefs are being challenged as a result of this interaction and dialogues. What helps achieve legitimation is how the intended or unintended practices help create patterns of meaning that are mutually shared. By referring to the non-verbal communication we make reference to the notion of pre-understanding, which is a phenomenon rarely acknowledged in the management consulting literature.

Habermas (1971, 1984a, 1984b) argues that the set of carrying pre-suppositions that might remains unexpressed and undisclosed can nevertheless influence how legitimation occurs. This is because the individual's locus of subjective experience conditions the nature of embodiment for new ideas/experience. We argue that the means by which consultants make their intentions apparent in the client party, need to be assessed in relation to the often hidden expectations and beliefs of the other party. The process of making such pre-understanding apparent can help influence the discursive side of the

communication, by means of correcting misconceptions or challenging unexamined assumptions. Discussions of pre-understanding within social sciences can be seen in the context of habitus that was developed by Bourdieu (1990; 2005) and whose use of the term has overlapping similarities with that of Habermas.

Complementary to our study of the above communicative aspect can be made from understanding the nature of the consultant-client *relationship* (Clark, 1995; Werr and Styhre, 2002). We identify how repetitive emphasis is made for how the quality of the relationship can affect the legitimation process. The interviewees refer to the nature of the relationship as containing the scope for the evolution of the dynamics of social interaction and which contain features of power and decision making. In the course of the deployment of the consultant-client relationship, actors argue how their way of relating to the other party can foster or hinder the achieved alignment of consensus that helps produce legitimation. Our analysis indicates that when clients have the opportunity to contribute to the consultants' advice-development process, there seems to be a much a greater alignment of inter-subjectivity. This helps reinforce the presence of legitimation in the relationship. Also, we find that the clients' cases of challenging the consultants' propositions, and where power is not perceived to be a sole product of the consultants' activities, reinforces the above proposition. We argue that our discussion of the consultant-client relationship reinforces Habermas's (1984a; 1984b; 2001) argument of legitimation as being a product of alignment and consensus.

## **9.2 Language & Conversations**

An important dimension for understanding Habermas's theory concerns the nature and use of language through which communication is possible. Language is not to be understood as simply representing a syntactic or semantic system, but a means of *conditioning* the expression and perception of knowledge claims. Habermas (1984a, 1984b) emphasizes the importance of definition and pre-understanding as a prerequisite to the creation of meaning. Habermas treats language according to Wittgenstein (1958) and in the context of being subject to the rules and intentions governing the use of language (see Taylor, 1991; also Searl, 1969, 1995; Willmott, 2003). Meaning should not be understood for what the words represent, but how they are intentionally used within context. Hence, by sharing the 'same' language it is thought that actors share the

associated meaning of words and their representation (Van Dijk, 1997). Habermas states: “Only the communicative model of action presupposes language as a medium of uncurtailed communication whereby speakers and hearers, out of the context of their preinterpreted lifeworld, refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation” (1984a:95).

Through language, organizational actors socially construct accounts of meaning that may be argued to represent a given reality. Language plays a critical influence for how knowledge-claims are shared and maintained between parties, and helps maintain the way social interactions are sustained. This is why Habermas states that the “epistemic authority passes over from the private experiences of a subject to the public practices of a linguistic community” (p. 134). For Habermas (1984a, 1984b), language becomes the battleground where subjective and objective qualities become explicit. It is through language where knowledge/validity claims become contested, and it is the reason for which they may be accepted or rejected by an audience. For Habermas the process of understanding the way language is exercised is important, precisely because it helps *condition* the produced shared understanding and meaning between people:

“Communicative freedom exists only between actors, who, adopting a performance attitude, want to reach an understanding with one another about something and expects one another to take positions on reciprocally raised validity claims. The fact that communicative freedom depends on an intersubjective relationship explains why this freedom is coupled with illocutionary obligations” (Habermas 1996:119).

In this context, this dynamic social dialogue between the proponents of those making objectified belief-claims with those challenging and criticizing their validity as well as accepting their premises, creates patterns of meaning that binds or divides the two parties. In making the above argument Habermas (2001) acknowledges the underlying presence of power and competing interests. Claims come to be validated because of the manipulative representation of events or the favouring of personal interests based on peoples’ acclaimed authority/expertise. For Habermas (1984a, 1984b) intersubjective meaning is created between social actors when validity claims are made, whose meaning is equally shared by the other party. In this context, language is not simply to be understood as a linguistic vehicle of vocal utterances, but as medium of meaning. This

instrumental view of language and for the construction of a social or an organisational reality has been widely argued and supported in the wider literature (see Mandelbaum 1949; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Luckman, 1983; Goffman, 1963; Mills, 1959; Newman, 1995; Searl, 1969,1995). A complimentary theme to our study of language is also the play of *conversations* (Ford and Ford, 1995; Ford and Ford, 1999). Even though the notion of conversation is intimately related to language exercise the term is used to characterise the broader nature of discourse, possessing overlapping dimensions with that of language (Van Dijk, 1997). Through conversations actors establish important areas of agreement, the scope of activity of the other party, and craft expectations for what is to be delivered and how (Ford and Ford, 2003).

When interviewees refer to alignments or misalignment of 'language' they place emphasis on the communication interpretive means of conveying it. When reference is made to 'conversations' the interviewees place emphasis on developmental stages of their communicative interaction, in which the content of their advice propositions is *emerging*. Regardless of the minor differences between the two terms we use them in order to characterise the communicative interaction through which knowledge-claims are made. Moreover how they are being conditioned, challenged, modified, accepted or rejected in the relationship.

### 9.2.1 Clients' Views

Through the discussion of the following empirical excerpt we see that language plays a significant role in sustaining the intersubjective meaning between consultants and clients. The sharing of the 'same language' is to be understood as the sharing of the same beliefs, interpretation, meaning and understanding (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this context, we argue how language can be used to foster or prevent the shared understanding between actors which ultimately leads to legitimisation. The next statement indicates a case in point.

...one of the things Anne put her finger on, and is exactly right, is how do we talk to a remotely based community with a common language, with common goals and with common measures, how can we do that? The [consultants'] method of doing it and I always call it 'industrial', is too industrial, it's too whack, whack, whack; we do this then we do that then we do...no!, HR doesn't do things like a 'bam, bam, bam' process like that (cl.24).

The experience of the above clients is particularly characteristic as it vividly illustrates the significance language plays for sustaining the consultant-client relationship during the business assignment. The client expresses his frustration for the technical language consultants adopt to communicate their advice. The consultants' managerial methods and techniques are obviously based on research and industry knowledge. However, frameworks of meaning which consultants are well acquainted with may become an obstacle when shared with the client. This is not because the content of the information consultants communicate is inaccurate, but because of the incongruity of the client's subjectivity and situated 'world-view' that makes it relevant.

I met two CAC consultants: one of them is sat where you're sitting and the other one is standing with a pen at the board. This guy hits me with this whole stream of consciousness stuff which I really don't understand. This guy is drawing diagrams and they are doing it at the same time and you're thinking, 'what is going on here', I am not an unintelligent person, what are you talking about? The reason I use that is [because the consultants] asked me, 'would you come along and present to us what you thought of us?' and I'll show you the slide. So this is me presenting to [the consultants]. It just freaked me out because I thought I'm a pretty logical guy, I've been with the company a long time! but I've never come across anything like this, 'the consultant-speak', one guys waving his arms around, one guys writing on the board, so I ended up after the initial pitch being very confused, but trusting in the fact that Peter knew what he was talking about and that these guys would be good, that was my initial reaction...The best way to do it is to paint a little picture for you (cl.24).

This course has got to come over in their [HR employees'] language in the way they want to react; it's got to be fun, it's got to have lots of stickies on the wall, it's got to have lots of charts, because that's the language HR understands. Sitting there with textbooks does not make it! Very much so, deliver it in *our* language (cl.24).

Maybe it started of with alienating us using language that we didn't understand but obviously they have to get under the business and understand and I think they did do that eventually (cl.23).

As the above excerpts indicate the application of the consultants' recommendations is not sufficient to bring change between the employees' operations. The accommodation of what the new propositions mean for the employees, and how the new methodology can be ingrained within their every day work practices, becomes the primary factor for the success or failure of the project. For this reason the client is eager to suggest the channelling of advice by the consultants in ways that will be more easily accommodated in the employees' experience. The clients' suggestions for the pictorial use of the consultants' advice as being more closely related to the HR's culture, reinforces the importance of language as medium of meaning, and not just as a means of expression. It

is worth noting that the clients' reaction to the consultants' suggestion made an important difference during the course of the assignment. This is, with the consultants' feeling compelled to modify their approach. The consultants' listened to the clients' ideas and found new channels of communication that would be more appropriately relevant to the employees' culture/needs.

I think it's just about how they approach it, if they come in using your language or willing to use your language and work with you as opposed to opposing things which, to some extent, [the consultants] tried to do and Philip challenged them on that. (cl.23)

In a different client-assignment and similar to the above example we find the application of metaphors a means to extracting information from the client party. In the following case example, the consultants suggests to employees to express their views, about the organisation, by drawing pictures. By using metaphors the employees felt comfortable because it was as if they could express how they see themselves in relation to the demands of the organisation. With the employees' personalised metaphors, being the consultants' starting point of reference, the drawings sustained the shared meaning between the two parties. The consultants made use of the clients' made-meaning-relations in order to propose and demonstrate their advice/solutions. The subject which binds both consultants and clients creates a situated rationality from which validity claims are conditioned/justified.

They did a variety of things really. We wanted to stimulate discussion and give free rain, but it was almost like 'what is it like working in [this organisation] and in some cases we would ask people to draw that pictorially. That provided quite a successful theme, because it actually relaxed people to the point where we got information out. So, the pictorial bit became a basis for somebody and then a description of what does that actually mean. What does that image represent? And we actually got a lot of data from that. Which was then... it wasn't just going around in a circle and asking a series of questions it was to actually stimulate discussion (cl.20).

Yes, in the workshops. But that almost stimulated enough to get the discussion going, they took it forward to "so what do you mean by that?" and that's why you see some of these quotes came out what people actually said. And that was quite a powerful way to present the message back, as to how people feel about the organisation. This is what matters to them (cl.20).

Another experience to the above discussion is also expressed by the following managing director. The client engaged a consulting firm to advice them for optimising

their IT systems for the creation of new electronic accounts for its customers. Even though the consultants were knowledgeable about their area of services, their communication with the client took place at a very technical level that became incomprehensible and uncomfortable to the client. Because of the above miscommunication the client decided to end the business contract and looked for a similar advisory service from a different firm. The lack of a successful communicative discourse is not only attributed to the technical nature of the project but also on the technical terminology. According to the client, it is the lack of *effort* by the consultants to contextualise the technical aspects of their knowledge to the clients' needs. The next example is a good illustration about the social realm in which actors have to enter for making their knowledge relevant, and which helps exemplify the essence of Habermas's argument: "For both parties the interpretive task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that in the revised version "his" external world and "my" external world can – against the background of "our" lifeworld- be relativized in relation to "the" world, and the divergent situation definitions can be brought to coincide sufficiently" (Habermas, 1984a:100).

And after not very long, we realised that whilst they could help us with the first piece, which was just actually putting out the initial letter, - so we sent out an initial letter that said 'here's some high level things that we're interested in, are you interested?', to the various suppliers, and they helped us with that, which was fine. Once we went down to things like function-specification, as I say, this is when we started talking completely different languages, so it was just silly. We were talking to the computer suppliers saying: 'tell us the protocol for such and such', we wanted to say to them 'how would you handle 15,000 mortgage accounts?', and whereas we would say, 'What sort of speed will this work on? Will that work with 13 branches?' they wanted to ask about "intellectual architectures". And no matter how much we tried to bring them back down and say: 'look we're [this type of organisation], we're not a computer person, we're a [this type of organisation], it just wasn't working (cl.11).

Yes. I mean I've got a reasonable understanding of computing and a reasonable understanding of management, but I still prefer people to speak 'proper' (cl. 11).

It was purely language. They were using at time what I call 'management speak', which just annoyed me. So instead of actually coming along and saying: 'well what we're going to do today is to have a look at the sort of the initial part of the project, or, we want to have a look just major parts of the project', we actually sat down and they'd say: 'well today we'll have a 'heads up' look', - sorry? And it was just, you know, 'we'll just run this up the flag pole and see who salutes it', and it just started to annoy me, and it didn't matter how many times I either told him directly or took the pee out of him while he was saying it, he just didn't get it, and that was as much as anything else (cl.11).



The prominent role of language for understanding the dynamics of communicative discourse can be found in its function to becoming a point of reference that integrates differing views and intentions. Meaning is created and shared between individuals not because actors merely share the linguistic signs/artefacts of language but because they share the intangible values, norms, beliefs that language connotes (Giddens, 1984, 1987, 1993). A succinct example that can illustrate the above proposition can be seen from the experience of the following client. After the start of the project, a member of the client firm became more personally involved with the consultants' work than the rest of the members. The client's involvement was made in reference to training principles they were seeking to integrate in the Human Resource department. The individual played a significant role in the successful development of the project. This is because he became a point of reference for the rest of the client members who were not familiar with how the consultants' ideas could be applied within their own organisational setting. The client member managed to align the meaning differences between the two parties even though this was not initially part of the contract. The primary obstacle that both parties experienced concerned the application of the consultants' managerial ideas into the firm. The specific client member acted like a bridge for not only conveying the various views, but for dealing with the emerging uncertainty between members. In becoming a point of reference, for the two parties, the specific helped 'translate' the language, understanding and intentions between actors. This is not only a transferable communication process but an interpretive interaction in which the alteration of meaning and language play a significant role.

I think from my perspective, I was working on the anti-bullying and harassment project at the time I went on the course so I was able to take that away but what we did have was an expert in Philip who was our bridge between CAC and what we were already doing. So when I was doing things like the work break down structure which was going and looking at everything that needed to be done in that particular project, Philip came and supported that and I worked with another colleague on her project and so the two of us and Philip, worked on both projects at the same time and he bridged that gap, if you like, so if we did have any concerns when we started putting it into practice, he was the person that we went to who fully understood the system as he'd become the expert so he helped us work through that. So Philip bridged that gap between the consultants and if there were any grey areas, when you actually come to put it into practice and maybe we haven't understood the workshop or we haven't actually come across that particular issue then Philip worked those through with us. (cl.23).

No, simply because my key role was as an interpreter between the two. After you get a handle on what they're talking about, and it took me two or three months to get a handle on exactly what they were talking about, once you've got it, you've got it,

and, it's simply a case of saying to them, 'you need to back off you need to slow down you need to do this', and then to the HR community it's very much 'trust me; this works, try it, give it a go'. (cl.24)

Gergen (1999) argues how: "Language and other forms of representation gain their meaning from the ways in which they are used in relationships" (p.48 see also Gergen, 2001). The use of artefacts to reinforcing a given set of meaning and understanding is an important aspect to linguistics. Studies on the use and manipulation of metaphors in the organisational context have shown their transcendental influence of meaning to organisational actors (Morgan, 1980). One of the primary means through which consultants managed to achieve an equally shared level of understanding with the client firm is through their effort to understand the language and it's meaning representations as perceived by the client. Even though the exercise of language in the previous mentioned examples hindered the consultant-client relationship, the consultants' conscientious effort to align their strategy with that of the client in this example, became significant for the success of the project. The consultants' adoption of the clients' business values and language allowed for the desired alignment and shared understanding through which they managed to win the business assignment. The client's comment on the consultants' 'superficial', but nevertheless effective approach is interesting as it shows this 'dual' function of language as a mechanism of information exchange together with the construction of a social reality.

The consultants that we eventually appointed ... when they were tendering for business they gave an excellent presentation about how they would conduct the research, about what they thought the findings might be. And some of the things that were very impressive, which may be rather superficial things, were that they had downloaded the [organisation's] strategies and referred to them, and had pictures of [the organisation]. So, it already looked as if they had tailored their work to what we were looking for, and that was quite professionally done. (cl.1).

The consultants' adoptions of the organisational symbols, strategic metaphors, and images as contained in the client's website helped create a communal consensus at the time of the consultants' presentation to clients. The success or failure of this practice became dependent on its context of application as well as the particular organisational actors who made use of them. In this sense, we cannot generalise about the ways through which language can be used in order to achieve consensus. However, it is the central role language plays within the communicative discourse between consultants and clients that

we wish to highlight. The client's experience from the following excerpt is an additional example of the above proposition, as the subject of *football teams* becomes the consultants' starting point in his liaison with the client parties. Starting from a common and inter-subjectively shared point of reference, the consultant tried to create a set of consensus which was thought to be further sustained in the business context. Furthermore, the social context of football teams may be argued that it contains its own commonly inter-exchanged language that the individuals can relate to despite their personal differences on the business level.

A young chap, - talking about relationships and about personalities, a young guy from Surrey, educated in Surrey, a very much South of England born and bred, first thing he did when he came into the town where he was doing this particular project, was learn who supported which football teams. And he found out who the Sunderland supporters were and he found out who the Newcastle supporters were, and, he got some information and some local information about the place, and talked about that. And I remember seeing him at the first meeting, and you can argue about whether he meant it or it was just his job, but his first 15 minutes of his presentation was talking about local themes, and it was a very much, a sort of, 'How does he know that? Maybe he's not so bad for a Surrey lad', so there was a sort of, not an acceptance, but there was a recognition that he was trying to involve .... rather than coming in and saying 'I'm the consultant, I know about these things, now you listen to what I've got to tell you' (cl.4).

The relationship between 'language' and 'partnership' is another theme that emerges from the above discussion that focuses on the social qualities of interrelationship between actors. The exercise and sharing of language, on a mutually shared level, allows the possible successful social coordination between actors. The initiative to examine how linguistic utterances impact on the communication and relationship on a micro-level, would require obtaining real-time data and a different research focus, which falls outside the scope of this chapter. Even though the chapter is limited in showing how the use of language helps sustain the relationship between the two parties, it nevertheless shows how it plays a determinative role in the creation of a mutually shared meaning.

As the following statement indicates from the case of a different client, the consultants' 'speaking the language of the client' is a metaphor that signifies the consultants' sharing of the meaning and reality as lived by the client. It is through understanding the inner and cultural dynamics of the client that the consultants communicate their advice. The client is satisfied with the consultants' practice and efforts as it is illustrated in the next statement:

I think, that, was one of the reasons why we had such a successful partnership and as I mentioned earlier, it is about a partnership...These consultants need to be accessible sort of 24/7, and they need to be able to speak the *language* that you speak within the organisation, and they need to be very quick to understand and be immersed in the organisation and feel and demonstrate themselves as part of it. (cl.10).

Apart from the clients' emphasis on language we now briefly illustrate their reference on the use of conversations as a means to sustaining the mutually shared or emergent understanding. We identify how legitimation can be seen as an achieved outcome in which actors voice their views (Ford and Ford, 1995, 1999). Such conversations rotate around the consultants' actions against the client's expectations and perceived outcomes. Conversations help ensure the creation of meaning between (Ford and Ford, 1995). Through conversations assumptions are being made explicit and the subjectivity of experience can find common patterns of meaning in the other party. Our analysis of conversations has overlapping similarities with our reference to language but also differs, in that the content communicated can be seen in a flux form of emerging (Ford and Ford, 1999).

We start with the experience of a chief executive who refers to his use of one of the Big Five consulting firms in a project that lasted for more than four years. This project demanded the re-orchestration of some of the firm's basic operational processes. The interaction and dialogue between the two parties had become an important pillar that sustained the success of the below project. The following excerpts indicates how the client provided a comprehensive picture of his conversations with the consultants and they helped shape the course of the project. We attach the next statements in full as we think that captures the essence of the issue we want to address:

There is no compartmentalisation to the extent that you get from the consultant, whether it's KPMG, Booz Allen, Boston Consulting Group, or whatever, you get a solution that is almost a take it or leave it solution. In the interaction is such that it's continuously refined and if I think about the business transformation program, leaving aside right choice and my choice so that the remuneration reward flexibility of rewards has been and gone, but as we continue the journey on the transformation program, there is continual refinement, continual enhancement of what we're trying to do so in terms of that overall program, for example, we developed a program that was initially designed to be eighteen months longer than the one we ultimately took and the challenge from ABA and CBA in this instance it was a combined challenge, the business was in our view to go faster, go harder, you will have no more challenge, you will have no more difficulty, you will just get through it faster, and so in that regard they challenged us on that. Three years into the program, coming to the conclusion, *we would say that was exactly the right challenge*. So, in that regard do we accept the consultant's view as sacrosanct and perfectly implemented or is it the

output of a series of discussions and conversations and it's the subject of continual refinement? Because if it isn't, you will end up with something the consultant's designed and in the absence of your challenge, they will deliver what's most appropriate for them (cl.19).

I think the start point...with whoever it happens to be and it doesn't matter which consultant it is, is a collective understanding of what it is we're trying to tackle, what resources we have available, what gaps there are in our resources that we will expect the consultant to close and developing a plan that we have confidence we're able to execute. This is probably a statement of the crushingly obvious but we wouldn't agree a plan with a consultant, regardless of the nature of the project, whether it was a contained three month piece of work or a three or four year piece, it's about the consultant and the company being very clear about the individual capability of the two halves and then blocking them together, does it work (cl.19).

I don't think we ever 'just went along with it' simply because they said it. It's really important to keep coming back to the earlier comments I made, the way that we've worked with Deloitte, or whoever, is very much around collaborative development of what is it we're trying to do, we never are in the place where the consultant is doing it 'to us', we are doing it together, so in that regard, we've never got to a point where their recommendation is so at odds with our view that we've rejected it because we would have stopped that earlier in the process, as we developed it through (cl.19).

the approach that we adopt is that whilst we regard the consultant as a hugely valuable input, they don't have the right answer, they have a range of solutions that, with the business, they work up (cl.19).

Complementary to the above quotes the following, different client, refers to his conversation with a strategy consulting firm at the time a series of strategic plans were drawn in order to radically change and improve the firm's deteriorating performance. An important notion that emerges from the next quote refers to the clients' criticism and challenge of the consultants' suggestions, as well as their mutual sharing and agreement. For Habermas (1984a, 1984b; see also Honneth and Joas, 1991) the presence of such criticism can reinforce the collective and shared mutual understanding between members. Habermas states: "the concept of reaching understanding suggests a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticisable validity claims" (1984a:116). In this sense, the client's acceptance of the validation of the consultants' claims takes place through the following practice of discourse that challenges and conditions them with the result of creating a sense of mutual understanding.

We spent a great deal of time challenging and debating and by getting the fifty top brains in the company to a series of workshops which were structured at key times during the change programme, during the formulation of the programme, we provided that pushback, we provided that challenge – that was absolutely vital. In no sense was a programme in which consultants came in with no expertise of our industry and told us what to do. They came in and helped us to rigorously challenge the ideas which we then formulated, which they helped us validate, and eventually we formed a plan, and then they went away (cl.13).

The client argues how the criticism expressed towards the consultants not only helped refine the ideas communicated, but also fill the knowledge-gaps produced from the fact that the client members were not acquainted with the new information. Furthermore, the process of challenging the consultants' suggestions helped towards the claims' legitimacy. This is because during this discursive interaction, the client members were seeking to identify the relevance of such ideas within their own context. The consultants had to modify their position in some of the areas. However, this discursive interaction created a more positive ground for meaning-alignment that in turn assisted the consultants' legitimation of service.

