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MANAGEMENT CONSULTING IN ACTION

Value creation and ambiguity
in client-consultant relations

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Irene Skovgaard Smith

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Doctoral School on Knowledge and Management
Copenhagen Business School

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Confederation of Danish Industries
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&

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Irene Skovgaard Smith, DI/CBS

November 2007

Danish Summary

Et godt og effektivt samarbejde mellem kunde og konsulent fremhæves generelt som en afgørende betingelse for at få succes med brug af eksterne konsulenter. Dansk Industri har sammen med Dansk Management Råd (DMR) og Copenhagen Business School (CBS) etableret et udviklingsprojekt, der under overskriften 'Vækst i Vidensamfundet' har til formål at udvikle det afgørende samarbejde mellem kundevirksomheder og konsulentvirksomheder.

Nærværende ErhvervsPh.d.-afhandling er en del af dette udviklingsprojekt og sætter fokus på, hvad der sker i kunde-konsulent samspillet i konteksten af konsulentopgaver, hvor det handler om at implementere forandring. På sådanne forandringsprojekter forventes konsulenterne at bidrage med viden, værktøjer og løsninger samtidig med, at de fungerer som forandringsagenter i kundeorganisationen og involverer og arbejder med ledere og medarbejdere på forskellige niveauer. Det gør kunde-konsulent samspillet til en kompleks størrelse, der ikke bare handler om den personlige relation og godt samarbejde mellem konsulent og opdragsgiver/projektsponsor.

Når vi har at gøre med ydelser, hvor konsulenterne går i clinch med organisationen for at implementere forandring, må kunde-konsulent relationer ses i et bredere perspektiv end fokus på personlige relationer mellem enkeltindivider tillader. Kunden er en organisation; en kompleks social konstellation af mennesker med forskellige positioner og interesser. Det afgørende er, hvilken rolle konsulenterne får, når de bevæger sig ind i denne sociale sammenhæng, og hvilke muligheder og begrænsninger det indebærer for at være med til at skabe forandring som ekstern part i processen.

Afhandlingen stiller skarpt på disse sociale aspekter af samspillet mellem konsulenter og interne aktører i konteksten af *kundeorganisation*. Forskningen, der ligger til grund for afhandlingen, er udført som antropologisk feltarbejde på to forandringsprojekter; den ene i en industrivirksomhed og det andet på et hospital. Dette indebar både observation af konkrete situationer, hvor konsulenter og interne aktører arbejdede sammen, og efterfølgende interviews med både konsulenter og de relevante ledere og medarbejdere om deres oplevelse af samspillet.

Analyse og konklusioner

Afhandlingens empiriske analyse tager udgangspunkt i, hvordan disse forskellige kundeaktører oplever konsulenterne og deres arbejde på de konkrete projekter. Observationer og konsulenternes perspektiv inddrages også i analysen for at belyse det kundeaktørerne taler om fra andre vinkler. Analysen udfoldes over fire centrale kapitler, som hver behandler et hovedtema relateret til den måde, interne aktører oplever og fortolker det konsulenterne gør, såvel som værdien af det. Det vises, hvordan konsulenterne på forskellig vis bliver positioneret som outsidere, og hvordan denne outsider-position indebærer både muligheder og begrænsninger for at være med til at skabe forandring.

Det første aspekt (kap. 4) af outsider-positionen handler om, hvordan konsulenter tillægges evnen til at udfordre det eksisterende, fordi de opfattes som værende uvidende om det faglige indhold, ikke 'sovset ind' i det daglige og ser det hele med 'friske øjne'.

Det næste kapitel (kap. 5) tager fat på de politiske aspekter af outsider-positionen. Her er udgangspunktet den måde, konsulenter defineres som værende upartiske og neutrale, fordi de ikke har en intern position. Dermed tillægges de evnen til at overbevise og øve indflydelse på forskellige interne aktører, både horisontalt og vertikalt i organisationen, og forhandle modstridende interesser.