### 9.2.2 Consultants' views

Apart from the clients' view on the subject we also come to examine the consultants' attached importance on the use of 'language' and 'conversations'. Consultants believe that they have to communicate the language of the client in order to be able to deliver their course of service successfully. The consultants place emphasis on the need to understand the clients' inner organisational dynamics, political interests and culture, and adopt their way of presenting material in a way that is meaningful to the client members. The consultants acknowledge that the process of achieving such communication takes place in a series of complexities for how accurately they are detecting what such inner dynamics are in the first place. Consultants play an interpretive role with having to understand and translate their own material to the client's situation. This is a process of contextualisation where the content of a common set of ideas is being modified, changed or given new nuances in order to fit the recipients' cultural paradigm (Suddabby and Greenwood, 2001; Heusinkveld, 2004). We also find that consultants place equally distinct emphasis on the notion of 'conversations'. Consultants believe that it is through conversations that they create common patterns of understanding which guide the later parts of the relationship. It is through conversations that consultants establish what is needed in the client, in contrast to entering the assignment with preconceived ideas they then try to adapt to the situation. By having 'conversations' consultants emphasise the nature of the fluidity in which the advice is being developed and *dialectically* co-emerging. We illustrate the above premise by looking at the experience of the below

consultant who refers to his communication of advice to clients. The next statement is in response to our enquiry of how the consultants endeavoured convincing the client. The consultant answers by arguing how he needs to use a language that fits the social and cultural norms of the client. The content of the advice is itself of no value unless it is translated in the interpretive schemata of the other party.

First of all you have to be able to display the world in a way that they will recognize. How many times you've seen flow charts of stuff which are so bewildering, that relates to systems and things of that sort that the customer whoever who has no interaction, simply does not recognise. So firstly it has to be a recognisable display of the problem...Secondly it has to be succinct. In my judgement, what you can say on one side of the piece of paper, by juxtaposing ideas and things of that sort *using the language that the client is using is absolutely everything*. Sure, refer to appendices and things of that sort, but there's an elegance in simplicity which helps people think: 'Ah, I've got my mind, you helped me get my mind around the problem', if, I as a client and can get my mind around the problem, I can see when I'm going, I can understand where the priorities are, that sort of things<sup>25</sup>. (con.2).

In making the above statement the interviewee clearly states how important it is to use the client's language in order to legitimise his set of service. By using the 'language that the client is using', the consultant does not just make reference to the set of linguistic artefacts. He is emphasising the system of meaning making relations in which ideas and concepts gain particular relevance. Hence, the consultant needs to adopt a language that channels a way of understanding, which fits the meaning patterns of the client. Such communication shifts from the quality of the content of the ideas themselves, to their exemplification into the meaning-making schemata of the other party. It is not clear how the consultant manages to achieve such an alignment and when can he/she know whether it will be successful or not. The emphasis is rather on the effort to adopt a language that meets the client's exercise of ideas.

A similar argument is made by a different consultant who supports the same premise. In the following quotation the consultant adds how the degree of understanding and adaptation to the client needs to be seen as if the consultant is almost an 'extension' of the client. Such close level of alignment is thought to make the process of legitimation

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<sup>25</sup> A complimentary statement to the above is also the following: "I'm dealing with residents, some of whom may be professionals and used to dealing with things like that that, others who may not be lettered, they've not been to Business Schools or got all that sort of jargon. Helping people to *understand* a problem and enable, see them in straightforward language".

easier, as the reiteration of ideas is not simply supported on the consultants' premises, but in the mutual and shared understanding that binds the two parties.

We need to be able to explain the benefits of what we're proposing in *their* language, not our language. We need to show that we're thinking like an extension of their company. In fact there are some organisations that use us as an extension of their risk management team. So we are very much on the team there. (con.3).

The important feature of the above excerpt is in relation to the context of the consultants' emphasis on language and the fluid character in which such an alignment emerges. As Habermas (1984a, 1984b) argues in his theory of communicative action the critique of knowledge propositions, by the other party, helps refine the degree of embodiment in which new ideas become part of the other party's belief system. The consultant argues how the alignment of language with the client is a continuous and challenging process that is governed by uncertainty. Actors have to make decisions without having a clear picture of outcomes. Consultants are being challenged for their propositions by the client party and have to change or modify their positions. Such a re-alignment is argued to be driven by the individuals' personal experience from working in different assignments. Even though corporations tend to create guidelines/frameworks of best practice, it is also argued that in reality corporations value the professionals' experience in the industry, and such experience cannot become explicit or commoditised.

Complementary to the above statement, the next consultant refers to the need to translate her insights to the clients' language, so that the advice gains relevance. In a very interesting discussion with the following interviewee the consultant makes reference to her communicative stages with clients. She argues that part of her responsibility and role in consulting involves simplifying concepts and identifying common meaning relations with the client.

One of my challenges is always to get the complexity across without bamboozling them with too much stuff... to do it in such a way that relates to the points they're interested in. I have to make my body of knowledge relevant to their particular circumstances (con.27).

From a different interview the following consultants refer to the importance of language and illustrate this proposition through a particular consulting assignment. The consultant argues for his effort to make the management of an organisation acute to the



employees' experiences. The consultant was not the direct person responsible for communicating his advice to the management. The consultant's emphasis on language can be seen through his endeavours to allow the employees to communicate their concerns to the management through a set of narrative techniques he designed. Instead of interviewing the employees and contextualising the main issues of their problems to the management, he tried to make the employees voice their concern in the way that they were currently experiencing it. The consultant believed that in order to legitimise his service towards the management he needed to find ways of communicating his findings in a way that was meeting the meaning-making-relations of those members.

They had like a pile of 50 stories each, and they had to then, at the bottom of the story, because they were all transcribed, and then they read the story, they then had to categorise it, and we got them to categorise it in a number of ways, and the categories were in *their* language... And we just said, 'tell us what it's like, customer service?', and the stories that came out, you know...and the staff were there, and the staff listened, and the staff, then analysed all the stories, and there were over 1000 stories collected, and the staff did the analysis. And the reason they do that is: it removes me from the system, so I'm not putting my bias in, it also meant that, to analyse them, I made them read every single one. So there was not getting away from the beast, and some of them were going, 'oh god' (con.3).

Even though the project created a lengthy set of work tasks for the employees, the management was very much able to relate to the employees' experience that helped identify set of actions that produce the desired solution. For the consultant the success of the project is attributed to the inner workings of the employees over the problem as it was not an exogenous solution. From a theoretical perspective it can be questioned if the consultant's method of narrative helped elicit the employees' inner concerns. Even though we do not want to generalise on this point, we want to argue for the central role language plays in the internal interaction between actors. The consultants' awareness of the type of language employed to communicate the clients' needs, often becomes an ambiguous process (Kieser, 1997; Alvesson, 1993; Ernst and Kieser, 2002a; Ernst and Kieser, 2002b). Even though consultants often argue for the need to employ a language that fits the client's culture, this is often not achieved or becomes misinterpreted. We want to illustrate the above ambiguity through the below example.

In the case of the below case example we find a consultant's expressed frustration towards her own colleagues because of their way of communicating a set of recommendations to clients. The consultant discusses her feelings in regards to client's

dissatisfaction. The consultant argues about her colleague's unreflecting presentation message, she tried to amend by changing the language that was previously used. The interviewee mentions that her colleagues had failed to appreciate the cultural sensitivity of the working culture of the Police Force. By making reference to the old-fashioned police uniform, the consultants assumed that they were trying to modernise the way the Police thought about their image in the public. Such reference seemed to have been perceived as almost insulting and failed to get the buy-in from the client. At her later presentation to the same members, the interviewee tried to change this impression by using a different language. She did not emphasise the police-uniform or the need for modernisation but rather stressed the overall thought processes characterising the police force.

I remember presenting to the policy committee of the Metropolitan police and the interesting thing about the policy committee is there are people who don't see even themselves as part of a team, on top, they either see themselves as part of the Home Office or representing a particular constituency. So, when we were feeding back, I remember my two colleagues who were interested in having an image presented got absolutely no attraction at all, it was very hostile...They weren't getting any positive response from the audience at all, no buy-in for their ideas...I was watching all this go on, so I took a different pitch from that which we'd agreed I'd take, but it worked, because what I recognised was that they were feeling like they'd ceded control over something they felt we didn't understand. The image was actually the substance as well because my colleagues were almost making fun of the traditional police garb..., not overtly making fun but you know, 'this is so Victorian and so inappropriate to urban London'...they [the client] felt was that not sufficient respect was being shown for what it symbolised etc. So that was what I picked up on and started to talk about, work we would need to do to understand the organisation beyond the design (con.28).

Apart from the emphasis on language, exemplified by the consultant's experience, mention is made of the importance of client conversations. Consultants argue how the delivery of an assignment is channelled through the making of conversations that shape the content of the advice, but also the means of its filtering it to the client. Consultants claim that the patterns of understanding created with clients become an important force for driving the assignment. Through the making of conversations consultants are eager to emphasise the fluidity of their service that moves away from the distribution of already predefined ideas/models. Alignment is achieved precisely because of the dialectic relationship of those conversations, and the client's contributing role that exemplifies an active presence rather than passivity.

Through the below analysis we want to argue how inter-subjectivity is created through the actors' sharing of meaning making relations. Our understanding of the scope of conversations helps us understand how the content of knowledge propositions is represented between parties. Moreover, how it evolves in the course of this interaction by being challenged and modified. For Habermas (1996, 2001), conversations constitute the social realm where claims about the world become 'known' as they are subjectively interpreted by the other party. The making of conversations is argued to help sustain how meaning relations are *represented* in the locus of experience by the other party. Our treatment of the influence of 'language' and 'conversation' for understanding legitimation differs from the notion of 'cognitive legitimation', we developed at an earlier chapter. Consultants are not simply concerned with convincing the client on a set of propositions that are evidently based. They rather enter into a dialogue in which initial propositions can change from the way they were intended. Our aim is to detect how the accommodation of such meaning making relations can influence manifestations of legitimation in the relationship and as exemplified in such communicative social interactions.

The following quotation discusses a consultant's experience of working for a large corporation, where the approach to dealing with the client was often predefined by the parent-firm. The consultant almost had to follow an already set 'protocol' with little flexibility of moving outside it. In the following excerpt the consultant talks about the aftermath of his efforts to move away from such past experiences, and how his consulting practices have been radically changed from carrying predefined business models. The consultant finds that conversations create a set of new dynamics in his relationship with clients. This has been an important aspect to sustaining his business relationship with current clients. The issue we want to extract from the below statement, and which is relevant to our study of legitimation, concerns the consultant's effort to produce mutual patterns of meaning with clients on the basis of which any further interaction becomes evocative. Moreover, the consultant's seemingly openness to accommodate potential criticism and challenge is made in an effort to sustain that shared 'common ground'.

Now selling is much more about having *conversations* with people to try and see if there's any common ground and if there is, something naturally emerges from it. So I don't go into any meeting to thinking 'I'm going to try and sell them X'. I go into the meeting trying to understand how to take the relationship to the next step. So if it's not somebody that I've met before it will be a question of listening a lot trying to understand where they're coming from, what they're issues are that they face, the challenges are that they perceive, explore that avenue further, see what help they think they're looking for, you know that kind of exploration. I typically won't go along with a consultation of this is a 7-step model for how we do xyz. On the other hand I'll take some brochures with me that will say here's something that you might find interesting to think about (con.9).

The importance of conversations is further supported by the following consultant who argues that his firm's relationship with clients emerges in the course of those conversations. The consultants make an interesting statement by referring to the simultaneous process of information gathering, about the client organisation, as well as having conversations with the client members themselves about what such findings *mean*. The use of conversations is not meant to be understood as substitutes for the consultants' work and as being detached from the client. The consultant rather argues for the increased likelihood of the client's positive receptivity over the proposed findings/advice, and how such conversations helped ensure some kind of mutual understanding.

The way we do it as I've said it's about relationships, therefore we don't go in, do a diagnostic, then say, "this is what we've found and this what you need to do." We will discuss it while we are doing the investigation with the client, and by the time we have honed in to what the issues are, the clients are with us (con.26).

In making the above discussion we do not want to imply that the consultants' emphasis on conversations should be understood in a normative way, or one that is free from personal and political interests. The fulfilment of clients' needs takes place within an environment of existing political tensions where the actors' interests aim at satisfying revenues as well as the progress of their own personal careers. As a result, the consultants' competency to create mutual alignment of meaning is governed by competitions of interests, as well as ambiguity and uncertainty. We do not exclude the presence of manipulation of perceptions in making the above argument. We rather emphasise how the mutually shared understanding, exemplified through language and conversations, help sustain the legitimation process.

Consultants repetitively emphasise the complexities that govern their exercise of language over the client, and where uncertainty cannot be tackled easily. We use the case of the following consultant to illustrate the above issue. Notably, her conversations with a

group of clients failed to produce positive results, because of the different positions of each party. The consultant argues for her efforts to make her views relevant to the client. The misalignment of meaning led to her failure to legitimise her views. This is not because of the content-quality of her advice, but because of the different position the client was holding in the business issues, which client members were not willing to change.

I can also see circumstances where that's not worked particularly well. There was one company who again invited me to do a half day session and however politely I tried to phrase it, and they had a big group of people there, it wasn't just the senior management it was about fifty people an away day for their senior people, I didn't agree with the strategy of this company and I was trying to focus on two or three issues I thought were important and not talk about my disagreement but this one person at the end said, 'I have this feeling you don't agree with the way our overall strategy is going; to which I had to say, I think there are some real drawbacks with it' (con.27).

Even though the consultant is seen to try to adjust her position to the client, the client seems to have difficulty accepting it. From the above excerpt we see that the client's comment targets the consultant's *attitude* on the corporate strategy of the firm, without appreciating her personal point of view. From this we want to argue how the sharing of language between consultants and clients, is not only about sharing the same statement but also the wider meaning that encompass it.

### 9.2.3 Summary

Our argument on discursive legitimation draws on the exercise of language as constituting, not only a vehicle of vocal utterances, but representing a structure of meaning-making relations. From our analysis we have tried to show how intersubjective meaning can be studied through verbal accounts, in which the ideas, intentions, and meaning-representations, become explicit. Our study of language is limited as we are displaying interview accounts from consultants and clients that did not work together on the same project. However, we have demonstrated that legitimation is dependent on accounts of discourse where consultants and clients construct their subjective reality through language.

### 9.3 Pre-understanding

In studying the social context of communicative discourse we find the arena of pre-understanding as equally important for determining how advice claims are perceived, supported, or rejected in this interaction. The notion of pre-understanding is used to characterise the conditioning of the actors' understanding and interpretation uttered according to their situated world-view (Habermas, 1984a; 1984b). Such world-view encompasses hidden assumptions about reality that remain unquestioned or unchallenged. Habermas (1984a) characterises pre-understanding as follows:

Every process of reaching understanding takes place against the background of a culturally ingrained preunderstanding. This background knowledge remains unproblematic as a whole; only that part of the stock of knowledge that participants make use of and thematize at a given time is put to the test. (p. 100).

The notion of pre-understanding is primarily derived from the tradition of phenomenology developed through the works of Husserl (1980) (see Crowler, 2001; Bell, 1990) who gave the early exploration attempts on the subject, but which Heidegger (1993) (see Crowler, 2001; also Mulhall 1996) later took and developed more systematically. Furthermore, the works by Schutz (1966) and his studies of Husserl greatly helped to make phenomenology relevant to social sciences research, and especially to the development of ethnography and conversation analysis. The prominent theme that emerges from phenomenology, and which is channelled through the notion of pre-understanding, has to do with acknowledging the already conditioned knowledge and experience of individuals as being *detrimental* to the acceptance or rejection of new knowledge claims. The conditioning of someone's experience that is not just limited in the cognitive realm (e.g. someone's conscientious decisions), but which is subject to the local environment that shapes it (and which environment cannot be changed or altered by the individual), becomes a powerful vehicle that shapes how the individual accepts any incoming propositions. It is for the above reason that Habermas (1984a) argues how: "The noncognitive elements of culture thereby slip into a peculiar marginal position. But precisely these elements are of significance for a sociological theory of action. From the perspective of action theory, the activities of the human mind are not easily limited to the cognitive-instrumental conformation with external nature; social actions are oriented to cultural valued and these do not have a truth relation" (p. 83). A similar term that has

been popularly used between authors to describe the above condition, is drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) work and his use of 'habitus', 'field' and 'symbolic violence' (Jenkins, 1992). Through the use of the above terms Bourdieu (1990) emphasised the role of practice and how embodiment takes place in social interactions. For Bourdieu (1993; 1995) the use of habitus was a term for accounting for the (wrongly) assumed separation between the man's accommodation of the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. In short, Bourdieu used the term to characterise the process of someone's associating his/her experience to the environment, as well as to new knowledge by means of relying on the already ingrained and existing presuppositions (see Hillier and Rooksby 2002). These are learned or/and unquestionably accepted. Drawing from the works of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) Norbert Elias (1897-1990), Max Weber (1864-1920), and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Bourdieu tried to provide a more systematic way of how habitus takes place in the social situ (Bourdieu, 1990, 2005; see Calhoun et. al. 1993; Lane, 2000; Fowler 1997). In discussing Bourdieu's efforts to reconcile objectivism and subjectivism Lane (2000) provides a useful account of how Bourdieu tried to reconcile the differences between structural anthropology and existentialism as proposed by the works of Levi-Strauss's and Sartre. Bourdieu tried to provide a more homogenous account of how the actors' enactment of, both the objective and subjective realm, takes place without creating dichotomies. Lane (2000) states: "According to Bourdieu, the opposition between Sartre's existentialism and Levi Strauss's structuralism was merely the most recent manifestation of a false dichotomy between subjectivism and objectivism which had long impoverished sociological and anthropological thinking" (p. 88). In this effort, Bourdieu tried to provide an explanation that could account for the cognitive, emotional and aesthetic inter-relationships made within actors for reconciling their accounts of a concrete reality, but which was nevertheless conditioned to their individual experiences.

For Bourdieu, the actors' *already* existing emotional and cognitive relations provide the means of sense-making through which new proposed realities emerge. In this sense, the actors' exercise of their already carried dispositions, influence their degree of receptivity to new ideas, without this being consciously realized. Even though our purpose is not to provide a systematic analysis of Bourdieu we nevertheless argue that his

contribution and emphasis on habitus can be seen as a term similar to the notion of pre-understanding, argued by Habermas. In the consultant-client relationship the above can be expressed through the pre-understanding of how consultants think that needs to deliver a business assignment. Retrospectively, how clients believe that consultants should meet their needs and add value in the relationship. Interestingly and while discussing his consulting experience, Schein (2004) refers to a number of particular circumstances where his lack of appreciating the assumptions made, by the client party, led to undesirable outcomes which is characteristic to note. Schein (2004) states:

In each of these cases I initially did not understand what was going on because my own basic assumptions about truth and turf and group relations differed from the shared assumptions of the members of the organization. And my assumptions reflected my occupation as a social psychologist and organization consultant, while the group's assumptions reflected in part their occupations as electrical engineers, chemists, and electrical workers (p.6).

Had I understood this, I would have asked for a list of the names of the managers and sent the memo directly to them. They would have accepted it from me because I was the paid consultant and expert (p.6)

Schein (2004) makes the above comments in the context of discussing the importance of culture in the organisation, and the different explicit and implicit layers that underpin its manifestation. As our empirical examples will show, the consultants and clients' pre-understanding is an important component of this communicative discourse which shapes the legitimisation of knowledge claims. The consultants' course of action is not justified by the client on the grounds of its objectified credibility or its rational validity, but because it is in alignment with the clients' pre-understanding of how the consultants should perform their actions. The shared and different pre-understanding between consultants and clients is often not made explicit during the relationship. As a result, there is not a managed shared understanding about each party's roles and expectations that has further implications on the business relationship.

### *9.3.1 Clients perspectives on preunderstanding*

The following discussion illustrates the importance of pre-understanding by discussing those instances where consultants communicated a course of advice that was sound and credible, but nevertheless failed to be justified by the clients. This is because it was not in



line with the clients' thinking and expectations. The following client discusses her experience in using consultants on a large procurement-related project that involved two large corporate strategy consulting firms. In discussing the early stages of the project, the client refers to her experience and early conversations with one of the consulting firms. The client sought to clarify how the consultants wanted to address the particular organisational need. The client has formulated a point of view about the scope of the problem and wanted from the consultants to provide insight, as well as conduct the research and provide an applicable methodology. During these early stages of the project the client entered into a conversation of disagreement with trying to indicate to the consultant what the right course of action should be. The interviewee is one of the immediate people responsible for the making of the business contract and she engages into a discourse to defend her view. The client's frustration for the emerging disagreement is evidently based on a different *pre-understanding* for what the 'right' course of action should be. The second consulting firm, and with which the client engaged eventually for the project, was already working on a different project for the client. It is not clear how exactly the consultants were in alignment with supporting the client's scope of action. However, the clients' sharing of the same understanding with the later employed consultants, indicates the importance of pre-understanding in relation to achieving legitimacy.

So in 2003 we had a firm of consultants called [XX] to have a strategic look at where we were as an organization, and where we are going, to advise us on how we can re-energize the program with minimum investment. The big thing that came out of that was 'Procurement Reform'. I mean, we *knew* that anyway, but [XX] was brought in to advise us, and I have to say in that instance, we advised [XX] (cl.22).

Interviewer: You advised [XX]?

I would say so, but they will never say so.

Interviewer: You advised [XX] on what?

On where the savings would be. As I said, you don't have to think very hard about it. If 80% of your budget is going in the industry, that's where the efficiency is...But they *didn't see procurement*, when they thought of procurement they thought of e-procurement. I was doing the supplier base optimization program which was procurement and we saw within weeks of doing it that 'oh my god our differences here are huge!'...[AA] were always suggesting procurement reforms, they weren't calling it that, but that's what they were proposing: "look at the way you go to the market" (cl.22).

Interviewer: But the [XX] didn't propose that?

They didn't. Until they came to a certain point in their study and then yes. So, the end result of the study was 'you must have procurement reforms'. The negative side is that it took them a long time to get there (cl.22).

The important theme emerging from the above example and with using Habermas's (1984a, 1984b) framework has to do with the locus of intersubjective rationality in which the two parties differ. The client's rejection of the consultants' proposition is not based on any immediate, teleological evidence to indicate her suggesting mode of procurement would be more successful than the consultants. The difference between the parties' employed rationalities, are mainly caused because of the different intersubjective meaning, which they are both bounded by and fail to bring into alignment.

On a different managerial situation, the following client refers to seeking advice from consultants, on a project related to the physical relocation and redevelopment of the client firm. The client's expectation from the consultant is about undertaking the important decisions and showing leadership qualities, that the client did not believe to have internally. The misalignment of the two parties' roles led to a failed project that the client managed to rectify through his later learning experience. From the following excerpt, the client acknowledges his reluctance to explicitly outline his expectations to the other party, while being confronted with the consultants' pre-conceived notion about the client's understanding.

Well, I expected more leadership and direction from the consultants on this matter. What they in fact did was to prevaricate 'well it's your decision' and I didn't know enough about the decision making that was required. So in the end I think that rather poor input from us through lack of knowledge and experience combined with an unwillingness by the consultant to make a decision that might of sharpened our bid ended up with us submitting something that wasn't as good as it could have been. Now fortunately for a whole variety of reasons which had nothing to do with the consultants, the circumstances meant that we had to rework our application (cl.27).

...they were too imprecise in terms of the outcomes of what we produced, they worked at a high level of generalisation when what we needed, I think with hindsight was a higher level of specification and precision than we were able to put into our document (cl.27).

So that was a rather bitter experience now I'm not quite sure where the fault in all of that lies. I mean we didn't know how to do it, we had very little choice other than to engage with somebody that purported to be able to do that, but maybe we hadn't expressed clearly enough what we wanted from them but when you don't know what you're doing that's hard for us to be precise. This is why I think most of the leadership was expected from them and they didn't provide it. I don't think consultants like to take risk which is what really they would have had to do, they would have had to be making some of the risk (cl.27).

The alignment of a shared pre-understanding can be expressed between the consultant and client parties by making explicit their implicit expectations. The presence of pre-understanding can remain hidden and undisclosed throughout the course of the clients' relationship with the consultants. Clients often have to work with consultants on projects that they have been assigned by their superiors, and are limited to the extent that engage in dialogue or negotiation about their similar or different views.

Through the following case example we are presented with two very different experiences by the same client. The difference between them lies in the client's choice and influence over the consultants' work that helped create a uniformity of perspective that was in harmony with the client's subjective aims and objectives. The importance of pre-understanding is being illustrated as the client's differences of experiences lie in the very diverse cultural dynamics to that of the consultant. The client's first experience with the consultants refers to a very distinct managerial approach. This was with the consultants' using their military experience and background as a form of management advice and which created surprise and dissatisfaction to the client.

In our view, the methodologies that were being used by [the TAO consultants], from basic fundamental values from the way they presented it right the way through to the mechanisms of engaging people, were inappropriate. I'll give you an example; the training day I had to go on – [TAO Consultants] are ex-US Air Force pilots. Yes, the actual consultants that used to work in the United States Air Force. They were all 'Top Gun' pilots flying F16s. We turned up at the venue, we weren't allowed into the room where they were running it, and we all sat around milling. There were about forty of us, having a cup of coffee, bearing in mind these are health care professionals we're talking about. Then suddenly, out of the room burst these two US Air Force [USAF] pilots actually in their flying suits, with a megaphone shouting something about air raids, and everyone has to get in to the hall now and we walked in to the hall through camouflage nets to the signature tune from Top Gun the movie playing with a big screen with fighter planes flying all over it. Instantly, for me that was a switch off. What the hell has this got to do with health? We proceeded to have a lecture on how they do things in terms of planning and execution and debrief within the USA Force and how this was the way forward for changing services and then we had to do a simulation exercise where a group of us were acting as squadron leaders of a type of aircraft on an attack mission, and, we were supposed to somehow transfer that to our own healthcare environment (cl.18).

Clearly, the consultants' presuppositions about their practices, was not made explicit to the client prior to their business engagement. The element of surprise caused a very negative impression on the client because it contradicted their expectations and common practices. The culture and military background of the consultants reinforces their management style and constitutes their pre-understanding on how to deal with a given operational problem within a hospital. Apart from the above experience the same client

refers to his use of a different consulting firm on the same managerial issue. As the following statements indicate, the client's choice for approaching the second consulting firm created a very different relationship. A principal factor that led to the had to do with the client's desire to apply a particular theoretical framework which the consultants had knowledge of. The fact that both shared the same pre-understanding helped towards a successful communicative discourse.

Firstly, there was a difference in our perception, WE approached [B Consultants], WE sought [B consultants], out and there were some set reasons as to why WE sought [B consultants] out and I'll come back to those. That made a difference, the fact that WE were approaching them (cl.18).

Yes. I didn't know Peter before, I approached [B consultants] and said this is what I'm interested in. And it was Peter that turned up because he was the expert in [B consultants] on theory of constraints. That was a bit heart in my throat (cl.18).

For me, the big difference between that and [B consultants] was, WE approached them because they had a track record, they also had expertise in a particular area that I had an interest in which was the implementation of Theory of Constraints (cl.18).

The influence of pre-understanding to the communicative discourse between two parties can be realised as well as rarely acknowledged. The managing of a shared but also differing pre-understanding, between the various members of one party, is the following theme of the following interview. The client members do not have a unified view about their expectations and deliverables from the consultants. These implicit/explicit 'multiple' voices, in the client, come to be recognised as the key obstacle in the relationship by the very individual who was the mediating the relationship between the two parties. Managing the different conflicting views and assumptions was outside the consultants' area of operations. However, in the social interaction between members and in the conversations held, the existing different pre-understandings become explicit, and the lack of coordination is also evident from the lack of decision making follow up on the suggested recommendations.

However, after the agreement between the project management board and the consultants, as I say, there was this wider meeting, with more people, not the project management board, but other representatives of the council and other stake holding bodies, and there, the thing did fall apart because there was not that understanding amongst all the clients, all the people that the project management board were responsible to, and that's when really it looked as if the whole thing would break down, and that's when we had to bring in lots of further meetings and exchanges of letters, just to clarify exactly what was going on. Also, part of my work at that stage, which was not easy, was to explain to certain people why we had tendered in this way, why we had said these things, and why we were still satisfied in the work of the consultants (cl.1).

I think some suggestions were made, but thinking back to that particular meeting, I can see why there were some people unhappy round the table, and there was a great deal of unhappiness around the table, because the suggestions that we came up with were still quite general and there was this feeling that 'well we've appointed consultants', 'they should do the work themselves' (cl.1).

Well, this is a very important question, because maybe the consultants *couldn't* bring coherence and consensus, *it is up to us to agree amongst ourselves what to do, and the consultants can't do that for us*. We can only get the best out of consultants if we know what we want to do (cl.1)

And seemed to be stepping back from leading it. Some people wanted the consultants to do a job, to give the answer and to move on (cl.1).

*Interviewer: From the start to finish?*

Yes. Whereas the consultants clearly saw at that stage of their work that the best way of giving us the best answer eventually was to let us make what suggestions we had initially (cl.1).

The consultants' hesitancy to make drastic decisions on behalf of the client may have been based on assumptions as well as the potential risk that they were running. For reasons that are not explicit in the interview we are not told why the consultants might not have wanted to take the risk, and how the client projected the situation to the consultant that arrived at the eventual outcome. It is clear that the client's prior understanding of the consultant's eventual deliverable did not correspond with the final outcome. The misalignment of expectations in reference to the project, and the roles each party should play, is an example of a sharing of a different habitus (Bourdieu, 1995, 2005). In discussing the receptivity of the consultants' presentation to the client members, the following client refers to the very different reactions expressed by the members. Such reactions were probably linked to their own education, working experience, and assumptions about consultants. The client characteristically argues that the positive or negative receptivity of the consultants' claims was the direct result of the clients' pre-understanding. People that were involved in more practical tasks found the consultants' theories as irrelevant to their work.

I think it would be more than that because some of our managers would be very passive and accepting, because in the main, they were probably from service areas where they had had little, if any, management development or a limited amount of academic education beyond school or perhaps college. Because some of the managers were very hands-on, they had come through the ranks and they were excellent managers, some of them were the better managers, but, the academic background was perhaps weak. And that was actually one of the things that was a bit of a concern to some of them, they said at the start...(cl.10).

*It's too academic...?*

I'm going back to school again. I'm not happy about this. If I'm going to have to do work and do a work-based project I'm not happy about that. So that was one part. So they were passive at some points in just receiving information. Some others, who are managers in a very different way, they might be from our corporate development directorate, they might be policy managers, these might be very, very highly developed thinkers who would challenge any of the theory and any of the models that were put forward (cl.10).

The above comments indicate the client's recognition for his own colleagues' different understanding and reaction to the consultants' work. In asking the client about how central this different background might have been, for accepting or rejecting the consultants' advice, the client alludes to a different type of members that happened to be more inclined to consider the theoretical and often vague ideas of the consultants; in contrast, the individuals who needed more practical examples before could be convinced.

I suspect they convinced some and they didn't convince others. And I think *that* would be down to what their background was either because I think some of the very high thinkers, if you like, high level thinkers would challenge the models and then maybe think yes there's something in that. Some would say just don't agree with it. The practical guys, some of them would be thinking, 'I've never thought of it like that. That's a good way of approaching it and others would say what a load of rubbish that was'. But I just think as with any group of people from varying backgrounds you'll get that sort of different acceptance or otherwise. But the consultants were there *not* really to try and insist on them taking this as being the right way and then testing them at the end. They were there to facilitate thinking and discussion and debate and the learning was to come from that, than from the work that was given to be done around the modules (cl.27).

It is interesting how the client is seeking to qualify what might have appeared as misconception by his own members in that the consultants were playing the role of the 'educators'. The consultants wanted to communicate a set of ideas but the client members assumed responsibility for accommodating this new set of information, thinking that they are back at school. On a similar tone to the above experience, a different client refers to a similar account and the different reaction by those attending the consultants' presentation on leadership. In asking the client about his reaction to the consultants' ideas, the client responded positively and very much supported the consultants' proposition for needing to adopt the appropriate style that would fit the managers' setting and personality. However, the client also makes reference to the very different reaction by his colleagues and in having the exact same occupational positions.

In that group there was certainly one other person that had said 'absolute tosh, a load of bloody rubbish'. And didn't cooperate in any of the activities, because it was a man because it didn't square with him, it didn't fit his mental constructs of leadership, himself, how to improve, what is successful, so, it was very much left to us to decide (cl.27).

To what extent the above clients' reaction to the consultants' ideas hindered the justification of the consultants' knowledge-claims is difficult to qualify, as we only have a limited set of data. Nevertheless, all of the above accounts refer to the relationship between the pre-understanding or habitus that those individuals shared, and its influence on the accommodation of new knowledge accounts. The thesis of our argument is how the sum of those dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990, 1993 2005; Calhoun et. al., 1993) that can be characterised as the sum of those lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, can be influential for how justification occurs. Our interest in expanding the above theme is made in an effort to systematically examine how the intersubjectivity of meaning is created. Moreover to make explicit those social practices that can be used as an example that can further indicate how the above takes place.

### *9.3.2 Consultants' perspectives on pre-understanding*

The importance of pre-understanding is a subject dominated equally from the consultants' experience with clients. Consultants operate in an arena of uncertainty, and need to make sense of their approach in alignment with the clients' needs and anticipations. Consultants who manage to bring to the fore the clients' dimensions of pre-understanding also endeavour to address it. However, consultants often concentrate into promoting their own consulting approach to a business assignment, and it is after the *misalignment* between the two parties' interests that consultants reflect back upon their experience. The following case example shows a consultant's approach to have an open discussion about the client's issues. Such an effort is met by different expectations from the client which the consultant fails to meet.

For instance I was asked into [the client firm] by someone I knew who moved there as a HR manager and for the team she was running in her part of it. So we come and talk to the team and she gave me a bit of background and I made the cardinal mistake because first time I met the team and there was some staff there, and, talking to them you know, I think they were 6 or 7 in an office half this size which wasn't particularly good, they just wanted me to say exactly what I'll do and I made the mistake of, I hadn't sensed that sufficiently, [saying] 'I want exactly to know what it is you want to achieve', and they weren't capable of working out where we wanted to go, they were saying: 'come and give us this' and I could have actually said:

'we're going to give you this process, part of it would be enabling you to determine what is the success, or, 'we would refine the process to deliver exactly' - so that was a lesson from a few years ago (con.3).

Despite the above misalignment of pre-understanding, the same consultant refers to the uncertainty he experiences in wanting to meet the clients' expectations about his role. The clients' view of the consultants as being the 'expert', and the consultants' different approach to dealing with the client as *not* being the expert, brings out the importance of those deeper beliefs and assumptions that governs the nature of the actors' pre-understanding. For the consultant this is a pre-understanding held by most clients, and the image of the consultant as being the 'expert' changes within society.

But there are clients who just say: 'tell us' and that was probably, given the consultancy that has had been going across, the border, [of that client] in the late 90s, they were used to that sort, 'we're the experts' so, I was coming in from a different one [approach] (con.3).

For me that's a real point around consultancy, you know, are you co-creating or are you seen as a consultant who is the expert? We're the experts in co-creating rather than experts in delivering our model whether it fits or not. And this for me is a real major difference, and, I wouldn't want to work in the expert model whatever happens. (con.3).

In a conversation with another consultant as well as academic, mention is made about the different theoretical paradigms that govern consultants as practitioners and in contrast to academics. In drawing from his longitude experience the interviewee argues for the different cultures governing the way managers operate in the United States in comparison to Britain. The consultant argues how pre-understanding is part of someone's identity and influenced by his/her inevitable demographic factors. His argument concentrates on the dynamics of pragmatism by which consultants and clients take decisions. Whereas, academics might be interested in the relationship between managerial events and the need to understand them, in light of a specific organisational theory, the practitioners are interested in the tangible results such action will produce. Consultants and clients operate a common pre-understanding that is pragmatist-centred and which differs from the American culture where the use of theory contains a different kind of validity. The broader conclusion from the above differences in relation to the consultant-client relationship, has to do the irrelevant use of scientific theories to the application of the consultants' work. Academics fail to legitimise their relevance of the theoretical work to practitioners, because operate under a different pre-understanding for



what kind of issues are important and why. The interviewee's reference to the practitioners being "anti-scientific" is an interesting one, and helps to capture the reality of this experienced tension. The above theme is also argued by Salaman (2002) and in making reference to why the growing body of management consulting literature often fails to appreciate the dynamics of the practitioners' concerns. From the following statements we want to argue how our reference to pre-understanding is relevant for understanding the legitimation process. This is because pre-understanding indicates the collection of the implicit assumptions and experience to which new knowledge claims are being conditioned.

I'm talking about Britain now particularly. The British manager is a pragmatist, you mention the word theory and he looks up to the sky and you have a problem convincing the client there's a theory as utility, which is of course the basis of Kurt Lewin's philosophy, 'nothing more practical than a good theory'. The consultant and the client have the same philosophy they are both pragmatists. You've seen the recent television series *The Apprentice*, have you? Now it's entirely in contrast with the literature on leadership, there's no such thing, you won't find any literature on leadership which has 'the Alan Sugar approach', but you get the average client who will be more impressed by Alan Sugar than he will be by me. So you do have a confluence between the typical commercial consultant and the client system, they both have certain values in common which are anti-scientific (con.12).

There is something in the philosophy, in the character, in the cosmology of the British way of thinking, which is away from hard science, and the soft science, which is what we are, and it even worse, I mean, if you can't believe in hard science why should you believe in soft science? So you know these are, the difference having worked in the States you use the word theory in the States as an entirely approach, a theory is something that you [seriously] take account of (con.12).

### *9.3.3 Summary*

Our exposition of the importance of pre-understanding, for understanding the process of discursive legitimation, is complementary to the study of language. By making reference to the assumptions, personal beliefs and perceptions we have tried to show how presuppositions can influence expectations produced about the other party. Prior to a business engagement consultants are highly influenced by the culture of the parent consulting firm, that is for how they think the need to deliver an effective service. At the same time, clients create their own assumptions for how the consultants ought to design and deliver their advice against their needs. Until such assumptions are made explicit, expectations are created in the individuals, and can influence the way legitimation is being performed in the relationship. In this sense, understanding the role of

presuppositions and implicit assumptions becomes important for appreciating the *containment* of meaning-making relations within consultants and clients.

#### **9.4 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine how legitimation takes place by drawing attention to the discursive qualities of the consultant-client interaction. By drawing from the work of Habermas (1984a, 1984b, 1996, 2001, 2003) we have argued how legitimation can be seen as situated in the actors' way of managing those interpersonal and communicative interactions, through which a mutually shared consensus and meaning is created/sustained/challenged. The chapter has tried to develop the above proposition by looking at the areas of 'language' and 'pre-understanding' as constituting two arenas where verbal and non-verbal meaning-making relations exist. Within his theory of *Communicative Action* Habermas argues how legitimation is not simply a product generated at the fulfilment of the actors' intentions. Legitimation can be seen an outcome of the dialectic relationship between actors, where the creation of intersubjectivity is dependent on managing the meaning making relations being expressed through discursive processes. In this context, we have looked at the role of language, not simply as a vehicle of vocal expression, but as a system of meaning-making relations ingrained within the actors' belief system, culture and experiences.

For Habermas, (2003) the actors' way of sharing knowledge enters the social realm of communicative interaction, where knowledge-claims are conditioned by the actors' subjective experiences. Hence, the successful or unsuccessful communication is not simply dependent on the quality of the competing knowledge claims, as they are represented in relation to an outside reality; but for how they become *relevant* in relation to the other person's experience. From this premise we argued that challenging or accepting the language through which propositions are communicated, encompasses a complementary challenge or acceptance for how such propositions are intended or interpreted by the actors. When clients find themselves challenging the consultants' 'inappropriate' forms of communication (e.g. because of being too technical), they challenge not just the propositions per se, but their way of becoming relevant to their own belief system. Challenging those forms of communication and by criticizing the

language used, consultants often have to identify new patterns of meaning that are more clearly relevant to the client. Failure to identify such patterns can often lead to the termination of the assignment and the failure to legitimise one's own views.

On a similar tone to our study of language, we argued for the role of pre-understanding and how it plays an equally important role to manifestations of legitimation. Pre-understanding is thought to encompass the constitution of cognitive schemata, experience, beliefs and expectations that actors are not often aware of, or make explicit. The study of pre-understanding has been more widely incorporated within social science through the work of Bourdieu and his work of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 1993, 2005). The similarities between the two terms concern the locus of the already ingrained experience that can determine the embodiment of *new* understanding and new experience. As a result, consultants may enter into an assignment by carrying a certain pre-understanding for how to satisfy the clients' needs.

The client's acceptance or rejection of such an approach will be partly dependent on the pre-understanding of how the consultants should serve their needs. The importance of pre-understanding to understanding legitimation is based on the idea that it can influence the degree of alignment/misalignment between the meaning making relations between actors. Habermas' emphasis on how intersubjectivity is maintained through forms of social interaction constitutes the arena of pre-understanding as a useful ground of such discursive relationship. From our discussion of the empirical data, we have clearly shown how pre-understanding is often failed to be made explicit between actors. Furthermore, how pre-understanding is well linked to manifestations of legitimation as it is contained in the exercise of language. Our examination of the discursive dimensions of language and understanding, does not take place in a locus of normative interpretations that argues for a positivistic alignment. We do not argue for a positive approach to legitimation where the adoption of a language meets the clients' need, and which is free from superficiality, ambiguity, personal and business interests. Legitimation does not take place free of political constraints that influence the perception and behaviour between actors. The interplay of qualities of rhetoric to construction of language accounts is very much part of generating accounts of legitimation. How the alignment of meaning making relations occurs has been discussed with caution, as we acknowledge the plurality of

factors that can contribute to it. Hence, the consultants or clients' personal or political interests can influence why they may accept or reject a set of propositions. Our purpose has not been made to examine how such alignment occurs, but the fact that its occurrence at a discursive level is important for understanding the exemplification of legitimation itself. By focusing on the discursive emphasis our aim is to not show the degree of superficiality that governs the creation of such accounts. Rather, to capture the dialectic element of the relationship, where the success or failure of alignment influences the legitimation process. Finally, the management of discursive social interactions are not limited in the study of language and pre-understanding, but can also exceed other dimensions that we have not addressed in the chapter. We have limited our study of legitimation to the above two areas, in order to make our contribution to the subject more manageable.

## Chapter 10: Consultant-Client Relationship Dynamics

### 10.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we move to discuss another side of discursive legitimation and which concerns the nature of the relationship between consultants and clients. We examine how the dialectic side of the social interaction is often responsible for whether legitimation is produced. We place the analysis of our data in the context of supporting Habermas's theoretical framework. We find how a) the decision making activities between actors, and b) the sharing of power, are particular dimensions that evolve within the relationship, influencing each party's perception of alignment in relation to the other. For example, we find that when clients often challenge the traditional authority of expertise, consultants are associated with, and when the consultants often change their course of action from following the clients' recommendations, this allows for a closer alignment of consensus that leads to legitimacy. By discussing the discursive side of legitimation, in the context of the consultant-client relationship, we cannot evaluate the degree of influence between specific actions. Our discussion of the nature of the relationship is made in the sense of encompassing the generic nuance of partnership and interaction that involves specific and unspecific interpersonal dimensions, like, trust, power, and decision making. Such dimensions take place in a continuously dynamic and evolving manner.

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the theoretical approaches used in the study of the organisational actors' locus of relationship. We identify the a) functional, b) interpretive, and c) critical dimensions as constituting such broad dimensions. By referring to the work by Werr and Styhre (2002) the chapter incorporates the discussion between the bureaucratic to the network-organisational forms. Werr and Styhre (2002) argue that the bureaucratic relationship form has been expressed through the hierarchical mode of organising where there is clear division of role and responsibilities. The consultant-client relationship has been mainly associated with the bureaucratic form, where decision making is delegated from consultants to clients. The network approach to organising differs, in that it creates less differentiation between the role and responsibilities of the involved parties. The process of organising is manifested

through an equal sharing of power, and where decision making tends to co-emerge. We find that the network type of organising is more representative of our empirical sample.

Our use of Habermas (1984a, 1984b, 2001) points to discursive legitimation as being dependent on the dialectic form of the interaction. In contrast to the previous chapter, here we examine how intersubjective meaning is sustained through the broader network of the relationship. We identify two main trends that we discuss in turn: The first concentrates on the way clients contribute to the consultants' stages of advice development and distribution. We find that the alignment clients achieve by becoming part of the consultants' knowledge making does not make them passive recipients of knowledge-input. The clients' active role of the consultants' knowledge generation helps create a better degree of embodiment, in which new ideas are more successfully aligned in the client. This is not because of the different quality of the consultants' advice to clients. It is because of the way that ideas are translated into the meaning-making relations of the client.

Secondly, we identify how legitimacy occurs when power is not a sole product of the consultants, but is interchangeably shared in the relationship with clients. Clients may challenge initially made propositions, and often compel consultants to modify their processes/delivery of an assignment. We find that the network approach to the consultant-client relationship creates a more equal sharing of power that contributes to legitimation outputs (Werr and Styhre, 2002). In the third section of the chapter we conclude our discussion by focusing on the limitation of the above proposition. Even though the interchange of power contributes to the legitimation of consulting knowledge, not all client members are in the position to exercise the above right. The clients' criticism over the consultants' practices is an outcome of individuals with seniority in the firm. The legitimation of consultants' services can be forced towards the less senior client members. Our findings are in alignment with some of the criticisms expressed by the critical approach as consultants often take advantage of their delegated power towards the client members. We find that in such a context there is clear lack of trust and absence of a mutual working partnership.

## **10.2 Consultant-Client Relationship Dynamics**

A recurring theme from the data highlights the role of partnership in the legitimisation of knowledge-claims. The management of the interpersonal qualities, that may foster or hinder the business relationship, is an equally strongly argued theme from both consultants and clients. Even though the notion of 'relationship' is used by the interviewees in their own personal business situation, it nevertheless encompasses the fundamental and common social qualities of interaction (Ring and van de Ven, 1992). The consultant-client relationship encompasses a complex number of interpersonal and business-related dimensions that have been discussed in the literature in different ways (Clark, 1995; Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997a, Alvesson, 1993, Maister, 1993). The business relationship has been characterised as critical for the success of a consulting assignment, as the qualities of advice and knowledge have to be distributed in a service context (Czerniawska, 2002; Nachum, 1999). Client satisfaction is argued not to depend on the informative or technical features of the consultants' advice only, but also in those interpersonal dynamics that help shape how quality is perceived by clients and how uncertainty is managed (Clark, 1995, Nachum, 1999). As a result, the study of the consultant-client relationship needs to be seen within the context of those business but also interpersonal practices/tasks that help regulate/sustain/threaten the relationship.

Werr and Styhre (2002) argue how the consultant-client relationship needs to be examined as being an institutionally embedded phenomenon which cannot exist "detached from social norms shared beliefs and ideologies" (2002:50). From this follows that the study of the above relationship requires the examination of treatment over those explicit and implicit institutional values that govern the function of the different parties. The emerging thread from our analysis indicates the impact and regulatory function of the nature of the relationship for how knowledge claims are being legitimised.

The discourse about 'relationships', as expressed by the interviewees, contain a number of similar linguistic themes that refer to 'partnership', 'cooperation' and 'trust' and which we also discuss under the same 'relationship' heading. The relationship theme encompasses the broader explicit and implicit conversations between the two parties in which intentions are expressed (Ring and Van de Ven, 1992). However, it is important to outline that the way through which the term is used by the interviewees, is not often made

explicit. The meanings associated with the word 'relationship' and the detailed social activities/practices that may help foster or hinder its development remain generic as well as overlapping. Discourses about the interpersonal dynamics of the relationship between actors are mainly drawn from assumptions about the way intentions are initiated and actualised.