Det tredje aspekt (kap. 6) handler om, hvordan konsulenter gøres i stand til at udføre funktioner relateret til behovet i organisationen for dokumentation og beviser. Når outsidere ses som værende objektive, kan de blive leverandører af sandheden om - eller med andre ord et fælles billede af - hvad der foregår i organisationen og hvad problemerne er.

Det sidste aspekt (kap. 7) relaterer til indholdet; dvs. ekspertise, ekstern viden og de nye ideer og løsninger, som konsulenter forventes at bibringe og på afgørende vis berige organisationen med.

Analysen viser således, hvordan konsulenter i udgangspunktet defineres som outsidere af interne aktører; de kommer udefra. Ved hjælp af denne grænsedragning tillægges de forskellige positive og ekstraordinære egenskaber. Egenskaber der handler om, hvad insiderne *ikke* er og *ikke* er i stand til. Outsidere ses som værende i stand til at udføre funktioner, der er behov for i organisationen, men som ikke kan udføres fra en insider-position. Outsider-positionen konstrueres derfor som afgørende anderledes end alle andre positioner i den relevante sociale sammenhæng. Det bliver på den måde en speciel position, hvorfra det

potentielt er muligt at skabe bevægelse og værdi. Værdi forstået som det, der opleves af forskellige organisatorisk aktører som værdifuldt, nyttigt og anvendeligt.

Outsider-positionen opfattes på den ene side som 'magisk' i organisationen på grund af anderledeshed, distance og diskontinuitet fra det daglige. Samtidig indebærer anderledeshed og distance dog også begrænsninger. Outsider-positionen er hele tiden tvetydig og sårbar i praksis, og lige så potentielt marginaliserende som den er potentielt værdiskabende. Realiseringen af det konstruktive potentiale beror i praksis på, i hvor høj grad relationen mellem insidere og outsidere ikke bare er karakteriseret ved distance og anderledeshed, men også nærhed og fælleshed. Analysen af interviewene med kundeaktører viser overordnet set, at samspillet opleves som mest ideelt, når konsulenterne er i stand til at begå sig, relatere og vide som en slags insidere, men samtidig handle og indgå i interaktion fra en outsider-position, dvs. uden at miste magien i outsiderens udfordring, politiske neutralitet, objektivitet og nye ideer. Dette indikerer tydeligvis en hårfin balancekunst, som ikke er nem at opnå og opretholde i praksis.

I kapitel 8 sættes netop fokus på denne balancegang ideelt set. Den tvetydige position er mest konstruktiv og har størst potentiale, når den er karakteriseret ved både nærhed og distance på samme tid. Det betyder, at konsulenten må indgå i kundeorganisationen på en langt mere involveret måde end det, man traditionelt har kaldt at bevæge sig 'på kanten' af organisationen. At være en effektiv ekstern forandringsagent indebærer at deltage i og blive del af det eksisterende, men kun i en vis grad og på en ganske bestemt måde. Denne ideelle insider/outsider-position konceptualiseres som perifer deltagelse. Det vil sige, at der skal foregå en bestemt form for integration af konsulenten i organisationen. Eksterne konsulenter kan ikke være med til at skabe forandring, med mindre de lærer organisation, kultur, mennesker, aktiviteter og hverdag at kende - og den læring sker i interaktionen med organisationens medlemmer og ved at deltage i deres aktiviteter. Samtidig handler det ikke kun om at komme tæt på for at få ting til at flytte sig - det handler i lige så høj grad også om ikke at komme *for* tæt på. En grad af distance og differentiering skal hele tiden fastholdes. Rollen som outsider - 'den der kommer udefra' - må aldrig mistes af syne.

Ideelt set skal grænsedragningen mellem insidere og outsidere således vedligeholdes samtidig med, at konsulenterne gradvis lærer, forstår og indlever sig i det interne. Det forudsætter konsulenternes *deltagelse* i hverdagsaktiviteter. Det handler med andre ord ikke bare om, at konsulenterne skal involvere ledere og medarbejdere i projektarbejdet, men at

konsulenterne skal involvere sig på en bestemt måde i de dele af hverdagsaktiviteterne i organisationen, som er relevante for opgaveløsningen. Uden denne perifere deltagelse bliver konsulenterne ikke i stand til effektivt at udfordre, overbevise, bevise og få ideer og løsninger til at virke i praksis.