Drawing from the work of Heracleous and Barrett (2001) we identify the classification made about discourses governing social interactions. In particular, the authors identify three dominant approaches, and, which focus on how communicative actions are sustained in the relationship between organizational actors. These are the functional, interpretive and critical approaches and which will be briefly outlined below.

According to the functional perspective the relationship is driven by a common and shared purpose, ideology and values that are collectively constituted between members. Actors are clearly able to communicate their intentions and understanding of the other party and such communication is perceived as intended. Language is an important medium governing the relationship and it has teleological function, in terms of fulfilling the purpose with which it is used (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). In this paradigm, conflict is dealt through the re-establishment and refining of the equally agreed principles/values. In the strategy literature the functional perspective is heavily associated with the actors' manipulative qualities to access and change the state of their environment through intervention (Chandler, 1977; Heracleous and Langham, 1996). Leadership is heavily dependent on the clear communication of objectives that are maintained through the development of explicitly defined values (Schein, 2004).

For the interpretive paradigm, emphasis is placed on the situation-dependent meaning construction that is collectively shared and sustained between members. In this context, actors are continuously faced with the need of interpreting the implicit or explicit intentions according to their own values and ideological paradigm. For the interpretive approach, ends are not necessarily realised because they are perceived as intended. Ends are rather realised because they are in line with the cognitive as well as social interpretive schemata of the other party. The pursuit of alignment between interests is a constant socially constructing process, where misinterpretation is always present and can lead to conflict. Furthermore, the use of language is bound by those existing meaning relations in



the individuals, and it is through conversations that definitions are re-established and shared understanding becomes possible (Weick, 1976, 1995). The communication of ideas that are not part of the locus of the situated understanding, between members, needs to be channelled through a process of contextualisation, where ideas become translated to the cognitive schemata of the individuals (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). As a result, the symbiosis of the relationship is sustained through the continuous sustenance of meaning (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

For the critical perspective the relationship between actors is highly dependent on the power relations and the exercise of authority and control which are not necessarily visible or detectable. The symbiosis of the relationship is assumed to be driven on maintaining those implicit power structures that help create a projected reality and which is also supported by the individuals' shared interests. The critical approach highlights the misrepresented normative, assumed, positivistic traits of the relationship between actors, where expressed interests are not freed from other social or politically embedded interests (Kieser, 1997; Ernst and Kieser, 2002a; Alvesson and Johansson, 2001). As extensively argued by authors in this paradigm, organisational objectives are fulfilled through the use of rhetoric and manipulation (Elsbach 1994; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The assumed normative reality of a situation is not accessible and neither equally represented between actors. In this paradigm, and as originally argued by Nietzsche (1968) and later by Foucault (1972), language is used as an instrument of domination where only those in powerful positions can manipulate the perceived understanding of others. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) state: "Researchers in the critical stream aspire to radical social and organisational change through critical understanding of relations of social domination and their base" (p.757). In their exploration of a communicative discourse that is sufficient to accommodate how the communicative actions are being actualised through the organizational structures, the authors move to develop a fourth type of discourse that is heavily based on Giddens' work (1979, 1984, 1987, 1993).

### *10.2.1 Bureaucratic vs Network organisation*

In the management consulting literature the functional and critical perspectives have mainly been used as paradigms to the study of the relationship. Werr and Styhre (2003) argue how the assumptions governing the functional perspective emphasise a power dynamic in which the client is in control of the assignment, and from whom the decision making is delegated. Clients are able to communicate clearly their nature of needs. Werr and Styhre (2003) argue for a bureaucratic versus network organization paradigm, in which the functional and critical approaches can be expressed. The bureaucratic approach is rather in alignment with the principles of the functional approach which highlights the transactional nature of the consultant-client relationship. Power and control are maintained within the client, and the consultant is seen as an outsider to the relationship that fulfils the designed assignment business needs. The organizing of the relationship is based on the clear definition of tasks, and the designations of roles to achieving them. Power is distributed from the people purchasing the service, and it is the client who needs to decide about the framework of the business relationship.

On the other hand, the network organization paradigm drawn from the less imposing and restricting organisational structures, emphasises the fluid character of the interaction and how control is shared and exchanged between the two parties (Baker, 1993, Brass and Burkhardt, 1993). Power is not necessarily embedded in those institutional structures and corporate values that strictly determine the actors' roles/expectations. In the network organisation as argued by Werr and Styhre (2003), the relationship "is continuously adapting to its environment and is open towards external influences" (p.51). In this mode of organizing tasks might be less well specified, rules are dependent on the actors' use and freedom to modify, and the division of labour is not only issued by a dominant party but by the collectively shared consensus and agreement (Van de ven and Walker, 1984).

### **10.3 Consulting Views on the Consultant-Client Relationship**

For consultants, the development of a relationship with the client is an important prerequisite to knowledge distribution and legitimisation. The consultant-client relationship is not just compromised through the administrative fulfilment of the business requirements, but through the socialising between individuals within and outside of the

assignment. From the literature, it is argued that a relationship between two parties is possible because there is a common ground of shared values, interests and objectives, that guide this interaction (Schein, 1988). The aim for accomplishing a common objective becomes a conditioning force where the members' interests find some kind of alignment.

At the same time, the relationship between actors is argued to become a complex phenomenon as the exchange of ideas takes place within a host of often conflicting interests, motives, aspirations that are not necessarily equally shared (Ford et. al., 2002). As a result, it is argued that ideas are not necessarily conveyed from one party to the other as intended (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). Conflict is possible because of misinterpretation or lack of understanding of the other party's intentions. The social environment in which the consultants establish a sense of personal rapport encompasses all those social attributes that may sustain or threaten the relationship.

An important social attribute is the quality of communication between the two parties and the change of behaviour by the individuals for what is not agreed or liked upon (Ford and Ford, 1995, 1999). As the below consultant states, the partnership enables the successful communication and relationship between the two parties, because they are explicit for what they anticipate, like or dislike. The clarity through which intentions are channelled help maintain the communication that governs the quality of the relationship at a social level.

Now you'll have asked some of the questions along the time, maybe you didn't ask them in a way that they realised you were asking the question and at that point it challenges how do you turn it around and you can only get that from what they say, start feedback at that point and it might be: I hate [this consultant], I can't work with her because I don't think she listens to me. Or it could be, she doesn't understand my business and then you would draw on the team. OK, I'll put somebody else in there'. There'll be things I do that people love, and, things that I do they think, oh god I wish she didn't do that. And you have to basically provide them with a forum to air those views. And once they air those views you have to commit to action, the ones you feel you can action, and change because one approach doesn't work for all. So I very much see it as, the key thing to our business is I think is the partnership, the client relationship and almost getting an understanding of them and their business and where they want it to be (con.1).

The consultants' willingness to listen and change her behaviour from response to the clients' reactions/views, is an example of one of the dynamics that help sustain the relationship (Ford and Ford, 1995; Philips and Hardy, 2002). Such relationship takes the form of disputes, the unreserved expression of emotions, mutual initiative to conformity

to new requirements and the pursuit of negotiation and agreement (Ford and Ford, 1999). The broader theme that emerges out of the above comment highlights the issue of common ground that is mutually shared between the two parties. By going through the process of voicing their implicit views, consultants and clients are in the processes of re-establishing the norms that sustain their relationship (Philips and Brown, 1993). The relationship is not confined within the qualities of information and the advice communicated only, but rather it is situated in the dialectic forms of interaction where the individuals' behaviour can change depending on the presented stimuli (Philips and Hardy, 2002; Philips and Brown, 1993).

In asking the below managing director about his firm's approach to the consultant-client relationship and in the context of the delivery of advice, he emphasises the importance of personal relationship to clients. The consultant argues for how the relationship contains strong aspects of loyalty that the firm has built over time. The communication of advice takes a new nuance of validity when communicated by the people that have built and maintained the relationship with the clients. For the consultant, the importance of relationship clearly encompasses the social environment that can affect the receptivity of the consulting ideas. In both of the following excerpts the issue of importance is how the relationship can provide a legitimate influence over the proposed advice.

The critical thing for us, as I said right at the beginning Stephanos, is to go in and develop a really good relationship [with the client]. We have clients in Hong Kong who would not go to anyone else. It costs them far more money to keep our consultants. They [clients] have to fly our businessmen and put them up in a hotel out there and such but they would not go to anyone else. (con.26).

We get to go back to the comment that I made earlier about our being behaviourist psychologists. I would like to think we are fairly skilled but the one area that we are really skilled at is really at the developing of relationships with our clients: talking to them, understanding them, coaching/mentoring them, it's a totally different approach. We don't go in and say, "We've got all the answers, and we're cleverer people than you." ... Absolutely, which is why I come back to relationships. We go in and establish relationships across that group. (con.26).

The functional approach to management consulting has mainly concentrated on the correlation between problems versus solutions. The consulting process is largely projected in its teleological function to produce outcomes. Even though the consultant-

client relationship is recognised in the literature, there is not extensive discussion concerning its impact on the legitimization of advice during a business assignment. From the experience of the mentioned consultants, we find that the receptivity of advice is dependent on aspects of socialization that remain ambiguous or implicit. Even though the importance of the relationship is repetitively reiterated from the consultants' experience in the interviews, there is little knowledge for how the relationship is defined or what it *means* for the particular organisational actors. By expounding on the relationship theme our aim is to gain a better understanding for how it is discussed between the interviewees. Moreover, whether a relationship for consultants becomes a type means for achieving a business objective or not. From the below consultant we find that the individual's relationship to the client organisation and its member can help the positive receptivity of the service provided. Even though knowledge can be widely accessible from different consultants the primary factor concerns the individual channelling it to the organisation. From the below statement it is underlined that part of the consultants' sensitivity of the project is having awareness about the wider factors that may affect the receptivity of his/her advice in the client. The consultant may need to alter the presentation of his/her service in order to fit with the clients' assumed requirement/objectives.

So I very much see it as, the key thing to our business is I think is the partnership, the client relationship and almost getting an understanding of them and their business and where they want it to be...So I think it's very unusual for a particular job that, or for a situation where only one consultant can do a job because of what they know, it may be the case that only one consultant can do the job because of the nature of the relationship that they have, so I think, the understanding relationships knowledge base and the ability to manage that dynamic is far more important than the technical knowledge and the knowledge base from which the consultants themselves draw. (con.31).

The way in which the consultant manages the client relationship becomes an issue of managing the clients' way of embodiment to new/different ideas. This is the reason for which the above consultant argues that such kind of knowledge becomes a lot more superior to the technical knowledge. The question however remains ambiguous as to how a consultant can manage the clients' receptivity of advice within his/her wider social context. The critical perspective has argued that consultants can take advantage of the clients' vulnerability in endeavouring to eliminate the experienced uncertainty (Burglund and Werr, 1999). Authors argue that consultants have tried to build business relationships

because of the project objectives that they want to fulfil (Kieser, 1997; Alvesson and Johansson, 2001). Whereas the impression might be given of how consultants are genuinely motivated to helping the client and identify the best solution possible, it is argued that such an approach is superficial to the consultants' experienced reality. From the above testimonies it can be argued how the consultants' relationship with clients is at least projected as primarily driven by genuine care and support. Consultants clearly imply that they manage to maintain their popularity amongst clients, *because* they are committed to serving their interests. We cannot generalise that this is representative of all the consultants' experience.

#### **10.4 Client Views on the Consultant-Client Relationship**

The emphasis on relationships is a theme that is equally supported by client testimonials. In a similar way to the consultants' views, clients see their relationship as quite important for their business assignment with consultants. Clients argue how the quality of their relationship influences their receptivity to the consultants' advice. Their reliance on consultants cannot often be based on the technical/bureaucratic elements of their contract. This idea is expressed by the following client whose experience with consultants at a high senior level, proved critical for the success of his various projects.

I think it's vital that you have a close relationship with the consultants. I think if you rely on just documents and allow people to go off and do there own thing for an extended period, then at the end of it you won't get out of that assignment what you were hoping for it. I think it has to be regular contact and I think useful regular progress meetings about where things are, where things are going, discussions about the issues, acting as a sounding board if you like for what some of the thoughts and emerging thoughts of consultants having (cl.29).

The following client implicitly refers to the network discourse of her relationship with consultants and in contrast to a transactional relationship (Werr and Styhre, 2003). In the interview, the client emphasises how the relationship aspect was critical for the business assignment. The client's idea of working in partnership with consultants implies a dialectic relationship where the initiation of ideas does not simply rely with authority in the consultant but is subject to *change*.

I will say, just one point on that Stephanos, they did actually work as a *partner* with us, rather than providing us with information, they worked together with us, very much in partnership, to address the business issues, you know.../ (cl.23).

Yes, they [board of directors] weren't just going to accept it. They had to see that the process was valid and the information was correct and the recommendations from the consultants and our action plan from it made sense. The relationship between us and the consultants was very good; it was a very productive relationship. (cl.23).

It's been very strong, we've got a good relationship back to my observation around a strategic partnership, one of the key components is around personality match and whether we feel that they're people that we can work with and get on with. They're very good; they're a good group of people both on a personal and professional level. (cl.23).

The argument is made, by the client, for how the relationship with the consultants was made stronger because both parties allowed space for constructive criticisms with each other. By wanting to have a 'strategic partnership' the client underlines the quality of the relationship that is not simply constrained on a mere legal basis of a contract. The strategic partnership is rather characterised from the clients' positive expectations in the consultant for endeavouring to meet their explicit or implicit interests. For the client, positive social dynamics would characterise such a relationship because it is represented in investing a personal interest and commitment to the other party's concerns, feelings, and self-interpretation of the business situation. In this sense, the nurturing of a mutually strong relationship for the long term is not only about meeting the various temporary challenges of a project. It is about exhibiting a sense of commitment for meeting the other party's expectations.

Furthermore, the client makes clear how the board members will not receive the consultants' suggestions at face value but will question and challenge them. It is assumed that consultants will defend or modify their position until a mutual ground of interest is achieved. The consultants' legitimation of advice to clients is partly dependent on managing and maintaining such a good relationship. Of course, we don't know how the consultants feel about the particular interviewee or whether they share the same view. We are also unaware of the specific difficulties consultants may experience in managing this relationship. However, our argument is that the network-organisation approach to the consultant-client relationship helps create a mutual investment of interests, where power is not just exercised by one party but can be challenged as well as be co-shared.

### **10.5 Consultant-Client Involvement Dimensions**

Having provided a brief overview for how consultants and client argue that their relationship is important for the business assignment, we now move to explore two particular consultant-client modes of interaction. These are a) the client's degree and nature of involvement into the stages of the consultants' advice making and delivery. And b) the consultants' change of practices followed by the clients' suggestions or criticism. Our discussion of the above levels of interaction is more in line with the network type of organization argued by Werr and Styhre (2003) where power and control is not centralised in one party, but can shift in the course of the relationship. Our discussion of the above relationship dynamics is aimed at advancing the above understanding by showing how the shifting of power and control can impact how knowledge claims are legitimised. In this sense, the way micro practices are organised becomes a central component to meaning creation. In this context we argue how the broader discourse that often characterises the flow of the relationship is really constituted by the more micro-social interactions whose management can determine the positive or negative direction of the relationship. In this context, the analysis of those micro practices can help us understand the interpretive lacuna through which consultants and clients find alignment of meaning. Our thesis is that the nature of the relationship between consultants and clients, can influence how knowledge-claims are justified (Philips et. al., 2004).

### **10.6 Client's involvement & the co-creation of meaning**

One of the particular consultant-client interactions that help foster the clients' degree of acceptance over the consultants' proposed claims is their involvement and manipulation of the consultants' design and delivery of a service. Clients become actively present into the consultants' reasoning and design of advice. They are given the flexibility to discuss, challenge, and criticize the consultants' final recommendations, in a way that is more appropriately fitted with their own values and objectives. Such interaction poses interesting questions about the sharing of power between the two parties and the alignment of balance of control and authority. Clients who felt that are not simply sold a service but who actively engaged to determining the consultants' work for them repetitively indicate a greater acceptance over the consultants' propositions. The above is strongly expressed from the experience of the below HR manager coming from the public



sector, whose experience of consultants varied dramatically between two firms. In summary, the business project demanded the optimisation of the client organisation's practices in way that were meeting the government's new targets. In the interview the client provides a thorough account about the felt frustration to the changes that needed to be introduced, and the poor customer service that the particular public authority was rated against by the government assessment bodies. The client's involvement in shaping the way with which the consultants designed and delivered their programme has contributed to the client's acceptance and satisfaction of the consultants' service.

They designed them [programmes] very closely in consultation with us. We worked on them, initially we worked through the very early design stages very closely. I mean, there were several meetings between the consultants, our HR people, myself, our corporate development people, people who were instrumental in developing our priorities, the council's vision, were involved in the early design work of the programme. (cl.10).

We have decided what our big vision is, what our big message is. The method for getting that through the people is what we want to pay them money to help us to do. (cl.10)/

I think the consultant is a tool that you need to use as part of your, if you like, almost part of your management team from the time that you are running something like this and then you say 'right, thanks very much, your help has been great, we'll move on now', but you've got to be there managing that process and you've got to be there, I think as you have just described, *your intervention is absolutely critical*. You have got to be there to make sure that it is achieving what you want to achieve. They are not there to take over from managers, they are not there to replace your role as a manager. They are there to work alongside you (cl.10).

One of the distinct themes emerging from the above interviewee, and which needs to be seen in the light of the above broader discussion, has to do with the shifting of power and control between the two parties. the client feels ownership of the project and the consultants are seen as a management extension of the client. At the same time, the consultants are given the power and responsibility to design the programme according to their assumed expertise-knowledge which the client has already agreed that does not have internally. What the client tries to avoid is a 'transactional' nature of service where there is only a minimal involvement in the relationship and without underestimating the consultants' external input.

The consultants are not directing this project. I'm and the business is directing the project. I've defined the problem, I've got the resources from the board to actually do this problem, to take this opportunity, I've brought the consultants in because I

want to execute and deliver something within a period of time which I *can't* do with the current resources I've got within the organisation. Now, those skills are strategic, they are capacity and they are if you like delivery mechanisms in terms of you know doing it, so, that's how it operates (cl. 8).

One way to characterise the above interaction is by arguing that both consultant and clients move through stages of decision making, where they both negotiate their interests in a way that they find alignment of meaning. For example, the client's assertiveness to clearly co-produce the project objectives with the consultant is a stage which unless the consultants' accept or compromises with, can make the partnership difficult or even dysfunctional. The same applies with the consultants' proposition of the design and delivery aspects of the program which the client needs to accept. The process of refining the made propositions and their accommodation and support by both parties, helps create a regulatory framework that binds the parties' relationship and its practices. Certainly, our level of analysis makes it difficult to know how precisely consultants and clients move through these micro-practices and mutually negotiate their interests to ensure possible partnership. However, what remains clear is the presence of a continuous and dialectic discourse that is in flux, and through which the compromise of interests is critical for sustaining the relationship.

#### *10.6.1 The client's involvement in the consulting project*

Apart from the shifting of power and control in the relationship, a complementary theme to the issue of legitimacy concerns the clients' involvement in the consultants' advice making process. The consultants' accommodation of the clients' suggestions might shift the structure of delivering the project. This helps create an intersubjective shared alignment of meaning that is particularly useful for understanding how justification occurs (Philips and Brown, 1993). The clients' process of internalising the consultants' advice takes place by means of co-involvement to the consulting practices. The above interaction enables the service to become something that is co-emerged and not simply sold in a transactional manner. The clients' participatory role in the consultant and their freedom to change or manipulate the consultants' suggestions helps foster this shared intersubjectivity. Clients do not simply become passive recipients over the consultants'

propositions but also partake in the creation of it. From this follows, that the clients' role of co-working with the consultant and participating into deciding what a design program should contain, helps ingrain the consultants' external advice in the client. This mutual co-enactment of meaning is crucial for how the client comes to accept the consultants' claims. This is clearly illustrated in the below comments where the client refers to his experience with the first consulting firm and how detached the consultants were to their needs.

I am not sure that at the time we commissioned the first time around we properly integrated that into what our overall plans were. This time we already had our plans in place and what we said is this bit and this bit and this bit they could perhaps best be done by using someone else to come along and partner us, but, we must ensure they are working within our strategic plan. (cl.10).

they know that their relationship with us as a council is more than just doing a programme and leaving... So, I think it is an important point about working with consultants. It's about establishing a trusting strategic partnership as opposed to just buying their service for two months or six months and then waving goodbye. I think, there's two very different relationships develop. (cl.10).

So they then took over, if you like, the delivery of an education programme, that's just been described, designed around what we wanted, within the council, to be our management ethos. (cl.10).

The client's desire to actively engage into the consultants' advice making process poses an interesting power-related tension that also needs to be noted. Are the consultants so open in allowing the client's involvement into the assignment? And is the power relationship shifting so easily between the two parties? In making the above argument we certainly do not want to undermine the complexities of how such power-relation 'equilibrium' becomes possible. Neither do we want to assume that consultants provide such freedom of contribution to all clients. Clearly, consultants can be opposed to such client initiative if it is felt to threaten their credibility and approach of service. We argue that the stages through which clients negotiate their involvement into the project is clearly dependent on a number of conversations that remain inaccessible. We have had rely on the clients' account of their experience as recorded on text for developing our proposed argument. However, the making of our argument departs from the evidence that clearly indicates how clients desire such an involvement, and that such relationship becomes feasible in conversation with consultants. Furthermore, such involvement can

account for influencing the creation of a shared meaning in the relationship and which meaning can account for the role of justification over the proposed knowledge-claims. Complementary to the above idea is also the client's clear and strong intention of involvement that is explicitly communicated to consultants. The clients' reflection and learning from the previous experiences becomes an important lacuna for drawing insights to the later relationship. The fact that the consultants are willing to allow the clients to contribute in their own way, indicates that the consultants achieved a level of power-relationship that was mutually satisfactory for the two parties. This is further illustrated in the below comments:

The consultants then went away and they put it into a deliverable programme of activities, brought it back, we changed some things around, there were some bits we felt maybe that they had missed the point or we wanted to firm up. And we also agreed on our input to the actual delivery because what we wanted was some of our senior managers to be seen to be working with them in the *delivery* of the programme. So, it enhanced the view that this was real! It was not an academic theoretical-based programme about management development. This was a programme which was helping to develop our managers, *deliver* our new vision and deliver our priorities. So, they did a lot of the off-site design work that was following a lot of on-site joint work that we did between our senior managers and them. (cl.10).

We had about seven days of activity away from the work place, off site, being delivered by the consultants using the materials that we put together with them as part of the design stage and they delivered the programme to our middle managers and that took them through all the things such as performance management, planning for the modernisation process, people management, customer care. (cl10).

Many clients who argue for this proposition had a transactional-related consulting experience from previous encounters where consulting initiatives were 'done to them'. Their lack of challenging the consultants' inputs or modifying the decisions provided a bureaucratic management approach (Werr and Styhre 2003) where power and control remained with the consultants. It is interesting to note that the clients' view of consultants shifts from being a source of value and support, to becoming a threatening party where personal interests are overridden by the consultants' decisions. All of the below clients refer to a conscientious effort to have a primary decision making role without being passive recipients. As the following excerpts statements indicate, clients refer to their growing positive experience with using consultants within a network type of relationship. In such relationship power is not necessarily possessed by one party but is the result of a continuous negotiation between interests.

It's extremely close! It's very, very close. In a managerial term it is quite intimate in terms of the reaction, it's very, very, [close] because things are constantly happening you know, in terms of how things develop. For instance, one of the first things you might do is you might conduct some research and so you have to create a research brief and you are working with the consultant on that, and the consultant if they are a marketing specialist may help to produce it, but, you are constantly monitoring the way things are going on you know and ultimately the consultant will come back to you, if there is a problem that needs to be resolved. (cl.8).

Yeah. So you need to manage consultants very, very carefully. And that's why it's important to have very close relationship in working with them it doesn't so much happen...[by itself] (cl.8)

It's probably the best relationship, but that's probably because of our *approach* to it. We wanted things different this time, we didn't want them to come in and go and we are back to square one. We wanted an organization left behind. (cl.10).