Nøglepersoner i kundeorganisationen, som f.eks. opdragsgiver, projektsponsor og projektleder spiller dog også en afgørende rolle for at dette lykkedes. Ingen kan integrere sig selv. Konsulenter skal gives muligheder for deltagelse på de rigtige tidspunkter og i de rigtige aktiviteter og muligheder for at bruge den nødvendige tid til at gå i clinch med organisationen. Konsulenter skal gives adgang til de rigtige mennesker, netværk og informationer. Den ledelse, der hyrer konsulenterne ind, skal gå foran og demonstrere, at deres udfordring og anderledes tankegang er legitim. Man vil aldrig få det optimale ud af at bruge konsulenter, hvis man holder dem på distancen eller overlader dem til deres egen skæbne. Omvendt kan det være lige så problematisk at knytte dem for tæt til ledelsen og en bestemt agenda. Begge dele kan være med til at marginalisere deres input i organisationen og underminere potentialet for forandring.

Introduction

> *"Management consulting is an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes" (Kubr 2002: 10).*

This thesis is about management consulting as it is relationally accomplished in the context of work organisations. Management consulting is commonly defined as in the above quote by Kubr (2002) taken from his classic guide to the management consulting profession. The definition is useful here for the purpose of pointing to who management consultants are as an empirical category of professionals, in most cases employed by or part of management consulting firms who together constitute an industry that offers particular services to other organisations. These are the kind of consultants I followed as they worked in client organisations to assist in achieving organisational purposes defined by the client management who hired them.

Management consulting involves 'two partners' as Kubr (2002) puts it; the client and the consultant, a buyer and a supplier. However, management consulting involves much more than just this buyer-supplier relationship. A quote by one of the consultants in my study can provide a glimpse:

> *"It is funny, because we have three different clients where we have done basically the same. And then you can say; because of people, because of execution-power, because of politics and all kinds of other things... the approach in the strategy work has been fundamentally the same, but the result, if you can put it like that, has been extremely different." (Consultant).*

The client *organisation* moves into focus. In order to deliver their service consultants enter client organisations and what they do there is done in interaction with members of that organisation. What they do is in other words fundamentally tied up with the people, processes, power, politics, culture and everything else that organisations are about. This is especially acute in the context of the type of assignments I studied where consultants are extensively engaged at different levels in the client organisation in the effort to implement change.

Management consulting is not just what consultants do or a service they deliver to a client. It is an organisational activity that consultants have a role in making possible by engaging in action and interaction in client organisations from a particular position made available to them by members of that organisation. That is management consulting in action as I explore it in this thesis. It is collective activity and social relations involving actors defined as external management consultants and actors defined as members of the client organisation. The object of analysis is how management consulting, and its potential value, is relationally and mutually constituted in such client-consultant relations in the context of organisations.

A MATTER OF COLLABORATION?

The relationship with the client is generally viewed as important in management consulting. Relationship building, close collaboration, team work and partnership is emphasised and it has become common to speak of close client collaboration as a key factor for creating value (Carucci and Tetenbaum 2000). As the Management Consultancies Association in the UK states:

> *"The most effective consultancy projects are those in which client and consultant work as members of a team, each bringing their own knowledge, expertise and resources to bear in realising an opportunity or resolving a problem" (www.mca.org.uk).*

Close collaboration, team work and partnership are increasingly seen as recipes for the success of consulting services and the way to get results. Consulting firms therefore also

brand themselves with reference to this idea. The following well-known consulting firms can provide illustration:

> *"Collaboration works... Experience it with Capgemini. At Capgemini you won't find a traditional consulting experience. We work jointly with clients. Collaboration is part of Capgemini's DNA, and it is one of the pillars of our service delivery. It is how we get results" (www.capgemini.com)*

> *"We work with our clients not for them. By collaborating with our clients throughout engagements, we build support, ensure momentum, and reach workable solutions" (www.mcKinsey.com).*

The idea of the detached expert supplier who delivers a service to clients is being left behind and relationship building and collaboration are seen as crucial for ensuring client ownership of problems and solutions as it has long been argued in the context of process consulting (Schein 1999). David Maister, the adviser of advisers, has more than anyone else become the advocate for the benefits of moving from a transactional way of dealing with clients to a relationship one, described as comparable with a 'romance' characterised by trust. (Maister 2005).

> *"Relationships are not more 'noble' than transactions, but where they can be created they are much more profitable. Accordingly, many professionals will want to make the terrifying and difficult transition from skilled seducers to relationship-minded collaborators." (Maister 2005: 7).*

Kubr (2002) in his guide to the management consulting profession seems to agree: "Without client-consultant collaboration, there is no effective consulting" (2002: 66) as he puts it. A relationship of understanding, collaboration and trust has to be built (ibid.).

Redefining collaboration

The focus on the importance of achieving effective client-consultant collaboration in consulting was also the background for the initiation of the study that forms the basis of this thesis. The PhD research is part of a development project on client-consultant collaboration[1]

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[1] The development project on client-consultant collaboration in DI/DMR is titled "Vækst i Vidensamfundet". The project is funded by The Industrial Mortgage Fund of Denmark and initiated together with Copenhagen Business School. The qualitative fieldwork study that forms the empirical basis of this thesis was carried out as part of the project and constitutes one of the main research activities within the project. In addition, a quantitative client survey and a qualitative interview study based on semi-structured interviews in 20 client companies were conducted as part of the project.

in the Confederation of Danish Industries (DI) and the Danish Management Association (DMR)[2]. The aim was to develop new knowledge on how successful client-consultant collaboration on change projects can be achieved. The starting point was that if it is the collaboration that makes or brakes consulting then we need to know more about how it works and how it is successfully achieved.

However, the above perceptions of client-consultant collaboration as a recipe for success bothered me from the start. For two reasons. Firstly it seems to imply that management consulting is achieved mainly in relations between two individuals. The metaphors commonly used speak for themselves; it is a 'romance' or a 'tango' for instance. Secondly, collaboration is a loaded concept that carries implicit associations of a close and positive relationship and common-sense assumptions on how to make it work, i.e. openness, willingness, good communication, relationship building, trust, common goals and pre-defined terms, expectations and roles.

There is of course nothing wrong with all this and trying to achieve good collaboration in that sense can undoubtedly be beneficial. But in the midst of all the collaboration rhetoric we risk forgetting that client-consultant collaboration is a complex matter far beyond a straightforward recipe for getting results or creating value. The obvious point is that it takes two to 'tango' and 'romance', to stay with the metaphors, and collaboration does not just work simply because consultants work collaboratively and have 'a relationship way' of dealing with clients. Moreover on the kind of assignments I focus on where 'the client' is not just the commissioning manager or project sponsor, but a range of managers and employees in the organisation, it makes no sense to talk about it as a 'tango' or a 'romance' at all. 'Romance' after all is a one-on-one interpersonal way of interacting and relating. Management consultants are mainly engaging in social interaction and social relations because that is the nature of the situations they are in most of the time.

Consultants know from experience that working with a range of different people in client organisations increases the complexity of their work. It means that they, as contracted outsiders, are faced with issues of resistance, organisational politics and lack of ability, power or will of the managers they attempt to work with and through to enforce changes. This is what the consultant quoted above is talking about. In addition attempting to build trust and

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[2] DMR (Dansk Management Råd) is a trade association within the Confederation of Danish Industries (DI), representing the management consulting industry.

close relationships with a range of different managers and employees across different levels and functions represents its own set of political challenges, not to mention the time and opportunity required.

A consulting approach of getting engaged in an organisation as an external change agent is fundamentally uncertain because the delivery of the service that has been sold to the client has to be accomplished collectively in an organisational context. How consultants and what they do is received, interpreted and reacted to by the people they work with in the client organisation frame and condition this accomplishment. And it raises issues that can not only be dealt with under the umbrella of the common-sense perceptions of how to achieve good collaboration, teamwork and close relationships.