So, the relationship is changing, the relationship we have this time with ABA is more of a partnership approach. Everything is structured the contract is structured to ensure that we both benefit from the contract, we got to ensure that we have a sustainable procurement organization. (cl.22).

In an interview with a client at the position of CFO, the above idea is further supported. The client's involvement in the consultants' decision making helped the acceptance of the proposed advice and it eliminated the type of criticism that could threaten the relationship. The client's space of decision reinforces the sense of acting in relation to what is not a predefined or pre-decided proposition. The client's felt right to acknowledge the consultants' recommendations, and at the same time make an independent decision, provides a notion of *flexibility* that is a desirable attribute of that relationship.

I didn't have KEME over here, doing something I wasn't involved with. Everything they were doing I was involved, I was *there*... I felt that the KEME guys were in a mindset that says 'we want to work with these guys and help them find the best way forward', rather than, 'I'm a smart consultant, I'll come along and tell them what the right answer is'. They might just have been good at presenting in a way that made me feel like that but that's how I felt as a client, I didn't feel like what I've got is some smart individual trying to tell me how to do something. Because the sort of individual that I am, I'll have my own views, and, I know my business, that doesn't mean that other people can't help me do things better but... (cl. 12).

The consultants' attitude to working with the client on a more equal power-level, becomes a distinct attribute of the relationship against which the client expresses satisfaction. This experience comes in contrast to the client's previous working business assignments where the consultants happened to be the more dominant party, and where

the bureaucratic type of relationship according to Werr and Styhre (2003) can be seen as the more dominant one<sup>26</sup>. As the above comment indicates the client's felt power and flexibility to challenge the consultants and to co-contribute to the outcome of the knowledge service, enhances the client's receptivity of the consultants' suggestions. This is further explained in the following comment:

One of the interesting things that happened was that I think KEME's preferred solution was not the one we went with. I pushed strongly to go with the one we went with. (cl.12).

In discussing the qualities of power and control a complementary to the above theme concerns the perceived *value*, clients believe that get, when they have influence over the relationship. Clients argue that by being in control, over what the consultant design and deliver, can extract the optimum value from the business partnership. Even though, it is often argued that consultants are the principle party that exercise power and control over the client we see that this is not necessarily the case. The way in which consultants allow their practices to be injected with the clients' distinct interests, creates an interesting dynamic that favours the network approach. Even though it is difficult to speculate in what way clients perceive that obtain value out of such practices, it is clear that it is in the interest of the consultants to engage in such type of involvement rather than offer an already specified service.

#### *10.6.2 Summary*

From our analysis and discussion we have seen that discursive legitimation is partly dependent on the nature of relationship that is developed between consultants and clients. We have focused on the clients' involvement into consulting projects where authority and decision making are not only delegated by the consultants, but also, mutually shared by clients. Such an involvement does not only entail mere participation by means of suggestion making. Clients are eager to challenge the consultants' assumed self-carrying of authority or expertise. Clients enter into the realm of the consultants' advice-giving distinct professional role and consultants need to allow such criticism to emerge in the

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<sup>26</sup> This is an experience for which the client elaborates with great detail in the interview.

relationship with the clients. However, as we are coming to examine in the following section such partnership is not just entertained by all employees. It is not free from the intense power game as well as aggressive and differing competing interests.

### **10.7 Clients' criticism & the consultants' change of approach**

A secondary influential trend that we also notice from the data is in reference to the consultants' change of approach followed from the clients' expressed suggestions, dislikes, or/and criticism. It is evident how clients often come to disagree with the consultants' operations, content-related recommendations as well as the language and approach used. The consultants' decision in modifying the various aspects of their approach creates degrees of tension. The issue of resistance and exercise of power are critical aspects of the relationship as a whole. We note how the consultants' change of approach in a project might increase the assertiveness in the client in perceiving to be the more dominant party. At the same time, it can also reinforce the client's likelihood of accepting the consulting propositions. The above theme can be illustrated through the experience of the following client, whose dislike of the consultants' approach was made explicit during a number of informal meetings and formal presentations. The client felt that the consultants were conveying a message that was not compatible with the employees' culture – an issue that has already been discussed in a previous section of this chapter. The consultants decided to change their approach. This is argued to have reinforced the client's positive working relationship with the consultant.

It took me two months before I started challenging and pushing back to CAC and God bless them, they changed their methodology quite a lot as a result of the push backs that I gave them because, at first, you struggle to understand what they're talking about, then you grasp the process but once you take that template and apply it to a, not being rude, a working HR manager like Anne, you start thinking, this isn't going to work, we need more steps, we need to simplify it, we need to do this because other wise you're just going to leave Anne in the regional office at 9.00 at night doing some work again, which was not the whole point of the exercise ( cl.24).

The client appreciates how consultants may have only changed their approach out of need to keeping the contract with the client firm, and, without genuinely agreeing with his recommendations. However, the change of approach clearly helps the legitimisation of the consultants' advice in the client as the below statements indicate (cl.24).

But when we ran the pilot training course, I just sat there for two days, taking notes and as a result of that we changed the training course as we went along because again, MT tended to be very rigid, you must get this, you must...you don't treat HR like that because they are the supreme people- people and what I was trying to do was to get MT to think, 'this is a special audience, this is not a guy in hob nail boots putting an oven in to Rotherham', 'this is the HR community who have probably delivered more training courses than you guys have had hot dinners, who are supreme readers of people and watchers of people and all the rest of it'. (cl.23).

The pace with which the consultants happened to deliver their assignment was, to some degree, regulated by the client's involvement. The consultants' receptivity to the client's suggestion, as well as the process of managing their relationship helped to alleviate conflict. We want to argue how the process of maintaining a satisfactory discursive equilibrium between the two sides is dependent on the achieved alignment of meaning in the relationship. We further want to illustrate the above theme by reference to the client's further interesting comment:

No, simply because my key role was as an interpreter between the two. After you get a handle on what they're talking about, and it took me two or three months to get a handle on exactly what they were talking about, once you've got it, you've got it, and, it's simply a case of saying to them, 'you need to back off you need to slow down you need to do this', and then to the HR community it's very much 'trust me; this works, try it, give it a go'. (cl.24)<sup>27</sup>.

On a similar tone to the above experience, the following client refers to her increased frustration of consultants in wanting to be the more dominant party in the relationship. The client refers to the sense of ownership and control, consultants wanted to have over the project, and in assuming that their knowledge is giving them the right to be the ruling party. Clearly the client alludes to the possession of power by the consultant in driving the project.

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<sup>27</sup> An additional comment to the above is the following:

"No, that all came from Peter I don't think we would have had the results we have. Because I think, - and I'm remembering back to the pilot training course, there was a sense of alienation between the trainer and the little group we had at the start. Because one thing you never do to an HR person, or you do it at your peril, is talk down to them, you don't talk down to HR, HR have been here three million times before, they've sacked more people than you've had hot dinners they've hired more people, they've done more training than you have and there was, I felt, an inconsistency of attitude which is what we worked through on subsequent courses; you, MT, get off your perch and come and stand of the floor with the rest of us. Let's spend more time doing word breakdown structures because everybody loves doing word breakdown structures – more of that, less of the boring old theory, put it in the book but, you know, so all of that". (cl.24).



I think almost every consultant firms I have worked with, have made the mistake of thinking that they were cleverer than us. They are not cleverer, they bring in different skills of working which is why we want them. They've all made that mistake and the result of that is it annoys people, it aggravates. So it makes the change management part of our job even more difficult, getting people to accept changes and differences and so on. (cl.22).

In talking about her experience on the particular project and the use of a large consulting firm that happened to win the contract, the client refers to the early stages of her relationship with the consultants. When the client detected that the consultants wanted to have the primary governance of the project, she strongly challenged that behaviour, with the result of changing the current state of affairs. This is vividly expressed in the below statements:

A common mistake is, you decide on a project, you get the agreement from the project manager, the people involved that yes that we want from the consultants to do this, and they, ACA go in, and all the other consultants and they think they run and own the project, but they don't. They don't run the project, they are just there to assist and give guidance, train, they don't own it. Because they are so keen to make their mark, they try to take over, and if you haven't got a strong individual in that organization that can sometimes be perpetuated (cl.22).

At the beginning of it, as soon as we became aware of that, and as a programs officer, - because we have constant contact with the teams so we can observe and we knew, we then got our change and communication team involved, learning teams involved, and my team involved, at various stages, in order to give our own people the confidence to say 'No, I am running this, this is *my* project, this is my budget you are talking about. I really welcome your support ACA but we're in the driving seat'. And we did that (cl.22).

*Interviewer: How did the consultants react to this when you said 'just a minute this is my project'?*

What I did in the whole was that I worked through their project director, the ACA project director, who's brought in specially to do this task because it was such a big contract for them. They brought in one of their best. As soon as I said anything, he knew straightaway it was an issue to be looked into, and he took a fix. (cl.22)

*Interviewer: Was there a change in attitude by the consultants then?*

Yes very much so. (cl 22).

Yes, it got to be a much more, we got away from the client-consultant relationship and it got much smoother, much gentler and all the rest of it, so they did listen. What they've done subsequently, I've no idea, but, certainly their attitude changed throughout the genesis of the project. (cl. 22).

The client's argument about the consultants' tendency for 'owning the project' is a statement that refers to the broader culture of the relationship and not just in regards to

some isolated practices. It is not entirely explicit in what exact ways the consultants demonstrated that sense of ownership that caused frustration. However, we want to argue that the created 'distance' between the two parties, and the unfiltered decision making initiatives by the consultants, led towards conflict. What is important from the above statement is the consultants' change of attitude to the project that helped maintain/foster the consultant-client partnership. It is interesting how the client responsible for the project expressed dissatisfaction to the partner consultant of the firm who in turn communicated that to the consultants working on the project.

### **10.8 Critical Perspectives and Argument Limitations**

One of the limitations from the above argument concerns the position of power and authority of those responsible for the consulting contract, and who may determine the alteration of the consulting propositions. The client and consultants' testimonies we discussed so far are made by people that were directly responsible for the purchase of a consulting assignment. Their control and manipulation over the consultants' advice is a direct outcome of their own position in the client firm which allows them to accomplish such initiative.

It is important to note how client members that have not been responsible for the design and delivery of a consulting assignment have expressed increased dissatisfaction of consultants. This is because decisions made on a more senior level were affecting them in a way that they could not modify. We take the example of two particular clients where the lack of power and control over the consultants, as well as the lack of recognition about their concerns from their own managers, resulted to immense frustration and dislike. This line of argument is very much in accordance with the propositions of the critical perspective where the consultants' power shapes the relationship, and where the manipulation of interest favours the more powerful party.

In a project concerning a non-profit organisation the following client discusses her experience of consultants at a time where the client's senior management was facing personnel and operational related difficulties. The company was heavily dependent on its use of volunteers for delivering its services. In an effort to introduce a new measurement system for the performance output of its service a large consulting firm was called in

order to design and deliver such framework. At the time, the client was holding a middle management position and was responsible for reporting to the firm's senior management. One of the important reasons of her frustration was in reference to the new changes the consultants aimed at introducing, without the consultation of the actual members of staff. Even though this was partly caused by the internal management's lack of consideration, the interviewee also refers to her frustration while working with the consultants. In particular, the consultants' lack of acknowledgement about her views on the issue and her need of compliance to the introduced changes. Her power and control over the consultants was limited because of her position and authority in the client firm. However, the issue of importance is the lack of a working relationship with the consultants. The interviewee's lack of expressing her views directly affected her perception of the consultants' advice. This is clearly captured in the below statements:

I wasn't one of the directors of the company. I was somebody who held a position of responsibility in the region. I would get feedback from people at my level and we would take it back to national meetings and let it be known how we felt. But the main feeling of unhappiness on the ground as a result of this we felt was coming from the fact that a management consultancy, a big management consultancy [firm] had come in and been given almost free reign to make assumptions and make us fit a template we didn't feel we fitted. (cl.17).

But I felt, and I think a lot of people felt, that when the management consultancy became involved there was a lack of *understanding* about the way the charity worked with people. And it did cause a lot of bad feeling because people did feel that really this should be measured in terms of numbers...(cl.17)

*Interviewer: Did the consultants try to engage with you, after the brief?*

Not really, no, No. And that was another grievance...The approach that was taken was we were all told that this process was going to happen. We were told that there would be consultation and that people would visit people in different jobs to get a flavour and spend some time with them. I know that on the fundraising side, which was the side of it that I was on there was very poor consultation actually. The consultants tended to stay around London and talk to the people at headquarters and not go out into the field because they thought, and, they were given to understand, that they'd got enough of a flavour of what was going on in fundraising from talking to people at headquarters. But that is a symptom of the organisation at the time, because it had become very insular at headquarters level. (cl.17).

Even though the consultants' services can be argued to have been already legitimised in relation to the senior clients who were responsible for the contract, the expressed view from this middle management employee is directly the opposite. The consultants' work resulted in a substantial loss of funds that its members had long and

hard tried to accumulate. Moreover, this experience would actually create further negative cultural and operations difficulties for the firm in the long term.

On a different interview with a middle manager from a large corporate firm, the client refers to her experience of working with consultants on a large performance optimisation project. The client firm sought to create a new mechanism for monitoring the employees' service output to customers. This performance measurement system sought to create new standards for reducing lead-times as well as increase their turnover. In this interview the client is explicit about her lack of a personal relationship with the consultant. Her job often became a continuous burden governed with fear and manipulation. At times, the consultants would escalate any opposing expressed views to the senior clients with the result of creating pressure on the employees at the middle or lower management positions. According to the client, the consultants used their assigned power to fulfilling their interests against the clients' expressed frustration.

I didn't feel comfortable that it wasn't a mutual relationship. I felt as though as I was being told what to do and how to do it. And there was no room for me to be able to feedback. There was very little room for me to be able to negotiate. I didn't feel comfortable that when I was feeding things back. If the project manager for example thought it was going to jeopardise what he was going to deliver then that would be escalated to my boss and I would be told off, if you like. I didn't feel comfortable with that. I didn't feel comfortable with some of the methods that were used by this one particular individual.

Yes, yeah. There was very little.... relationship building on site wasn't that great because if in doubt the consultants would just escalate it. It's almost like telling tales really that's the way that it felt. If in doubt the CAP consultants would escalate through their lines of management and we would be told well you've got to do it anyway so therefore people stopped saying things and just went along with it. (cl.25).

Yes, there is a view across the business that if you make too big a deal about things or too vociferous in your arguments about certain things that you're classed as not a team player. There is a, from my own personal perspective there is an element of "blame culture" going on within [the department] and has been for some time. Since it happened has everybody falls in line with that so we shut up and put up and shut up as they say. Just do it. (cl.25).

*Interviewer: Did you express your reaction and your negative feelings to anyone?*

Oh yeah, it was fed back and Mary fed back to George, the dealings for this one particular project manager, the guy himself. It wasn't just me there was a lot of other people fed back as well. Allegedly, this guy was spoken to about changing his behaviour and such like that allegedly and on occasion it did, and then, on occasion he didn't. (cl.25).

The above account evidently portrays a consultant-client relationship that is powered by the consultants' privileged access. The consultant's working relationship with employees is regulated by power and control. Even though our discussion of the

legitimation of knowledge claims is seen in relation to those client members who are responsible for the decision making of the consultants' activities, the above expressed views show aspects of this relationship that may not be realised or detected by those responsible. In this sense, it is possible that the consultants who may have a good working relationship with the senior clients and compromise their interests on the grounds of negotiation, can have a *different* relationship with other organisational members of less senior positions. The above critical approach, as expressed by clients, comes is echoed by the consultants' experiences. As the following comments indicate consultants emphasise the power aspect of their relationship with clients. Decisions are not necessarily based on conversations which are transparent or explicit. The theme that follows this discussion is in line with the emphasis placed by authors highlighting the use of hidden power relations that govern consulting projects (Kieser, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Werr, and Styhre, 2003; Clark and Salaman, 1998).

The following consultant used to work for one of the Big Five firms and refers to his own experience in dealing with clients as well as that of his colleagues. The interviewee is explicit about the use of rhetoric and the acclaimed expertise that is not necessarily reflected within the consultants' practices. Nevertheless, it is used in order to market the firm's services. As the following excerpts indicate, the underlying factor that regulates the decision making is the personal relationship between the consultant and the decision maker.

I think that when the consultants turn up they are trained in, lets say different processes, so business process re-engineering for example is a classic one that a lot of consultants are trained in and surprising enough there's not a lot of people out in organisation, or, there are many organisation where people aren't trained in that kind of thing. When they say they are trained in changed management to me that training in change management means that they have access to the appropriate individual, to force the decision (con. 4).

...they actually establish a rapport with the client and consulting is all about relationships. It's about the relationship with the decision maker. If a consultant can come in and deliver and establish a relationship with the client that they can appear to *justify* with the client charging 10 times the amount, and, building that on expertise, specific knowledge, brand, these are the kind of things, that is the key; it's all about that relationship, because that person that consultant is trying... if they can justify the additional value that the client will pay out that's where you want to be from a consultant. (con.4).

Legitimacy of knowledge is based on the convincing process in which the individual client comes to buy into the consultant's recommendations. Such legitimation is in large

dependent on the personal relationship between individuals rather than dependent on the assumed objective qualities of advice and expertise. A similar argument is also expressed from a different consultant. His emphasis is about the personal relationship which helps influence the fulfilment of the consultants' interests over the client. The image that we get from both the consultants indicate a client that is a passive recipient of the consultants' suggestion, and one who does not challenge the acclaimed expertise. As the following statement indicates, decisions are made because of the consultants' links with the client members who have authority rather than on what the content-advice is.

The way you get yourself high billability, high utilisation, is you affiliate yourself with one of the senior sales people, who is known to go out and be a good rainmaker, because they can bring in the work (con.10).

It needs to be highlighted how the interviewed consultants sharing the above critical view see the exercise of manipulation not as an inherent quality or extension of consulting practices, but as an activity dependent on the consultants' self-regulating practices, together with the outcome of the business pressure received from the parent firm to produce revenues. Consultants feel compelled to see clients as a means to meeting financial targets. However, consultants often do not ascribe to the culture or decision of the parent firm and decide to move outside of it by forming their own company or join other small consulting firms. This is illustrated in the following excerpt by a senior management consultant in describing his experience from working for a large corporation, and who is now a director of a small consulting firm:

Yeah, I think there, there was a very strong feeling that if you went to a client meeting and you didn't come away with either an order... or, then you'd sort of failed. Whereas the people that I work with now and the work that I do now is very much a case of you develop relationships, you get to know people over time and then as their business issues crop up they think 'He might help us with this' they know you, *they trust you*, they ring you up and they say 'I'm not sure whether you guys can help but we've got this issue with such and such, what do you think?' And then you have a conversation with them and you explore it and if you think that you can help then you say 'Well we might go about in this way or in that way and that way do any of those sound like what you're looking for?' If you don't think you're able to help say "Well I don't think we can help you with that but you might want to talk to this firm or that firm or the other firm". Because at the end of the day if you're in the game for the long-term you want to deliver what people want, rather, than have to continually find new clients because the last ones weren't very satisfied with what you did for them. (con.9).

On a separate interview with another consultant emphasis is made about the role that relationship plays in affecting the accommodation of advice into the client. The

degree of acceptance of the consultant's radical ideas is argued to be more easily received by clients who show trust in him at a personal level. The fact that the consultant chooses to communicate his ideas in different ways, and on basis of his relationship, shows its central justificatory role. The following comments indicate the role of relationship to the justification process for accepting/rejecting the proposed advice.

So basically, the better the relationship you have, the wider variety of safe to supposedly radical solutions are acceptable. The worse the relationship, then, almost you have to go with the safe solution which is close to what the client probably thought they wanted anyway, would be my kind of, that would be my experience I think. The better the relationship the more they trust you and the more they're willing to maybe do things they hadn't expected or look at, an identification of issue or identification of solution in more radical and unusual ways. The less trust they've got, the more they will want to go down the safest route. (con.30).

I think there are times where a client will still just want you to do what it is they want based on their diagnostic of the problem but I think my experience is the longer and the better relationship you have with the client almost the more they're willing to allow you to manage that process, yes, and I would say that it varies from the two. (con.30).

The context of the above statement is made in relation to the broader importance that the quality of the relationship can play in the legitimisation of knowledge claims. The consultant's belief for how the relationships attributes are related to the context of advice legitimisation reinforces the position of our argument. However, inferences for how the above relationship is to be seen as a 'power relationship', by the consultant, needs to be acknowledged as dependent on interpretation, and, as it is feasible to analyse the consultant's above view both in the context of the critical and functional approaches. From a critical approach the consultant chooses to use his/her relationship, with the client, as a means to legitimising his/her advice and the consulting practices are used in favour of the consultants' interests. From a functional approach it can be argued how the consultants' approach is not intended to override the client's interests, but acknowledges the limitations of decision making in the client.

## **10.9 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the dimension of discursive legitimisation as expressed in the consultant-client relationship. We have concentrated on examining the importance consultants and clients equally attach to the social relationship that governs

their interaction. Our thesis has been to argue how the governing of the social relationship is an important social arena for understanding how legitimation occurs. Our discussion has concentrated on exploring the clients' involvement in the advice and decision making process of the consultants. By having an active presence in the design and distribution of the advice, clients create a much clearer alignment with consultants characterised for its fluidity and flexibility. Consultants are not simply keen on delivering a common set of ideas that might have been applied at previous assignment with success rates. The relationship, consultants and client want to develop helps create a better inner recognition about the organisational behavioural dynamics between each party. When clients engage in the consultants' advice development process, they are actively engaged in identifying ways of creating alignment for what these ideas represent in their organisation. To what extent consultants are flexible enough to accommodate the clients' input is argued to become a critical part of the relationship and which also extends to relations of power and authority. We have illustrated that when consultants are willing to modify their knowledge input, they help achieve a better level of integration while legitimising their service to clients.

Apart from the above theme, we have also discussed about the interchange of power between the consultant and client parties. We found that in situations where consultants are willing to accept the clients' expressed criticism and often modify their position, allows them win the clients' trust that also helps sustain the legitimation of their service. We do not argue for the above alignment of the relationship in a normative way, and without acknowledging the inner power relations that govern the interaction between the two parties. We have clearly shown how the above argued alignment is often confined in a context of superficiality. Our effort has not been to justify the normative groundness of the consultants' course of legitimation, but to illustrate how it takes place. In fact, we have argued for the limitation of the above proposition and how the exercise of criticism and power is often made by client actors at senior positions.

Consultants often fail to listen to the criticism and reaction of the less senior employees which might not be the direct clients of the assignment. The interplay of power, we have argued, is in alignment with the work by Werr and Styhre (2003), who argue for a network type of relationship where power is not the sole product of one party.



We have been limited in demonstrating the more specific activities that consultants and client perform in order to maintain qualities of trust and a mutual working partnership in such relationship. Our treatment of the notion of relationship has been focused on rather exemplifying the broader social and interpersonal qualities of the interaction, instead of a set key of activities that perform specific results. We conclude by stating how the achieved legitimation between consultants and clients takes a strong discursive form of interaction, which is in line with Habermas's argument. Even though our discussion does not represent Habermas's theoretical framework in its entirety we nevertheless make use of his insightful contribution of legitimation that governs the dialectic side of the relationship.

## Chapter 11: Conclusion

### 11.1 Legitimacy and its generalisability into social settings

Our study of the four legitimacy categories represents distinct social contexts which share different types of conditions that determine how congruence and conformity occur. However, the study of the identified categories has a much wider social application within a range of social settings that move outside the consultant-client interaction. Such social settings can compromise the relationship between the government and its citizens, the relationship between corporate firms and their consumers, and the relationship between employers and employees. In the following section we want to briefly illustrate how the application of the above categories could be exemplified in such social settings.