The dictionary definition of collaboration simply says: 'to work together with someone' (Oxford dictionary 1995). Working together means engaging in social interaction and that again implies a social relation, although not necessarily a personal, close or positive one. It is in this sense I talk about client-consultant relations. In the next section I describe my analytical approach and focus in more detail.

ANALYTICAL FOCUS AND APPROACH

The thesis is situated within an overall approach to the study of management consulting that foregrounds its mutual and dialectic aspects. Client-consultant relations therefore figure as a central aspect within such research on consulting (Clark 1995; Sturdy 1997; Fincham 1999; Pellegrinelli 2002; Werr and Styhre 2003; Johansson 2004). Within this approach it is emphasised that there is a high degree of interdependency between consultants and clients (Fincham 1999) and the consultancy process is seen as a co-operative effort between consultant and client, i.e. mutually constituting, interactive and dialectical in nature (Sturdy 1997; Johansson 2004). As mentioned in the beginning of the introduction this means that management consulting is explored as relational and situational practice that is accomplished in relation to internal actors[3] in the context of a client organisation.

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[3] I use the terms 'internal actors' or 'client actors' to refer to members of client organisations defined by way of employment, i.e. managers and employees.

Approach to the study of client-consultants relations

The subject of client-consultant relations is however dealt with in a variety of ways more generally, as for instance the above relationship-building focus. In chapter 3 I will explore such practitioner-oriented perspectives further and the tendency to treat client-consultant relations as a matter of interpersonal one-to-one relationships, often focusing mainly on the relationship with the commissioning client or project sponsor. In the context of the kind of assignments I studied, such perspectives are clearly not sufficient because consultants interact with and relate to a much wider range of actors in client organisations as already mentioned.

However, the approach of privileging individuals and interpersonal relationships has the more important implication that social aspects of relations, such as collective identification and collectively held definitions and perceptions, are left more or less out of the picture. This is highly problematic since such aspects influence all human action and interaction. As social beings we could not act or interact without them.

In most practitioner-oriented literature on consulting, and amongst consultants, relations are mainly talked about in personal and psychology inspired ways. This thesis will do the reverse and privilege the social aspects of relations between people using a sociological perspective. The relevance of the present thesis is thus related to an objective of counteracting the general tendency of individualism in most discourses on consulting and contributing to an understanding of management consulting as a social phenomenon.

Another tendency in the existing literature is to focus mainly on the consultant as the main agent of the relation. This means that the role consultants assume in relation to clients is seen as the result of how consultants identify and position themselves. This relates also to the way consulting roles are commonly talked about, namely as something consultants choose and define. Such perspectives do not take into account the fact that consultants are social actors in the minority entering a social context, i.e. the client organisation, where they will in one way or another be collectively identified and positioned by people in that context. At the very least it is problematic to assume that any social actor can freely position him or herself in social interaction.

Also in this regard I will counteract the general tendency by making the client context rather than consultants the focal point of the analysis. This is based on the assumption that the position consultants acquire in concrete situations on assignments depends to a large extent on the positions internal actors make available to them. The analysis focuses on collectively held

perceptions and definitions of consultants that establish, frame and condition management consulting and create both opportunities and limitations for the realisation of its potential.

The empirical starting point for the analysis is client experiences of working with consultants in the context of the assignments. More precisely how consultants and what they do is experienced, interpreted and reacted to in the client organisation. The analysis explores patterns of how consultants are defined and perceived as particular kinds of social actors in particular social contexts. The purpose of this exploration is to show how consultants become positioned in the client organisation, and in different parts of the organisation, and what that means for their opportunities for taking part in creating change as they aim to do.

Although I focus mainly on client definitions in this thesis it is at the same time important to emphasise that consultants take part in creating the definitions of the kind of social actors they are in relation to internal actors. And internal actors and consultants assume their positions in relation to each other. The consultants are therefore not absent from the analysis. Social differentiation is always the result of relational construction and negotiation (Jenkins 2004). So also in the context of consulting.

Making sociological sense

The present research and analytical approach is positioned within a tradition of scholarship described by Richard Jenkins (2002) as 'generic sociology' (2002: 22) including social anthropology and other social studies approaches such as social history and social psychology. Jenkins is professor of Sociology, but with a background in anthropology that he defines as "a distinctive kind of sociology" (2002: 20). My own background is similarly anthropology and the analytical approach of this thesis can be seen as inspired by Jenkins idea of 'sociological sense'. At its most basic it is an analytical interest in making sense of patterns of social behaviour and perceptions paying particular attention to established relations between social actors and the shared ways in which they interpret action and interaction and invest it with meaning (Jenkins 2002).

> *"Sociology is the study of the recurrent or regular aspects of human behaviour. Wishing one neighbour a good morning and ignoring another is not, as a one-off occurrence, sociologically interesting. Do it every day, and, as an established relationship of inclusion and exclusion, it becomes so." (Jenkins 2002: 15).*

In this thesis I look at management consulting as such an established relation of differentiation. Or in Goffman's (1959/1990) terms, as a particular type of interaction setting where collectively held definitions establish what kind of social actors consultants are in relation to internal actors, their characteristics and abilities, the roles they play, the functions they fulfil as well as the value of their activities and abilities. This is related to processes of collective identification in Jenkins' terms (2004).

> *"Without repertoires of identification we would not be able to relate to each other meaningfully or consistently. We would not have that vital sense of who's who and what's what. Without identity there could be no human world. Which suggests the fundamental importance to sociology of understanding identity and its workings. Knowing who's who and what's what is as fundamental to the sociological enterprise as it is to everyday life."* (Jenkins 2004: 7).

Repertoires of identification, or social differentiation as we might also call it, are fundamental to all human relations and thus also to consulting. In chapter 3 I will elaborate more on this basic theoretical framework for understanding differentiation and its workings.

The focus in the analysis is primarily on the way client actors differentiate consultants and what that means for consultants' opportunities for taking part in influencing what goes on in client organisations. Consultants become positioned in ways that produce both opportunities and limitations as we shall see throughout the analysis. The established relation between internal actors and consultants is highly ambiguous. It is however precisely by living in and negotiating that ambiguity that value can potentially be created. Value is defined broadly here as that which makes consulting valuable for organisational actors, i.e. new meaning, new ways of relating, negotiating and influencing as well as making types of action and interaction possible that would not otherwise have been possible. This is all part of social change.

The research approach is inductive emphasising the meanings social actors attach to what they experience. A basic anthropological/sociological framework for understanding how differentiation works, inspired mainly by Barth (1969) and Jenkins (2004), is nevertheless fundamental for the way I analyse and make sense throughout the thesis. This basic framework will be described in more detail in chapter 3. Such a basic analytical framework allows us, as Jenkins argues, "to get on with the sociological business of approaching all human experience on its own terms in order better to understand it" (Jenkins 2004: 14). It is important to emphasise that theory for me is not an end in itself and the objective of this thesis

is not to develop or advance sociological theory. The analytical framework and the analytical concepts I use in the analysis are tools to help me make sense of the empirical material. I therefore have an eclectic approach using different concepts and terms to make sense of, point to and encircle the issues I am analysing in different ways.

Relevance for practice

The thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of how the social dynamics of client-consultant relations work and under what conditions opportunities for influence are created. This is clearly relevant for all parties involved in management consulting. I will however not provide a recipe on how to achieve 'a value-creating relation', because this achievement is not something any single actor can secure. It is, as I have also argued above, a social achievement. What can be done instead is to give practitioners the opportunity to increase their understanding of how these social relations work and how they themselves become positioned in interaction as well as how to navigate and negotiate the implied ambiguities as beneficially as possible within the limits and conditions of any given situation.