The exemplification of cognitive legitimation can be illustrated by the way that political parties might seek to legitimise the introduction of law or policies to its citizens (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). To an important degree, such endeavours rely on promoting a series of well marketed political ideas for winning the citizens' support. However, the promises made, especially prior to political election campaigns, are strongly driven by forms of argumentation based on what politicians will be able to achieve *if* they are elected. The legitimation of such claims is contingent to channels of communication in which politicians are able to transmit messages that will be able to persuade voters for the possible execution of such promises (Tyler, 1990). For this reason, large investments are channelled into advertising campaigns in order to create the convincing impressions that the specific political party is able to initiate change that will be for the benefit of its citizens (Smith, 2004). Examples of cognitive legitimation are also demonstrated when a political party seeks to initiate change while being in power, and requires the vote of the other political constituencies before it is able to implement the actions it seeks to take (Smith, 2004).

The exemplification of moral legitimacy can be illustrated by the way a large organisation might seek to win customer trust by promoting its deontological principles. At present, and with the heated debate on global warming and the production of unnecessary waste, organisations seek to appear as ethically responsible towards the environment. By making increased use of recycling, by ensuring that fair trading

standards are maintained with growers, and by reducing their production of unnecessary waste, such organisations seek to appear as morally responsible towards the environment (Crane and Matten, 2007). The wider objective of such endeavour aims to ensure that their practices are in alignment with important corporate ethical responsibilities that are regulated and promoted by government bodies (Crane and Matten, 2007). We do not argue for a moral notion of legitimation that is driven by altruistic motives. Such organisations are clearly driven by the need to generate profits and the interests in appear as corporate responsible cannot be detached from their immediate business interests. However, we argue that the reason why such corporations may be willing to heavily invest to appear morally responsible is driven by the need to attain legitimation at the deontological level, where care for the environment is believed to be an ethical responsibility (Crane and Matten, 2007).

The illustration of the pragmatic as well as discursive legitimacy can be illustrated in the context of employers' relationship with employees. Dimensions of pragmatic legitimacy can be manifested when the managers of an organisation might seek to introduce, for example, new structures of performance pay, or introduce changes that might require new approaches to working or reporting to colleagues/superiors. A restructuring of the working environment might be argued to promote the decentralisation of power or an increased sense of autonomy between employees. Managers might argue that such organisational changes might be to the benefit of the organisation and its employees in the long term. However, from a pragmatic legitimation perspective the employees might require the managers to demonstrate the specific economic outputs they will be able to gain from such changes (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). The employees might not be interested in how a change programme might help improve the organisation's performance, but instead, are interested in how it might lead to a possible promotion or an increase in their pay as a reward for committing themselves to such changes.

The exemplification of discursive legitimation can be equally demonstrated in the context of different ethnic and religious employee groups and their representation in relation to the corporate decision making process. By engaging in dialogue with those that are affected by an organisation's decisions, managers have the opportunity to

appreciate how the employees make assumptions about such outcomes and how employees believe that will affect them. By creating accounts of shared understanding managers do not simply seek to convince employees as to the validity of their actions, but rather seek to gain appreciation of the interpretative process by which they create relevant meaning out of them. In examining discursive legitimation in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Palazzo and Scherer (2006) make the argument of how “A discursive approach to organizational legitimacy will have to deal with the growing importance of dissensual communication in pluralizing and globalizing societies”(p.83)

## **11.2 Overview of Thesis**

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the relationship between management consultants and clients. In particular, to investigate the processes of knowledge legitimation as it happens during the course of a business assignment. The study of legitimation constitutes an important function for the way business value is perceived to be created between actors. The purpose of this thesis has been to examine the stages by which consultants communicate their advice to clients and the reasons for which such advice might be accepted, rejected, or modified. Our focus on legitimation has tried to make transparent the underlying socio-political factors that can influence the decision-making mechanisms within and between actors. The reason for the above focus emerges from a current premature understanding for how consulting knowledge is legitimised in the literature. Even though, attention has been paid for explaining the mechanisms by which consultants aim at creating value, there has been little attention to the clients' receptivity of the consultants' actions. Also, how clients might condition the consultants' suggestions in a way that value is perceived.

### *11.1.1 Theoretical framework*

From the literature we find that two principle views have dominated the way authors think about the consultant-client relationship. These views are characterised as the Organisational Development/OD or Functional approach (Clark and Fincham, 2002) and the Critical approach (Werr, and Stjernberg 2003; Werr and Styhre 2003). Departing from a different set of assumptions both approaches provide a distinct interpretation on the topic.

The OD perspective argues for the range of skills, consultants bring to the client party and which have a teleological effect. Knowledge is regarded as a transferable resource that has definable aims, and which can be managed according to the specific intentions of the involved actors (Senge, 1990; Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986). This approach has been defended and advanced by authors that despite their academic interest happen to also undertake an active consulting role as practitioners (Maister, 1993, Schaffer, 1991). The functional approach has also grown out of a distinct set of epistemological and ontological assumptions that often remain implicit in the literature (Fincham, 1995). For example, the belief that the consultants are competent to identify the fabric behind the clients' organisational needs and provide solutions, equally assumes that the representation of organisational problems are accurately depicted through organisational actors. Furthermore, the assumption is made for how the consultants' course of action, in response to such needs, will lead to results which are often anticipated or pre-designed (Lipitt and Lipitt, 1986). The consultants' sell-ability is partly dependent on convincing the client for the potential gain of his/her service. In addition to the above, it is also assumed that consultants operate within and under the realm of the clients' interests (Golembiewski, 1993). The process of helping the client is understood in an altruistic sense, in that the consultants' personal business interests are not necessarily in conflict with the client (Schein, 1988; Lynch, 2003).

The critical approach on the other hand, defends a rather different interpretation for how consultants manage to legitimise the value of their service. Departing from the principle assumption of how consultants are limited in their understanding to capture the presented client needs, the process of legitimation evolves around the interpersonal mechanisms in which consultants manage to convince the client of the value of their service (Kieser, 1997). The critical approach argues for how the knowledgebase from which consultants produce their ideas is part of a much larger knowledge-pool that is driven by management fads (Abrahamson, 1996). As a result, consultants are not in control of their assumed expertise as they often desire to be portrayed. Furthermore, their service does not find a precise alignment with the clients' needs. The consultants' legitimation is based on their competence to modify already existing popular ideas into specific client situations (Heusinkveld, 2004).

The solutions produced are not solely dependent on the consultants' creativity, but their instrumentality for creating accounts of meaning that are convincing to the client. As a result, the value that consultants create, originates from a much deeper interplay of organisational and political factors that matter to the key organisational actors and who are responsible for the business contract (Alvesson, 1993; Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). The consultants' legitimation of service is often projected as representing the client corporation as a whole. However, the critical approach argues that levels of satisfaction are only context-dependent to the individuals engaged in the project, and against whom consultants fulfil specific interests (Werr, 2002).

Even though both of the above approaches have advanced our understanding of the consultant-client relationship, explanations about the legitimation process are produced against the assumptions held by the different perspectives. Furthermore, it is clear that both approaches are consultant-centred (Salaman, 2002). Legitimation is viewed against prospects of what the consultants can achieve in the client without often questioning what reaction such an approach might have. Moreover, whether clients have any influence for how consultants design and communicate their advice to clients for legitimising their value of service. In order to break away from the rather homogenous treatment of legitimation, this thesis has drawn reference from a wide range of consultant and client practitioners. Beginning from the literature that shaped our theoretical understanding of this phenomenon, the thesis has sought to establish the more particular factors responsible for the justification of knowledge claims.

### *11.1.2 Findings*

By drawing our analytical theoretical framework on the work by Suchman (1995) and Habermas (1984a, 1985b) we have identified that legitimation takes place within different dimensions that have been titled as 'cognitive', 'pragmatic', 'moral' and 'discursive'. The creation of such categories aims at highlighting the different epistemological and empirical contexts in which claims are conditioned. Since the study of legitimation is primarily concerned with understanding the factors that produce congruence and conformity, it becomes necessary that we endeavour to locate the exemplification of the above dimensions in the consultant-client relationship. Below, we

come to summarise the main findings of this analysis and move to discuss the broader relevance of this contribution.

## **11.2 Cognitive legitimation**

The study of cognitive legitimation includes the rational and cognitive structures that are essential in the design and delivery of information or knowledge. The degree of positive or negative receptivity is dependent on the 'shared logic' from which a proposition can be defended. According to Suchman (1995) cognitive legitimation becomes a metaphor representing the collection of those mental schemata which can help condition the acceptance or rejection of claims. As a result, for example, an organisation that might want to convince its employees that the introduction of a new pay structure might be to their benefit needs to base its argument on reasons/evidence the employees can be convinced by.

### *11.2.1 Process of argumentation*

The consultant-client relationship is highly driven by forms of argumentation where the given organisational problems are captured, defined and analysed (Czerniawska and May, 2004). In the process of demonstrating their value to clients consultants are dependent on the accumulation and distribution of information that corresponds to the clients' expressed needs (Kieser, 1997). However, the way through which the consultants' value of service is projected, takes place through competing forms of 'knowledge-representation' that corresponds to the clients' reasoning/cognitive schemata.

At one level, the consultants' cognitive legitimation is dependent on their access to industry knowledge and experience the client requires. From the collection of our empirical data we find that consultants are able to claim a privileged position of knowledge-sharing which potentially creates credibility and trust from the client. However, the way in which consultants make their knowledge relevant to the clients' needs is not dependent on the availability of such information only, but in the instrumentality by which it becomes *meaningful*. Consultants endeavour to legitimise their knowledge by finding mental schemata that correspond to the reasoning of the other party.

Even though the factual validity of the consultants' proposed knowledge is critical for sustaining the sound reasoning of their argument, we find that in the process of alignment with the client, consultants also use rhetoric and symbolic management practices (Legge, 1995). As a result, the acute solutions with which consultants are often appraised for, in the functional literature, are amalgamated with rhetoric techniques that merely aim to persuade. We do not argue that this is solely made by the consultants in order to mislead/manipulate clients. This can be done because the consultants themselves face a clear impasse with legitimising their work differently. Consultants can become an instrumental force to the clients' organisational needs by channelling the knowledge and information needed. However, and according to cognitive legitimation, the achieved congruence is not necessarily the result of the inherent objectivity in the consultants' advice.

#### *11.2.2 Client needs re-identification & rhetoric*

At a second level, the consultants' cognitive legitimation occurs in the process of redefining the clients' needs. Consultants become a new point of *reference* in the client in the way the client perceives the identity of the organisational problem from what was initially anticipated or expected. The consultant's insight, in the client, creates a new scope of meaning where assumptions and initial evaluations are now challenged. This allows the creation of a new working structure that is guided by the consultant and often found in close collaboration with the client.

From the practitioners' experience we find that, at times, consultants have played a pivotal role in enabling the client to detect grey organisational areas that were bypassed or taken-for-granted. At the same time, the process of 'need re-identification' creates a powerful incentive for consultants to demonstrate the potential value of their service. The clients' convincing of the consultants' propositions is highly dependent on the reasoning by which, this refined/differentiated 'understanding', is now projected. Consultants and clients are limited in empirically knowing the credibility with which the reality of the organisational problem is projected 'afresh'. Reliance in the consultant takes place by trusting a point of view which is believed to accurately depict the conditions of a situation. At this point, we also find the vulnerability to which the clients are subject to and which consultants can often take advantage of. Rhetoric and persuasion techniques,



as the critical literature argues, are used to convince clients. However, they are not inherent extensions of the consulting practices. As a result, consultants can often genuinely contribute to the client's understanding of an organisational issue without merely selling their service for maximising corporate profit.

At a third level, we find that a large part of the consultants' cognitive legitimation to clients is dependent on the consultants' use of success stories and client testimonials from similar assignments. In contrast to the above discussed dimensions, clients become a lot more passive recipients to the consultants' ideas. The clients' possibility to verify the consultants' claims remains possible but limited. The consultants' cognitive legitimation lies in the demonstrative alignment between: a) what the consultants have achieved in the past, and, b) how this relates to the client's current situation. We find that consultants tend to rely on the dramaturgical aspect of their work by channelling the presentation of previous experiences, in a way that fits the clients' needs/expectations (Clark and Salaman, 1998). This is a phenomenon that has already been discussed in the literature (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). At the same time, we find how clients are able to influence the consultants' justification of knowledge claims by disapproving or challenging the credibility with which events are projected. According to Suchman (1995) cognitive legitimation is governed by the local and socially ingrained patterns of reasoning which is responsible for bringing conformity and congruence. Cognitive legitimation is not referring to the attainment of an outside normative truth that can be objectively shared between individuals. It rather characterises those abstract mental processes from which argumentation and persuasion are produced between actors.

### **11.3 Pragmatic legitimation**

Whereas cognitive legitimation is trying to understand the way in which knowledge claims help generate conformity between parties, pragmatic legitimation is referring to specific outcomes that members of an organisation believe to gain (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). Pragmatic legitimation is used to characterise the short or long term outcomes that can influence the decision-making behaviour between organisational actors. For example, an organisation might want to legitimise the introduction of a different set of working practices in its employees/stakeholders. The managers can endeavour to argue for the financial incentives that can be gained from implementing

such changes. If the proposed incentives happen to meet the employees' immediate interests, the managers have a higher possibility of successfully legitimising their propositions. The point of importance is not the credibility with which processes are carried out but whether they happen to meet the people's personal goals.

In the consultant-client relationship pragmatic legitimation takes place with the way consultants demonstrate that their service will be to the immediate benefit of the client. Moreover, the clients' receptivity of the consultants' legitimacy is highly dependent on the homogenous or diverse interests that influence their expectations. Even though pragmatic legitimacy is dependent on practices of argumentation in which consultants can recommend a 'right' course of action, clients can be declined to accept or support such decision, because it does not meet their personal goals.

From our empirical data we find that the above case is particularly true when a client organisation is represented by different groups of interests. Difficulties emerge, for how consultants demonstrate the value of their services, when there is no uniformity between the client members. In this case, the individual client in dealing with the immediate consultant, is not necessarily the end-client, but implicitly represented through other stakeholder groups. Even though consultants might be able to legitimise their service at a cognitive level, they can still fail to legitimise their services in terms of meeting the clients' diverse interests. As a result, an important factor of pragmatic legitimation is the extent of interpretation by which a specific course of action may meet the audience's explicit or implicit interests. Our findings indicate how consultants tend to operate in two specific areas from which they exemplify the above premise. The first one, concerns the consultants' competence to generate solutions or introduce management tools, which are believed to have an immediate affect in the current workings of the firm. The second area, has to do with the consultants' ability to mobilise resources and produce rates of efficiency, which the client organisation is lacking or not able to produce itself.

#### *11.3.1 The construction of business solutions*

One of the ways in which pragmatic legitimation is exemplified has to do with the way consultants demonstrate the relevance of their stock of knowledge to the clients' specific organisational problems. We find that consultants operate in a fluid and unstructured manner, for *how* they communicate their knowledge to clients. Even though managerial

models/methods and techniques might be used that already exist in broad circulation, consultants manage to personalise the meaning of their content to the client situation. This process does not entail the mere transfer of information into a different context, but the translation or modification of what it entails in the client (Fincham and Evans, 1999; Heusinkveld, 2004).

The functional approach has been criticised by the critical approach for the way it projects the consultants' assumed knowledge and expertise in the client (Kieser, 1997, 2002). As a result, authors argue for the circulation of already existing popular management ideas, and how they are attractively packaged into new business services (Røvik, 1996). Even though the above proposition might well hold truth, our data indicates that the consultants' role in personalising already existing fads does not correlate with the mere distribution *or representation* of those fads to a new context. The consultants' application of already existing business concepts can find a new set of meaning relations that are positively received by the client.

Moreover, clients are less concerned with how consultants often derive the production of their ideas. As Salaman (2002) argues, clients are highly concerned with the pragmatic application of the consultants' management ideas in their own environment. Clients judge the consultants' credibility from the way consultants are perceived to fulfil the clients' expectations. How clients create meaning from the consultants' interventions is not dependent merely on the stock of management fashion from which ideas are derived. As Fincham and Evans (1999) argue, the association that is often made between a management fad and the way it is exercised by practitioners, often becomes misleading. The authors go to suggest the specific part and dimensions of management fad, practitioners are drawing from, is not equally representative of how it is treated between academics and management gurus. The personification of the consultants' ideas in the client, is part of a broader discourse in which political, economic, and social factors are at play. As a result, to argue for how consultants often become distributors of already existing fads, without understanding the process by which ideas become *embedded* in the client, prevents us from appreciating the actual process of legitimation.

A complementary dimension to the above has to do with how consultants are often instrumental in manipulating information and knowledge to constructing 'ways of thinking', the client finds useful or rewarding. A large part of the clients' experience indicates that their organisational needs require the resources of time and commitment to question and review and develop suggestions. At this point, consultants play an equal managerial role to that of the client by dedicating themselves to reflecting over the issues experienced. We argue that consultants often, are in the position to provide creative ideas and solutions that do not represent superior knowledge, neither expertise which cannot be found inside the client. This view can be thought to come in contrast with the emphasis 'expertise' often found in the functional perspective (Rassam and Oates, 1998; Sadler, 1998). Consultants are able to produce different prisms of viewing a situation because of their availability to extract and analyse information that already resides in the client. The consultants' competency to demonstrate the feasible execution of their advice often creates pragmatic legitimation. In this sense, the consultants' work gains value in its operational side of contribution, rather than, outside expertise. Such demonstration is not free from use of rhetoric and persuasion techniques. Clients can be subject to the consultants' manipulation and impression management. However, we argue that clients are in the position to often challenge such consulting behaviour. Such approach often requires them to a change their strategy or arrive at the termination of the business contract.

#### *11.3.1 Detachment & Operational Competence*

Another way by which pragmatic legitimation is manifested, concerns the consultants' qualities of efficiency and operational competence. Consultants are able to deliver outcomes against specific managerial demands that often require the swift mobilisation of resources and people. In a numerous set of examples we find that clients experience a number of domestic operational difficulties that are mainly related to project management. The history, culture, and often internal political differences between the members themselves, often provide a real challenge to undertaking or delivering projects. The clients operate under a silo of organisational culture, which is built over time and personal interests seem to become obstacle to progress. Even though, client members can be well aware of organisational changes that need to be introduced, they experience

difficulty with managing their personal stakes in the firm. Client members are sensitive about their career prospects, and for which a potential clash with colleagues of same seniority might cause friction in the long term. As the organisational studies literature indicates, the relationship between the members' personal political interests with levels of organisational efficiency, remain narrowly close (Tyler, 2006).

Pragmatic legitimacy is manifested in the way consultants act as external actors to the clients' domestic affairs. Consultants are able to challenge and obtain information because they do not share the members' vested interests. Consultants manage to achieve pragmatic legitimacy not because of their stock of knowledge-expertise, which is external, but rather because of their instrumentality to bypass the members' lack of motivation or personal differences. In this paradigm, clients demand from consultants to challenge power relations or to introduce initiatives that are difficult for the client to achieve. Consultants are able to create value in the client by manipulating resources and people, with the result of maximising the efficiency of the clients' performance.

In addition to the above, we also find that consultants generate pragmatic legitimacy when channelling tangible or intangible resources that the client does not possess internally, or it is expensive for the firm to acquire. As the cost economic theory argues (Armbruster, 2006), the purchase of services/resources by clients remains a cost effective mechanism, because of the temporary timeline of the resources required. From the interview data we find that clients expect from consultants to undertake similar managerial roles and responsibilities of their own. Clients want the consultants to work in close collaboration with them without appearing to be superior. At the same time, clients demonstrate sophisticated instrumentality for the way consultants are used in order to bypass domestic interpersonal differences. The consultants' value of service is not necessarily judged on basis of the quality of the managerial intervention, but also for what it means in reference to the organisational actors' vested *interests* as situated within that particular social environment.

#### **11.4 Moral legitimation**

In addition to pragmatic legitimacy, our study has looked at the dimensions of moral dimension and how ethically-related values are used to justify the consultants' activities

and knowledge transfer. Moral legitimation is concerned with normative questions about what is right and wrong. Ethical values are assumed to benefit the wider collective good of the people's community (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimation can be seen in contract to pragmatic legitimation, where the fulfilment of the individuals' interests becomes the primary drive that helps legitimise one's actions.

The consulting literature indicates that the moral dimension of the consultants' work remains central to their demonstration of business value (Poulfelt, 1997; Grint and Case, 1998; Byrne, 2000). Consultants have received criticism from a wide array of business assignments where clients have been manipulated or over-charged. This is often achieved by extending the length of the project or by charging hidden costs, not made explicit at the start of the contract (O'Harrow, 2007; O'Shea and Madigan, 1997). Authors agree in that the ethical responsibility consultants carry, while entering into an assignment, is found outside the expertise or technical-managerial aspects of their work. Put differently, how consultants treat the clients' organisational needs does not depart from the fact that they have the right solutions/information (Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Exton, 1982).

From the literature we also find that the moral dimension has been examined in relation to the work-business-ethics, which consultants project by appreciating the sensitivity of the information received by clients. By respecting the time line in which projects are designed and by demonstrating qualities of transparency and confidentiality for the way the client-members' views can be treated (O'Harrow, 2007), consultants are believed to be obliged to ensure that clients are not jeopardised after the end of the contract. Views in the literature vary, on the extent to which consultants are regarded as being the sole responsible party, for ensuring that a business code of ethics is maintained. Ozley and Armenakis, (2000) and Poulfelt, (1997) argue how clients often fail to meet basic ethical standards themselves. Moreover consultants unfairly continue to be recipients of bad publicity.

Our research findings indicate a different kind of moral legitimacy from what is often discussed in the literature. Our argument is made about the client members' domestic interpersonal and political differences, where decision-making can lead to conflict or the polarisation between members themselves. Highly bureaucratic structures and vested interests often become causes of creating inertia in the organisation. Endeavours for

introducing changes are often followed by experiencing resistance or lobbying, by client members, who want to maintain the status quo. Such clients are often in need of desiring an external intervention, in order, to create legitimacy for their course of action. The positive receptivity of such new interventions as well as the radicalism of the changes introduced, comes to be justified on grounds that represent legitimate principles.

Moral legitimacy is demonstrated by the consultants' externality, perceived objectivity and neutrality. Not just as behavioural qualities in themselves but for what they mean in relation to the clients' existing conflicts or interpersonal competitive interests (see Moore et. al., 2006). We argue that there is a narrow relationship between the way in which the clients' internal environment is projected, and as constituting the demand for a seeming moral intervention which finds alignment against the consultants' behavioural qualities (Tyler, 2006). The processes by which the consultants' independence and objectivity gain validity, are mainly dependent on the ways that they are nurtured, socially constructed, and maintained by the client.

The sense of morality, in the course of business decision-making, seems to play a crucial role for how the interests between members find unity and harmony. Moral values demonstrate an inner sense of duty and locus of responsibility that is collective and concerns the peoples' welfare (Suchman, 1995). Taking action is necessary, not because it favours the interests of a specific individual, but because it is the 'right' thing to do. We support our theoretical conceptualisation between the consultants' externality with moral legitimation through the work of Moore et al., (2006). The authors make the argument of 'moral seduction' and 'issue-cycling' in order to refer to how specific business decisions become credible when they are based on moral virtues. A scope of logical reasoning is created by which decisions find justification on an incremental set of *ethical grounds*. Moore et. al., (2006) argue that the projection of such reasoning takes place through degrees of biases which are consciously and unconsciously assimilated. As a result, members of an organisation seek to challenge other peoples' authority or gain support for introducing a change of working practices, because they genuinely believe how this will increase the performance or profitability of the firm. The consultants' outside intervention and the qualities of objectivity and independence are interwoven with the client's decision making role. As a result, the consultants' intervention becomes

necessary, because the social good produced is believed to contribute to the benefit of the wider members involved (e.g. stakeholders). Our discussion's findings are divided into two thematic areas. The first one is looking at the consultants' intervention in the context of the client's organisational outputs and consequences. The second one is looking at moral legitimacy from a procedural perspective where decisions are made which require support from the various members.