The present research was practitioner-oriented from the outset and anchored in a practitioner context (DI/DMR) as described above. The research has continued to have an applied focus throughout the process as I have discussed with and presented my research to consultants and on a few occasions[4] also to managers who use consultants. This has benefited my research in numerous ways, but more than anything it has constantly reminded me of the crucial importance of relevance and engaging with the issues practitioners experience in everyday organisational life. Issues that might not be part of the standard story and discourse about their practice. When I get up in front of management consultants to talk to them about their practice I know some of what happens on assignments, in interactions with client actors and what kind of situations they find themselves in. I can share the insights of my analysis in a way that gives them a particular take on what they experience. A take that hopefully gives them new ways to understand it, talk about it, reflect on it and thus also become better at dealing with it in practice. This is part of the potential value of my contribution.

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[4] It has generally been management consultants who have shown the most interest in the research.

THE STUDY AND EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

Two management consulting firms[5] participated in the empirical study that forms the basis of the thesis. Both are firms who offer management consulting services as broadly defined by Kubr (2002) above. They offers services aimed at assisting management in changing organisations for the better; making them 'leaner', more effective, more profitable, better at selling, better at product development, better at managing projects, better at organising and managing their business and organisation. Both consulting firms are Danish firms. I will get back to their positioning within the Danish management consulting industry below.

The study revolved around two consulting assignments[6], one with each of the consulting firms, in two different client organisations; a hospital and a manufacturing company. Both assignments were characterised by extensive consultant engagement with internal actors at different levels in the client organisations. I followed the assignments by observing ongoing interaction between consultants and client actors and interviewing them about their experience of working together. The methodological approach is anthropological and the research was designed as a field study where ongoing interaction in concrete situations was observed and the meanings and interpretations of involved actors explored in interviews. Research and methodology is described in more detail in chapter 2 where I also reflect on my approach to anthropological fieldwork and representation as well as the particular conditions for fieldwork in the context of consulting.

The assignments

The first assignment was in a hospital where the consulting firm was hired to implement Lean manufacturing principles in a day surgery unit. The aim was to increase productivity and secure that the day surgery facility was used as efficiently as possible. The project involved the day surgery unit itself as well as the different surgical units that use the day surgery facility. The consulting firm was brought in by top management in the hospital and a vice-director had the role as commissioning client and project sponsor throughout the project.

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[5] The consulting firms as well as their clients are anonymous in the thesis.
[6] A third consulting firm also participated with a smaller 1-month assignment that I followed as a pilot fieldwork study. I will not draw directly on the empirical material related to this assignment in the thesis.

The second assignment was in a manufacturing company in the middle of a turnaround- and strategy implementation process. The consultants were hired to help with this stage-by-stage change process. The change efforts they worked on in different departments were generally focused on increasing productivity and changing company culture. I followed a project in a unit within production and a larger project spanning across sales, customer services and production as well as activities related to the overall turn-around-process. Here the consulting firm was similarly hired by top management. The main commissioning client was the CEO, while other top managers had the role as project sponsors in relation to the different projects that were running.

The consultants working on the assignments in both contexts identify as management experts in some way or another, but not in the traditional sense as detached expert advisors. A crucial aspect of their approach is the focus on implementing and working hands-on with a range of client actors. On the assignments they involved and worked with a range of client managers at different levels as well as key employees. They had a relatively high degree of physical presence in the client organisation throughout the assignments.

The assignments thus represent the general tendency that management consultants are becoming more involved in the implementation of the solutions they propose (Morris, 2000). Clients are increasingly demanding hands-on collaborators who take part in realising solutions and securing sustainable change (Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath 2001; Czerniawska 1999, 2002; Morris 2000). Implementation in this sense does not just refer to a particular phase of a consulting project or a particular service. Rather it refers broadly to a consulting practice of working closely with people at different levels in the client organisation in the attempt to put expertise and solutions into practice and create change by involving and applying as you go along. It is 'doing' as Czerniawska (2002: 100) puts it, rather than just advising, prescribing or facilitating, practised by consultants who see themselves as both experts and change agents.

The scope of the research is limited to these types of consulting assignments and it is further limited to the consulting process itself and does not include aspects related to the buying process, initiation of the assignments or the continued change process when consultants are no longer present. The research was carried out in a Danish context. In the following I locate the two management consulting firms that participated in my research, within the management consulting industry in Denmark.