#### *11.4.1 Moral legitimacy through outputs and consequences*

Our empirical findings indicate that moral legitimation is exemplified in the context of specific organisational outcomes that organisational actors seek to achieve. Courses of action gain legitimacy in order to avoid specific negative consequences that can be threatening to the members' interests, and, which can relate to an existing corporate strategy/line of operations, that tend to under-perform. Suchman's (1995) qualification of outputs and consequences concentrates on the goal-oriented activities an organisation invests to accomplish, and also, on the aftermath of an organisation's actions that help legitimise its presence in the environment. In the consultant-client relationship, this premise is translated into an already existing social environment where interpersonal differences tend to be explicit. Power relations between actors, with often equal degree of seniority, creates dysfunctionality to the wider life of the organisation. Organisational outcomes are considered as distinct interventions that can challenge the existing status quo or direction in which authority is exercised. Moral legitimacy takes place from the way clients are able to make use of the consultants' externality and to often neutralise their own domestic political differences, while creating a better degree of support from their own members. For example, an organisation that might not be performing well because of its longitudinal rigid bureaucratic structure, can find difficult to change or challenge existing practices. Groups of individuals that might desire to promote a course of change can find it extremely difficult to persuade their superiors or find support from their own colleagues.

The legitimacy of a minority group to challenging existing lines of authority remains limited, without a broader recognition for how their actions helps serve the firms' wider interests. We find that clients make use of the consultants' assumed objectivity and independence in order to strengthen the credibility of their own endeavours, or/and, to



challenge existing power relations. Such endeavours can gain wider support from actors, when the outcomes that they are sought to accomplish underline a greater ethical good. The consultants' intervention can help create credibility towards the stakeholders who might not have direct involvement in the running of the organisation. The stakeholders' decision to support or reject a proposition is based on the perceived tangible or intangible benefits. Moral legitimacy is created when consultants and clients are able to demonstrate that their course of action will accomplish a set of objectives or help stir away the negative consequences. By making the above argument we do not propose to generalise our findings in saying that clients merely tend to manipulate the consultants' moral attributes according to their selfish interests. Neither, we argue that the clients' decisions gain validity because of the inherent normative moral qualities in the consultants. Instead, we argue that moral legitimacy can be understood in terms of organisational outputs and consequences that organisational actors try to accomplish, and which are believed to favour the wider welfare of the members' interests.

#### *11.4.1 Procedural legitimacy*

The second area of our findings focuses on the procedures by which clients incorporate the consultants' services. In contrast to outputs and consequences, procedural legitimacy deals with the type of processes responsible for specific decision outcomes. In a similar way to the previous discussion, we find that procedures are intimately related to the interpersonal differences and power plays. Clients seek to utilise the consultants' detachment to the culture, history, and the members' domestic interests by producing a neutral perspective that can be shared by all members. However, whereas in the context of outputs and consequences moral legitimacy takes place within an already established framework of power roles and explicit interpersonal differences, here we find that procedural legitimacy is used in order to help shape the *emergent* impressions created between the members' actions. In the course of decision making we find that clients seek to be highly sensitive in the way they project their own interests to a project. Moreover, how they seek to exercise their line of authority to colleagues. Consultants play an intermediary role when helping to alleviate implicit or explicit interpersonal differences and provide a sense of neutrality that has credibility. Clients tend to rely on the

consultants' independence for managing to avoid the possible creation of tension in an instrumental way.

When initiatives are evaluated through the consultants' involvement that seems not to favour one party's interests, clients seek to maintain good relations with their own colleagues. To what extent clients happen to be successful in promoting a specific agenda, at an outcome level, remains unclear. From our discussion we have illustrated a number of projects that failed to be implemented because of the opposition, client members, faced from their own colleagues. The consultants' externality does not guarantee the legitimation of a business decision. However, in the process of decision making and exercise of power clients are able to create impression towards their colleagues about their own integrity. This is particularly significant as traces of political lobbying can affect the individuals' performance or future career in the firm. We also found that in procedural legitimacy, lines of authority and interpersonal differences are not necessarily established neither challenged. Interpersonal differences remain implicit, and the use of consultants' is thought to help alleviate possible misinterpretations from the rest of the members. In this sense, the consultants' legitimation becomes a kind of 'safe nest' where the individuals can test out the inner interpersonal differences.

In making the above argument we do not imply that consultants are simply passively used by the clients in order to fulfil their interests. As we have extensively discussed in the chapter, consultants can use a variety of rhetoric and selling techniques in order to create impressions in the client. Clients can fall prey to the consultants' persuasive power. However, our argument is that the consultants' moral legitimation is not directly dependent on the interaction dimension with the client. It is dependent on the clients' internal social and political environment, which in many ways, helps *condition* the wider meaning of what the consultants' contribution signifies.

### **11.5 Discursive legitimation**

The analysis of the previous categories of legitimation is drawn from Suchman's (1995) work and are also supported by Dryzek and Niemeyer, (2006) and Rescher, (1993). In contrast to the above categories we have also drawn information from the seminal work by Habermas (1984a, 1984b) in order to examine the discursive side of legitimation. Discursive legitimation compromises an understanding of reality and knowledge that is

situated in the creation of intersubjective meaning as this is constructed in the interaction between individuals.

Our previously examined dimensions of legitimation concentrate on making explicit the underpinning social dimensions which account as responsible for the creation of congruence and conformity. As a result, the managers of an organisation might seek to legitimise their decisions in relation to the employees. A corporation is seeking to legitimise its policies and procedures in relation to the changing demands in the political, technological, social environment. Throughout our discussion of legitimation, and as underpinned by Suchman (1995), conformity and congruence are thought to be achieved because, the *instrumentality* of peoples' actions, complies with the ideological requirements of the cognitive, pragmatic and moral social conditions. In a discursive context of legitimacy, attention turns to the inter-subjective alignment of meaning that creates a perceived reality on which organisational actors base their decisions. The fulfilment of legitimation is not only dependent on the instrumental receptivity of peoples' action in the other party, but in the created dialogue. In using Habermas's (1984a, 1984b) work we have borrowed his contribution on consensus which is achieved through the exercise of language. Consensus is dependent on the dialectic relationship between actors that help create and sustain the parties' 'intersubjective meaning'. In this paradigm, knowledge claims are not legitimised because they correspond to a set of principles represented in the cognitive, moral and pragmatic dimensions. The conditionality of knowledge claims is dependent on managing those social discourses of interaction from which people draw their meaning-representations.

When consultants engage into a knowledge claiming process, the legitimation of their proposition is dependent on instances of interaction and critique. Language plays a prominent role because it encompasses a platform of communication where such intersubjectivity can be made explicit. Language is not simply a vehicle of vocal utterances but a system of subjective interpretation in which the social reality is constructed. Our understanding of the exercise of language remains crucial for identifying how alignment or misalignment occurs.

Our incorporation of the above theoretical framework, to the analysis of the findings, is divided into two parts. The first one is looking at the role of language and pre-

understanding as representing two areas where intersubjective meaning plays a critical role for how legitimation occurs. The second area is looking at instances of social interaction where co-involvement and the sharing of power can influence the degree by which meaning relations are maintained.

#### *11.5.1 Language & Pre-understanding*

In the first part of our analysis we find that language plays a prominent role in the legitimation process. Language does not merely encompass the communication of information, or advice, as represented in semantic signs mentioned earlier. The exercise of language signifies a greater embodiment of meaning for how reality is perceived. When consultants communicate a set of advice, the receptivity by which the information and knowledge is conditioned in the client has to do with a 'web' of existing meaning-making relations. The process of convincing the client is not dependent on the client's mere acceptance of the credibility of the facts communicated. It is rather dependent on the client's deeper meaning structures. When consultants and client are thought to speak the 'same language', they do not simply share a common set of verbal artefacts. They rather agree on the meaning of what these verbal artefacts represent in the broader social context of which they are exercised.

Our findings indicate how the clients' exercised critique towards the consultants often allows for the modification/change of the initially proposed knowledge claims. Hence, consultants are compelled to identify new ways of communicating their service, in ways that correspond to the clients' needs. The above is illustrated from a number of business projects where consultants were keen on promoting a line of service that was becoming too technical, for the client, to understand. The perceived superficiality of the consultants' claims often threatened the business relationship. The mutual effort to maintain accounts of 'intersubjective meaning' meant that both parties often had to struggle to understand how their views and aspirations were interpreted by the other party.

A complementary dimension to the above has also to do with non-verbal dimensions of legitimation and which are found on already existing accounts of pre-understanding. By drawing on the work of Habermas (1984a, 1984b) and scarcely on Bourdieu (1990,

1993) we argue that legitimation is dependent on already ingrained and existing presuppositions. In our empirical findings we identify how pre-understanding is demonstrated by specific implicit expectations. Clients have hidden beliefs for how consultants are going to design and deliver their business assignment. At the same time, consultants have expectations for how clients are going to appreciate the value produced for them. An example that illustrates the above theme has to do with the presuppositions consultants make in thinking that represent the primary party from which delegations of responsibility is derived. Clients find that because consultants become a knowledge distribution source, they also claim an inherent sense of power and authority that often becomes the reason of conflict. As a result, consultants feel that they are often in the 'driving-seat' while educating the client party. However, clients often desire a different degree of network collaboration, where both parties share an equal sharing of power. Consultants have expectations for how the clients will appreciate the consulting endeavours in creating value, without often questioning such assumption. We find that in cases, where hidden expectations and presuppositions become explicit, both parties are able to challenge and rectify their positions. In cases where, consultants and clients fail to appreciate the locus of pre-understanding in the other party, this often becomes a reason of conflict. The broader conclusion of the above argument is how legitimation constitutes a complex phenomenon, and, clearly is dependent on types of pre-understanding that are rarely acknowledged in the literature.

#### *11.5.2 Relationship structures and power sharing*

A complementary dimension to discursive legitimation, and as represented in the exercise of language, is the relationship and power sharing between clients and consultants. Here, the intersubjective meaning, Habermas is proposing, is exemplified from our empirical sample in the way consultants and clients manage their interpersonal interactions. This involves a mixed variety of socialising activities where the term 'relationship' is used as representative of this interaction.

In the literature we find the relationship theme has been discussed under the bureaucratic and network titles (Werr and Styhre, 2003). The approaches vary in their position of authority distribution becomes a binding force for how the relationship comes to unfold. Bureaucratic structures indicate a clear line of authority that is distributed from

the consultants to clients (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Points of action are regulated through control and the interaction between actors is mainly managed by the commonly shared interests. It is assumed that conflict can be avoided when the design of objectives is clearly communicated. Network relationship structures, on the other hand, emphasises the less stable location of authority in the relationship, or its delegation from a designated party. Power is exchanged between consultants and clients in a much more fluid and unstructured way. In this paradigm conflict is always imminent and can be avoided as organisational actors are able to clarify their own misconceptions as they go along (Werr and Styhre, 2003).

Our findings indicate how discursive legitimation is possible when consultants and clients operate under a network-relationship structure, where power is exchanged between them, and is not controlled by one party. Consultants and clients seek to develop mutual productive relationships, because they believe that this affects the quality of the progress of their business assignment. The social attributes encompassing the business relationship contain qualities like trust communication and commitment. When consultants are allowing the clients to challenge their behaviour or incorporate them in the design of advice-sharing, we find that there is a greater degree of successful engagement. This is because the consultants' embodiment of advice is more easily integrated to the clients' subjective needs. Furthermore, clients find the flexibility to channel the consultants' advice, differently from what is often intended or initially anticipated by the consultants.

Finally, our empirical findings indicate how discursive legitimation is strongly manifested when the clients' *criticism* over consultants compels them to modify or change their behaviour/approach to the business assignment. For example, when consultants are committed to change their working practices according to the clients' needs, there is a greater degree of knowledge legitimation. Consultants may possess credible resources of advice but fail to be justified because of the manners with which this is exercised. The shift of power becomes an interesting dynamic in the relationship because it helps define the consultants' authority on the project. At the same time, power can become the consultants' cause of failure in seeking to legitimise their services.

Clients are clearly not passive recipients. As Sturdy (1997a) argues clients are willing to challenge the consultants' credibility. This does not necessarily aim at underestimating the consultants' contribution. It indicates that clients believe that can maximise the value they can extract from the consultants' services. This behaviour often becomes an obstacle because in the delegation of their power to clients, consultants often manage to define their identity. The broader theoretical contribution made out of the above discussion points to dimensions of discursive legitimation as outlined by Habermas (1984a, 1984b). The creation of alignment as produced out of the above discourse, is not detached from how the knowledge-service is delegated in the relationship. As a result, the social 'fit' achieved through the stages of interaction, and between the two parties, has clear consequences for how value is perceived.

### **11.6 Dynamic approach to legitimation categories**

The categories of legitimation, we discussed in the above theoretical framework, are not to be understood as static or separate for the way they take place. Our examination of the different categories is made in order to provide support for how they are exemplified within the client-consulting context, and on basis of the theoretical framework that they are drawn from. However, there is a clear overlap of the cognitive, pragmatic, moral and discursive aspects of legitimation. We want to make clear how the model we argue for is a dynamic and not a static one. We are limited in demonstrating how the above overlap legitimation dimensions occurs in consultant-client relationship, in detail, as our foremost aim has been to establish their presence. However, it is necessary that we briefly illustrate how an overlap of the legitimation categories might be understood from the empirical data. From discussing the below consultant and client statements we want to show how the various legitimation dimensions can be seen as dynamic.

In an interview with a senior public officer, the argument is made for how consultants manage to fulfil a number of organisational but also client-personal needs. The consultants' legitimation is not simply situated in the cognitive or moral legitimation, as the following quotation indicates. Consultants manage to legitimise their service because the perceived value of their services is believed to satisfy a number of criteria. Such criteria overlap the conditions situated in the categories of legitimation we discussed. As

a result, the trends of legitimation have to be understood within a context of interpersonal interaction that encompasses an array of social nuances. The simultaneous exercises of the legitimate trends help produce specific areas of meaning. This overlapping legitimating application can be understood as accountable for how and why knowledge claims are legitimised in the relationship.

The consultants, when we eventually got them, did several things, not only did they provide us with a level of expertise in the areas that we needed, but they also became a neutral agent and was seen as someone as politically neutral, and operationally neutral, with all those variously political stakeholders that were involved, so they were able to present the case in a non-political way. That was a big plus in a multi-tiered, multi-political environment. (cl.4)

The client argues how consultants fulfilled a number of functions with providing information that was not available from within the firm. At the same time, the consultants helped create the impression of representing a neutral political stance to the possible conflict and exchange of blame between the client members. From our discussion on legitimation it can be argued how consultants are able to justify their propositions to the client on basis of the credible advice and information. That is, in reference to industry knowledge and how the client was to make use of the external information obtained. However, consultants simultaneously help alleviate the 'political cost' from the clients, by helping make decisions that would not have been seen as favouring the interests of specific members. As a result, the assumed independence and externality of the consultants helps produce grounds of moral legitimacy. Clients may decide to accept the consultants' advice because they believe that does not favour the position of specific political members. Moreover, the presence of moral legitimacy and the fact that client members do not possess a challenge to the decision making process of the assignment, might further be thought to represent some form of pragmatic legitimation. This is because clients believe that the consultants' contribution fulfils their own immediate interests, by means, of maintaining their credible political image to the public.

From an interview extract with a management consultant the overlap between the legitimate layers can be also supported. In the following excerpt, the consultant refers to the dynamics of the business assignment and how the competency to persuade the client is not just restricted to information and knowledge. The consultant argues how the process of legitimation contains a number of different social and political dimensions



where the consultant needs to know how to respond. It is assumed by the interviewee how such experience is not transmitted by the parent consulting firm, but rather emerges from personal experience on assignments.

I think that a lot of consultants do try and do that, because again, they are very intellectually strong but if they don't have the ability to converse with people, get people's buy-in, make decisions, or, make things happen it falls on its backside. So if you put a consultant in there that is very bright intellectually, knows BPR back to front, inside out, it won't happen. What you need is somebody in there who is a consultant with the appropriate knowledge but you are better off with a consultant that doesn't know as much maybe, but, who is *politically aware*. So, he knows how to make things change, because *it's all about change it's not about a model*. You need a consultant in there if you are to bring people along in the organisation, who will make things happen, because they are only one person, or a group of individuals inside let's say a 10,000 person organisation. They need to get people to buy in and that is often the value added part, that the client needs, because they kind of know what the model is. If you look at BPR it's all hand up and what ever but it's all about 'you want to get there and its how you get there, how to get the end result at the end of day and looking about what you do as is the process mapping, - all the old stuff, all the old stuff. But the good consultant is the person who can make it happen, a poor consultant can go in tell them the answer, won't communicate it properly, won't get buy in of people and it won't happen. And if you have that kind of consultant then they generally don't last. ( con.4)

Even though, there are a lot of ideas mentioned in the above quotation and which could be discussed in length, we only want to highlight the dynamic nature of the legitimisation layers. They are not to be seen static or separate when they occur in the business relationship. They can co-emerge or overlap in a way of creating mixed impressions. Both consultants and clients have to identify their position against such mixed impressions. The consultant argues for how the required abilities for convincing the clients moves into different areas of argumentation. The consultant will have to know how to present a service that creates the scope of positive contribution. Such scope is not only situated in the factual information presented, or the business management tools (e.g. BPR) and their assumed change results. The consultant makes the point of how consultants find themselves in a discursive relationship with: a) the business advice itself and, b) how different presentations of it in the client can trigger different reactions. For example, if the client faces a business issue in which there are sensitive political interests, the business model might be important in itself. However, creating a sense of consensus between members is also dependent on how clients may perceive that their personal/business interests can be fulfilled through the consultants' actions.

Cognitive legitimisation is situated in the realm of information and argumentation. However, moral legitimacy is also highly dependent on the interpersonal sensitivities in

the client, which may determine how views of externality are perceived. Moral legitimacy becomes a basis on which clients may decide to accept or reject a course of consulting advice, *regardless* of the instrumental importance of the business model. We argue that consultants find themselves in a process of self-learning for needing to develop interpersonal competencies and for being able to detect the different dimensions of legitimation. The consultants clearly often operate in an environment of high uncertainty for knowing whether their actions will produce the desired outcomes in the client. In this context an arena of the consultants' competencies are situated in the ability to foresee and also enact within the clients' overlapping legitimate needs/requirements.

### **11.7 Practical implications for the consulting industry**

There are a number of implications that emerge out of the study's finding that concern the way clients and consultants think and perform their role during the course of an assignment. An important implication for practitioners has to do with becoming aware of the different facets of legitimation that foster or hinder specific instances of congruence within a consulting assignment. From the collection and analysis of the empirical data it is evident that consultants and clients are implicitly aware of the different factors influence instances of legitimation. However, they are not necessarily explicit about what such conditions are and how they are able to address them. For example, a client firm that may expect consultants to deliver specific guidelines for how the client is to perform against a specific managerial challenge, may be encountering a consultant who believes that his/her role for the client would be to indicate a number of options from which the *client* needs to choose the option believed to be best. Entering into an assignment with a host of implicit assumptions can influence the consultants or clients' process of evaluating the other party.

Our disentangling of the legitimation categories indicates that consultants and clients operate under different legitimacy constraints. Even though a consultant may seek to communicate the theoretical soundness or the credibility of the sources of information from which the advice originates, the clients may be seeking to find specific suggestions that can meet his/her interests in the short term. The *misalignment* between what the consultant might try to communicate and what the client expects to receive is

not necessarily linked to the soundness or correctness of the advice communicated. It is rather linked to the distinct social conditions that may legitimise a set of advice within the consultants or clients' specific circumstances. For this reason it is important for both consultants and clients to become explicitly aware as to what kind of assignment they engage in. In addition to the above, it is possible that the trajectory of an assignment might change during the course of the interaction. For example, a consultant may be asked to provide specific information and knowledge to the client, while coming to realise that there are important interpersonal tensions between the client members that also need to be addressed.

Our study of the cognitive, pragmatic and moral legitimation can be characterised as belonging to three broad categories of assignments. Assignments that belong to the cognitive legitimation are driven by the need for information gathering or problem solving, where the use of argumentation and reasoning at a conceptual level can determine its legitimation. Assignments that belong to pragmatic legitimation are driven by the specific interests of the organisational members and the particular accomplishments that they want consultants to produce against them. Within this category legitimation takes place in relation to what consultants are actually able to deliver rather than just what they claim to be able to do so. Assignments within the category of moral legitimation are driven by the internal competition or the interpersonal interests which exist between the client members. In this paradigm consulting advice is perceived to have less importance when compared to how it can change the power dynamics between members. Our study of discursive legitimation indicates how language, meaning and power are important social qualities that help manage the parties' relationship. The creation of intersubjective meaning is important because of the interpretive process in which both parties engage in order to assimilate the service of the other.

An additional implication to the above argument has to do with the need for developing a knowledge base with a different set of skills and competencies in which consultants and clients are able to address the different social underpinnings of legitimation. Even though the consulting process is interdependently used with 'advice giving' we have seen that it is highly constrained by the different social conditions

outlined earlier. For this reason, consultants might seek to develop a specific knowledge base for the way that they organise who are the people appointed on the project. For example, a consultant that might have strong knowledge in communicating a set of information to clients might be weak in appreciating the internal political clients of the organisation and its members. Clients can undermine the consultants' service or knowledge expertise when realising that the involved consultant might not be able to address the internal political dynamics. As a result, it is important for consultants to learn how to be able to respond to the constraints presented by the cognitive, pragmatic, or moral categories of assignments they engage in.

In a similar way to consultants, clients also need to be able to appreciate the nature of the organisational and managerial challenges that they are facing and how the consultants' service will be able to address them. It is important for clients to make explicit the expectations they have from the consultants. Furthermore, they need to develop the knowledge base so that they are able to indicate when the consultants' service is adequately addressing the needs they experience or not.

### **11.8 The manifestation of the balance and weighting of the legitimization categories**

Our argument on the legitimization categories does not seek to project a linear, sequential or static impression for how the legitimization dimensions emerge. As argued earlier in this chapter the legitimization dimensions can co-exist, co-compete or co-conflict between them. In the thesis we have not had the opportunity to demonstrate a dynamic view of legitimization as our primary objective has been to demonstrate their presence and manifestation in the consultant-client relationship. However, it needs to be noted that there clearly can be an imbalance about which category happens to be dominant in a consulting assignment. From this it follows that it is possible to have a consulting assignment where the exercise of cognitive legitimization is more dominant than the pragmatic or moral. Clients might want to use consultants as a resource that complements their own managerial objective or efforts. In such situation consultants might seek to challenge the clients' way of approaching the situation and endeavour to provide a differentiated perspective that might be welcome by the client, or might cause conflict in

the relationship. We seek to illustrate how the above ‘imbalance’ of legitimation might be exemplified by drawing reference to some of our earlier discussed empirical data.

The experience of the client below indicates the situation where there is a ‘high’ need for moral legitimacy while there is a rather ‘low’ exercise of cognitive legitimacy. The client refers to the reasons for the use of consultants and makes the case for the significance of the human political factor. Those below the senior management were struggling to exercise pressure or initiate changes despite the decline of the organisation’s performance. The client makes the argument for how the consultants’ input of knowledge and advice was useful in helping them identify areas of development. The consultants helped the client find ways to operationalise new improvements in a way that the client did not have the necessary knowledge to implement. However, and while appreciating the consultants’ informative role, the client is placing important emphasis on the consultants’ influence for changing the internal political relations in the client. The fact that consultants were able to support and validate an already existing agenda for change, created an important sense of credibility on the initiative for change that the senior management had more difficulty arguing against.

The value that the client received from the consultants undisputedly has to do with industry knowledge which the client lacked. However, the information and new knowledge was not the most significant factor in the business assignment and for which the client was appreciative of the consultants’ contribution. This example illustrates a kind of imbalance between the consultants’ legitimation at the cognitive level as illustrated through genuinely new knowledge and information, but also highlights the importance of the difficult interpersonal conditions that helped create the space for the client to initiate changes that the senior management had long opposed:

But don’t forget the human dimension here. The human-political dimension which sometimes prevents companies from doing what it is that some people *know* needs to be done. And other people won’t allow to be done. And that is one of the most *valuable* reasons for bringing consultants in – because you get accelerated change at the human level... And the role of the consultant in that process really is no more than to *validate* the thinking (Cl.13).

In providing further support to this argument, we turn to the case of another client who found himself in an awkward position in relation to the consultants’ attractive solution, but nevertheless poor implementation. As the following example indicates the

consultants' cognitive legitimation is dominant in the early conversations with the client. The complexity of the solution itself is not sufficient to gain the client's trust because of the different organisational culture and environment of the HRM department. As a result, the client engages into a long dispute with the consultants for how their ideas should be implemented in the organisation.

Even though the discursive dimension of legitimation seems to remain absent during the early stages of the project the consultants made the effort to listen and incorporate the clients' suggestions. This changed the overall trend of the project and the client started to show trust in the consultants' ideas. When the consultants identified new ways of communicating their ideas by using the particular client as an important channel of information for the rest of the employees, both parties were able to find a common language of sharing and understanding that made the important difference to the project. The consultants were able to legitimise their advice to the client by showing the feasibility of their ideas, which involved a vivid illustration of overcoming the operational challenges.

But when we ran the pilot training course, I just sat there for two days, taking notes and as a result of that we changed the training course as we went along because again, MT tended to be very rigid, you must get this, you must...you don't treat HR like that because they are the supreme people- people and what I was trying to do was to get MT to think, 'this is a special audience, this is not a guy in hob nail boots putting an oven in to Rotherham', 'this is the HR community who have probably delivered more training courses than you guys have had hot dinners, who are supreme readers of people and watchers of people and all the rest of it' (cl.23).

Both of the above examples illustrate how the legitimation dimensions can be overlapping, co-existing or single, dominating the rest of the social arenas of interaction. This imbalance of legitimation makes even more important the need for both parties to identify how they create meaningful relations with the assignment at hand, but also with how it is understood or interpreted by the other party.

### **11.9 Broader theoretical relevance**

Having provided a summarised overview of the thesis's research findings we now proceed to discuss the broader theoretical relevance of this contribution. We begin by discussing

our theoretical insights for understanding the legitimation process. Also, it's relevance for appreciating the underlying mechanisms of value creation.

### *11.9.1 Legitimation and homogeneity*

The findings of our study shed new light to the issue of legitimation that has mainly been discussed in the context of the functional and critical perspectives. This rather homogenous view of legitimation has interpreted the consultants' actions and practices on basis of what is often already assumed in the literature.

At one level, our legitimation analysis introduces a more comprehensive theoretical framework which indicates its complex and multilayered character. Our findings indicate a new set of categories that compromise distinct social *conditions* for how knowledge claims are treated. The fact that the different categories compromise a set of distinct conditions which are not necessarily shared between them indicates how consultants and clients can simultaneously operate at different levels of legitimation.

The creation of perceived value is not necessarily to be treated as the outcome of isolated and prior-designed consulting practices. We find that value can be dependent on the type of legitimation-categories which are simultaneously at play within a business assignment. It is difficult to categorise the clients' perceived value on a quantifiable scale, because of the existing variance of meaning for what the consultants produce in the client. The legitimation categories also indicate how the justificatory procedures can dramatically vary in terms of the ideology and values they represent. For example, whereas moral legitimation may indicate the attainment of the social wider good, pragmatic legitimacy indicates the fulfilment of the immediate personal interests. To what extent could the above modes of legitimation be reconciled or need to remain independent from each other? Our findings indicate that facets of legitimation can co-exist with the result of creating a plurality of meanings within the involved organisational actors. This is mainly because of the plurality of interests that consultants and clients aim to serve and how such interests often remain hidden and implicit. The legitimacy processes, by which knowledge claims are legitimised, create a mixed picture of perceived value. Our more precise understanding of the legitimation categories and their explication can help make sense for what their ideological context and limitations are. Value is not merely dependent on the instrumentality of consulting practices, either the

knowledge base from which advice is driven or the quality of communication channels that is distributed. The clients' involvement and reaction to the consulting services plays a pivotal role for how perceptions of value are created. This is because clients actively engage and challenge the consultants' propositions. Clients compel consultants to change channels of communication used to disseminate advice. Clients engage into a more integral relationship with consultants that can be seen in contrast to the passivity with which the relationship is often portrayed in the literature (Sturdy, 1997a).

The functional and critical approaches have tried to interpret consulting practices in light of assumptions that emphasise the instrumentality of knowledge or the manipulative skills, by the consultants. As a result, an almost 'void' of understanding has been created in trying to explain the continuing rise and popularity of consulting service to today's corporations. This is because accounts of analysis in the literature, often begin by theoretical frameworks that are in light with what each perspective proclaims, rather than what is experienced by practitioners (see Salaman, 2002; Kipping and Engwall, 2002). From our analysis, we have found that this image is often exaggerated when consultants are being portrayed as sole experts in constructing solutions, or when consultants are thought to deploy sophisticated lines of rhetoric and communication that only aim to persuade. We argue that the functional and critical perspectives co-exist as clients use a multiplicity of channels in order to assess the consultants' performance/contribution. Our study has tried to shed light over what some of these 'channels' are and how legitimation is exemplified through them.

### *11.9.2 Research limitations*

Our study of the consultant-client relationship has taken place within a set of limitations that also need to be made explicit. The limitations of the thesis primarily constitute two aspects of the collection of the empirical data. The first one has to do with the variation between consultants and clients and how the interviewees did not operate in the same assignment. Even though, we tried to ensure that the type of interviewees contacted took part on similar management projects, we were unable to ensure that the interviewees had experience of the same project. As a result, consultants and clients were referring to experiences from previous different business assignments. It would have been helpful to



have also been granted access to their corresponding client party. This would have helped us obtain accounts of interpretation that might have shed new light or challenge as to how the stories were told. In response to the above, we had to rely on the information disclosed and as interpreted by the interviewees. We had to assume that the projection of the story corresponded to actual chain of events even though we had no empirical ways of testing this out.

An additional limitation to the above has also to do with our lack of greater participant observation to the interviewees' experiences. Participant observation would help elicit the deployment of the relationship as it was actually unfolding in real time sequence. We would be able to trace the significance of specific legitimate factors as they might have been taking place. Participant observation would help provide a more integral insight to the inner dynamics of the two parties, than what we have actually managed to achieve. However, our encountered difficulties with obtaining access in the first place had proved an inevitable limitation. We have tried to overcome this limitation by undertaking semi-structured interviews that were extensive and comprehensive. We also allowed the opportunity for the interviews to add information in addition to what was recorded and which was treated with utmost confidentiality and anonymity.

### **11.10 Recommendations for future research**

This thesis has managed to identify aspects of legitimation that contribute to how the creation of value is perceived between consultants and clients. What this research has not had the opportunity to investigate is the dimensions of legitimation themselves. Our study mainly relied on theoretical frameworks as represented in the work by Suchman (1995), and Habermas (1984a, 1984b, 1971). In this thesis we have not had the opportunity to question assumptions made for how the categories were created in the first place. Moreover, what kind of characteristics are and should be considered as representative of them. This is particularly true for the first three categories as our treatment of Habermas's work has only been pedestrian to the scale and context of his use of the term. Future research should concentrate on examining the creation of a possible theoretical framework between similar legitimation categories, that are more extensively substantiated from the study of social sciences. In such project, authors will have the

opportunity to more vigorously challenge assumptions made by Suchman (1995) and other authors, and propose a more systematic framework of legitimation that can be operationalised. In addition to this, we think that since each of the legitimation dimensions represent distinct ideological qualities that are varied between cognitive structures, pragmatic interests and moral values, it will be useful to develop data collection methods that would be appropriate according to the requirements of such categories. Studying the construction of cognitive schemata for example, will require different methodology avenues that more accurately seek to depict the representation of cognitive schemata, rather than assume their existence.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I

**Table of the interviews with consultants and clients**

| Date        | Anonym. Code      | Time  | Location        |
|-------------|-------------------|-------|-----------------|
| 10 June 05  | Con.1             | 11:30 | Newcastle       |
| 20 June 05  | Cl.1              | 15:00 | South Shield    |
| 24 June 05  | Con.2             | 08:00 | Durham          |
| 24 June 05  | Con. 3            | 16:00 | Durham          |
| 27 June 05  | Cl.2              | 11:00 | Durham          |
| 27 June 05  | Cl. 3             | 16:00 | Durham          |
| 6 July 05   | Cl. 4             | 10:00 | Sunderland      |
| 07 July 05  | Con. 4            | 12:00 | Newcastle       |
| 08 July 05  | Cl. 5             | 12:00 | Newcastle       |
| 14 July 05  | Con. 5            | 12:00 | Durham          |
| 19 July 05  | Cl. 6             | 13:00 | Newcastle       |
| 21 July 05  | Con. 6            | 10:30 | Durham          |
| 26 July 05  | Cl. 7             | 12:00 | Newcastle       |
| 29 July 05  | Con. 7            | 11:00 | Durham          |
| 16 Aug.05   | Con. 8            | 11:00 | London          |
| 17 Aug.05   | Kno. Of. 1        | 12:00 | Cambridge       |
| 17 Aug.05   | Con. 9            | 14:00 | Cambridge       |
| 18 Aug.05   | Con. 10           | 12:00 | Sussex          |
| 19 Aug. 05  | Con. 11           | 12:00 | London          |
| 31 Aug. 05  | Con. 12           | 12:30 | London          |
| 31 Aug.05   | Kno. Of. 2        | 14:30 | London          |
| 31 August   | Con. 13           | 16:30 | London          |
| 01 Sept. 05 | Kno. Of. 3        | 10:30 | London          |
| 01 Sept.05  | Con. 14           | 13:30 | Oxford          |
| 01 Sept.05  | Cl. 8             | 15:15 | Oxford          |
| 02 Sept. 05 | Con. 15           | 11:00 | London          |
| 07 Sept. 05 | Kno. Of. 4        | 12:00 | Phone Interview |
| 12 Sept.05  | Con. 16           | 11:00 | Cambridge       |
| 12 Sept. 05 | Kno. Of. 5        | 16:00 | Bracknell       |
| 13 Sept. 05 | Con. 17           | 11:30 | London          |
| 13 Sept. 05 | Con. 18 & Con. 19 | 14:30 | London          |
| 13 Sept. 05 | Con. 20           | 17:00 | London          |
| 14 Sept. 04 | Cl. 19            | 10:30 | London          |
| 15 Sept. 05 | Con. 22           | 14:00 | London          |
| 16 Sept. 05 | Con. 23           | 14:00 | Bath            |
| 21 Sept.05  | Con. 24           | 13:30 | Cranfield       |
| 27 Sept. 05 | Cl. 10            | 15:00 | South Shields   |
| 02 Dec. 05  | Con. 25           | 13:00 | Harrogate       |
| 05 Dec.06   | Con. 26           | 14:00 | Birmingham      |
| 28 Dec. 05  | Cl. 11            | 12:00 | Darlington      |
| 13 Jan. 06  | Cl. 12            | 11:00 | Tumble Wells    |
| 13 Jan 06   | Cl. 13            | 14:00 | Dover           |
| 16 Jan. 06  | Cl. 14            | 14:30 | Newbury         |
| 17 Jan. 06  | Cl. 15            | 16:30 | Newbury         |
| 23 Jan. 06  | Cl. 16            | 11:00 | Leeds           |
| 26 Jan. 06  | Cl. 17            | 11:00 | Darlington      |
| 30 Jan. 06  | Con. 27           | 14:30 | Durham          |
| 01 Feb. 06  | Cl. 19            | 15:00 | Norwich         |
| 06 Feb. 06  | Cl. 20            | 10:00 | Manchester      |
| 06 Feb. 06  | Cl. 21            | 14:00 | Manchester      |
| 07 Feb. 06  | Cl. 22            | 11:00 | London          |
| 07 Feb. 06  | Con. 28           | 15:30 | Ashridge        |
| 08 Feb. 06  | Con. 29           | 08:00 | Warwick         |

|             |                 |       |                 |
|-------------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|
| 08 Feb. 06  | Cl. 23          | 15:00 | Bath            |
| 09 Feb. 06  | Cl. 24 & Cl. 25 | 10:00 | London          |
| 10 Feb. 06  | Cl. 26          | 11:00 | Newcastle       |
| 16 Feb. 06  | Cl. 27          | 10:00 | Darlington      |
| 10 March 06 | Con. 30         | 14:00 | Phone Interview |
| 05 April    | Cl. 28          | 10:30 | Gateshead       |
| 13 April 06 | Con. 31         | 13:00 | Phone Interview |
| 26 April 06 | Cl. 28          | 13:00 | Phone Interview |
| 26 June 06  | Cl. 29          | 10:30 | Phone Interview |
| 26 June 06  | Cl. 30          | 14:00 | Phone Interview |

## Appendix II

### Interview Summaries

#### *Interview summary example: Management consultant (Con.1)*

This interview is an interesting one as the experience and views comes from the HR manager in discussing the organisation's operations and corporate goals. The interviewee is manager of the HR department and provides advice on issues related to recruitment, pay, payroll procedures, regulation changes affecting that etc. The idea of what advice and consulting means takes different connotations in the interview as being the idea of challenging the client's assumption on a particular project or providing an outside perspective to the situation where the client has been only inwardly looking. The diverse areas of work within the consulting firm is also an important dimension emphasised in the interview as the sharing of information and knowledge between department and in relation to the particular client helps to bring a more robust understanding in relation to the needs and the action to be taken.

In regards to the justification of the advice-claims made to client, the consultant emphasises the need for the client to trust the consultants' views and also to share some of these views as their own with the context of their partnership. By sharing, challenging the consultant but also trusting him as a partner the consultant implies how the views will be communicated and accepted more easily. Again, if there is problem in the relation the consultant talks about changing the advisor or team.

The use of an internal team that also helps the preparation of the consultants' proposition to the clients before going to the consultants is interesting. Even though, the team does not meet the client themselves, they help prepare the actual consultants on the project by correcting or improving their image and impression making to the clients, hence, increases the chances for winning the sales pitch. The key themes from the interview concern the consultants' functional role in using the existing and accumulated knowledge about the industry and competitors in their advice to clients. Here, the consultants help clients by analysing information, providing structure and framework for what would work and why, backing it up with previous experiences with similar clients. The consultants' previous examples and experience with clients is also used to demonstrate the validity of the consultants' argument. A second key theme also concerns the importance of partnership and relationship with the client which becomes a determinative factor for the success or failure of an assignment. Here, it is not only the quality and breath of advice that matters in the relationship but the communication, openness and trust consultants and client have develop in which the proposed advice takes place. The notion of the 'trusted advisor' is something that is repeatedly emphasised in the interview and is used to illustrated the success of the won assignment with the corporate firm in going to China (p.4).The consultant talks about the differentiating factors between her consulting firm and other consulting firm. She states how her firm supports its advice on its auditing, tax-related knowledge, and industry data to the client. Accenture or McKinsey, for example, are described as more 'pure' consultants where provide advice and expect the client to conduct the above procedures whereas her firm literally does them for the client.

In summary the interview shows how in essence the consultants are in a continuous pursue of conducting different activities in relation to the accumulation of information about the market trends and how to make this relevant to the client-situation/problem within a close partnership. There is not one factor that helps demonstrate how consultants fulfil the clients' needs as being the information itself or the personal relationship aspect. There is a combination of factors that rotate around the managerial problem and the consultants' proposed advice but which takes place within an endeavour to create 'partnership' in which the above communication of advice takes place. So it is not the advice itself that may convince the client but also the clients' possible greater receptivity of the consultants' sound advice within a personal trusting relationship.

*Interview summary example: Client (Cl. 22).*

This interview concentrates around the experience of a client who is the assistant director of the procurement part of the organisation. The interview is focusing on the procurement programme which began in an effort to reduce its spending on purchasing while maintaining its performance and efficiency. Even though the interviewee client talks about her experience at the different stages during the unfolding of the project, the organisational needs concerned identifying way of improving its procurement operations through the help of the consultants and ensuring the transfer of skills and knowledge from the consultants to the clients. The issues of value and client satisfaction and dissatisfaction also play out in the interview as the client had negative experience with certain firms and in contrast to her positive experience with [AA] consultants. The client's satisfaction originates from the fact that the consultants manage to respond and fulfil the organisational needs with providing a better and wider understanding of the market, ways of searching suppliers and creating a better structure and understanding that run through the multiple and different procurement team in contrast to the more isolated and individual way of operating in the past. There are two points that need to be highlighted about this interview in general. The first concerns how the interviewee client knew and realised that the problem is that they need to reform their procurement practices.

The second concerns the consultants' advice in helping the client 1) to think for how to conduct a better market research and analysis before buying a product 2) providing workshops and training that the employees had to apply in their workplace. So, facilitating the process and trying to make the links between theory and practice is where the consultants' second part of the contribution is to be found. So the consultants' role and service to clients can be characterised more as marginal but nevertheless making an actual difference with providing the structure and facilitation for how the training and workshop is to be conducted. The consulting knowledge and advice from [AA] consultants concerns the providence of a framework that was based on market research and concerned how the department could make better use of their suppliers. The providence of an IT tool and their active involvement in the application of the software while providing training and support to the staff helped the client to become more acute for how to make purchases and look differently at procurement. In the past the client had created a larger number of management teams which even though being dedicated to ensuring a good purchase have not had knowledge of their own different management teams within the department. As a result, they were not seeing the development of new

way of purchasing and negotiation with suppliers that could ensure a better deal. The second overall contribution by the consultants concerns the creation of a number of workshops that would aim at educating the workforce about these new changes and development within the department while at the same time making sure that the staff applied this new knowledge to their working environment. The close working relationship between the consultants and staff, according to the client, helped to achieve a better transfer of knowledge and skills that the client would then continue to use and maintain after the absence of the consultants.

A particularly significant issue concerns the client's determination for leading the project and setting how to go about it and what to achieve instead of the consultants driving the client. It has been a cause of dissatisfaction in the client for how consultants often think that the client does not know or that the consultants should be driving the project or being in the driving seat. The client, in this case, actively sought to change this potentially developing culture within the project by liaison with the consultant partner for this not to happen. The client had a negative experience with other consultants while the [AA] consultants was working at a different part in the project. There was a difference of view for how procurement reform could be achieved. As a result the client says how they tried to persuade the other consultants to think differently, and, how by the time this happened McKinsey agreed for the same procurement reform strategy the client had been arguing all the way along. Here the consultants were suggesting for the introduction of an IT systems while the structure and operations of the different management teams remained the same. Inna believed how procurement reform could be achieved by having a better understanding and knowledge of the market and being able to negotiate and make better purchases. Clearly, the core contribution by the [AA] consultants has to do with providing the operational side of how procurement took place while at the same time practically showing how purchases could better be made by suppliers. The highly hierarchical structure and culture is another arena of value contribution by the consultants setting the pace and bypassing the often bureaucratic obstacles of the firm. The client's clear intention for having a knowledge and skills transfer process, from the consultants, led to the creation of an academy which would continue to study and deal with finding new ways for optimising their current performance. Finally, the client sees the results of the project being a huge success with achieving the initial objective set, reducing the spending and achieving procurement reform that helped maintain the same good performance and efficiency.

## Appendix III

### Interview letter invitation to Consultants & Clients

27 July 2005

Stephanos Avakian  
University of Durham  
Durham, DH1 3LB  
Tel: 0191 334 7106  
E-mail: [stephanos.avakian@dur.ac.uk](mailto:stephanos.avakian@dur.ac.uk)

John Snow  
Operations Manager  
Maxima Services  
London

Dear Mr. Snow,

#### **RE: Research into Knowledge and Consultancy**

I am writing to ask your assistance in connection with an innovative research project I am conducting into the topic of knowledge management and management consultancy.

A key aim of this research is to study the dynamics through which information and knowledge are generated and distributed within the internal and external network of a firm. Also, in what way knowledge is thought to add value and increase performance in the consultant-client relationship.

Even though a lot of discussion has been dedicated to the topic of information, knowledge, and consultancy, little systematic research has been dedicated to the study of knowledge. After a thorough review of the literature on the topic I have developed a number of research themes and I am in the process of arranging interviews with individuals that made purchase of such services. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in this study. Specifically I would like to ask you about:

- 1) The assumption that govern the drive for knowledge creation and expansion. The relationship between information, knowledge, and value creation. How this is expressed in the activities between members.
- 2) The nature of the factors responsible for the legitimisation, acceptance/rejection of new information 'as' knowledge.
- 3) The way in which knowledge is thought to add value and enhance performance.

Following a thematic analysis of the empirical data I aim to provide a comprehensive discussion on the topic of knowledge management and management consultancy. The results from this research will clearly provide a number of benefits. In particular it will provide:

- A vigour analysis that discusses the reasons behind the increased discussion on knowledge management, and, the present lack in identifying the knowledge legitimisation process.
- Findings that address key managerial problems, challenges, and opportunities faced by organizational members that use knowledge management and consultancy firms as a means to addressing them.

- Analysis for the nature of knowledge claims and their application in organizational contexts. Why the identification of differences between the two might prove critical for the development of this field.

I envisage the interview taking approximately an hour of your time. The interviews will be recorded and I intend to give all those who participate in the study full anonymity for the names and places mentioned, assuring confidential treatment of the data collected.

In the meantime if you require any further information or have any questions, please, do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Stephanos Avakian



11 January 2006

Stephanos Avakian  
Durham University  
Durham, DH1 3LB  
Tel: 0191 334 7106  
E-mail: [stephanos.avakian@dur.ac.uk](mailto:stephanos.avakian@dur.ac.uk)

Anne Fuller  
Management Consultant  
Nike Consulting  
Birmingham

Dear Mrs. Fuller,

**RE: Research into Management Consultancy Services to Clients**

I am writing to ask your assistance in connection with an innovative research project I am conducting into the management consultancy industry.

The aim of this research is to study the nature of the consultant-client relationship, and, how consultants create value for clients. Despite a plethora of published material on consultancy and knowledge management firms, the nature of the consultant-client relationship has been poorly examined, and, is only partially understood. After a thorough review of the literature I have developed a number of research themes and I am now in the process of arranging interviews with selected experienced consultants. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in this study. Specifically I would like to ask you about:

- 4) The different mechanisms by which management consultants generate their knowledge advice and respond to the clients' needs today.
- 5) The different processes and methods by which consultants, interact and distribute their knowledge advice to clients.
- 6) The way consultants perceive their impact on the clients' organizational performance, and the different factors that may influence the outcome of their intervention.

Following a thematic analysis of the empirical data I aim to provide a comprehensive discussion on the key issues responsible for the dynamics of the consultant-client relationship and the knowledge transfer process. The results from this research will clearly provide a number of benefits to individuals partaking in the interviews. In particular it will provide:

- Findings that address key managerial problems, challenges, and opportunities faced by management consultant within the knowledge management field.
- A vigour analysis that discusses the underlying factors that hinder or promote the success of management consultancy services, and, the use of knowledge management resources as a means to dealing with clients' needs.
- An analysis of the clients' changing organizational needs to which consultants respond to, by providing knowledge, solutions, and advice.

I envisage the interview taking approximately an hour of your time. The interviews will be recorded and I intend to give all those who participate in the study full anonymity for the names and places mentioned, assuring strict confidential treatment of the data collected.

I will contact your office in the next week to see if I can arrange a mutually convenient time to meet. In the meantime if you require any further information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Stephanos Avakian