The Danish management consulting industry

The boundaries of the management consulting industry are generally difficult to define and this is also the case in a Danish context (Poulfelt 1999). Matters of industry size and turnover are thus always estimates. According to the Danish Management association (DMR) the industry is relatively large in Denmark with a total turnover of 14.8 billion DKK in 2006, representing 0.9% of the Danish GNP compared with the average of 0.58% in the rest of Europe (DMR Brancheanalyse 2006/2007). The last couple of years the industry has enjoyed large growth rates of 23% in 2005, 22.5% in 2006 and similar rates are estimated for 2007 (ibid.). Manufacturing companies and the public sector are the largest client groups each accounting for over a fourth of the turnover in the industry (ibid.).

The industry is characterised by a small number of large firms and a large number of small firms amounting to a total of 7500 consulting firms according to DMR. 11% of these are categorised as larger firms that have annual turnovers over 50 million DKK. These 11% of the firms account for 79% of the total annual turnover of the industry (DMR Brancheanalyse 2006/2007). It is thus a small group of larger firms that dominate the industry. Research on the Danish consulting industry from the 1990's (Payne and Poulfelt 1993, Erhvervsfremme Styrelsen 1999) similarly concluded that the industry is fragmented in this way. A survey showed that 25% of the largest firms accounted for 90% of the total turnover in the industry (Erhvervsfremme Styrelsen 1999).

The two firms that participated in my study are amongst this group of larger firms as categorised by DMR and both employ between 100-200 people including administrative staff. They are domestic Danish firms and are thus not amongst the big international players in the global management consulting industry[7]. The two consulting firms offer services that correspond with the category of services that are most common in the Danish consulting industry as a whole and this is similarly the case with the two assignments I followed.

The client organisations in my study are also representative of the typical client groups, manufacturing and the public sector, even though healthcare is not amongst the most typical of public sector clients. Hospitals in Denmark are however increasingly using management consulting firms such as the ones that participated in my research because of their Lean expertise.

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[7] At least up until the end of the 1990's the big international consulting firms accounted for less than one-third of the Danish management consulting market (Poulfelt 1999).

The DMR industry analysis (DMR Brancheanalyse 2006/2007) uses the term 'advice' to designate this category of classic management consulting services within strategy, business development, organisational development, management development, restructuring, turnaround, rationalisation etc. 63% of the total turnover in the industry in 2006 was related to these types of management consulting services (ibid.). A survey carried out in the 1990's (Erhvervsfremme Styrelsen 1999) showed a similar pattern where the majority of the services offered are described as management development, organisational development and strategy- and business development.

The DMR industry analysis (DMR Brancheanalyse 2006/2007) furthermore showed a shift within the category 'advice' from analysis-oriented assignments towards greater involvement in implementation as described above. A client survey conducted by the Confederation of Danish (DI) as part of the development project on client-consultant collaboration similarly indicated that consultants work in a combination of roles were they carry out analysis, contribute with expert knowledge, develop and implement solutions and work on generating acceptance of changes in the organisation (Jensen 2006)[8]. This picture fits the profile of typical assignments in the two consulting firms that participated in my study as well as the two assignments I followed.

The same tendency has also been found internationally as described above, where Czerniawska (1999, 2002) for instance describes it as a shift to the role as 'involved doers'. As businesses and organisations everywhere are searching for the key to creating sustainable change, consultants are meeting the demand. They are offering to 'do', and marketing their implementation and change management abilities as the way to get results (Czerniawska 2002). There is thus both client 'pull' and supplier 'push' reasons for the increased interest in change implementation in management consulting (Morris 2000: 128).

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis is centred on the empirical analysis that unfolds over the course of four chapters, namely chapters 4-7. Each of these four chapters focuses on an overall theme based on

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[8] The survey was web-based and distributed to a range of the biggest DI member companies. The survey had 174 respondents - CEOs, vice-directors, assistant directors, head of departments and project managers.

patterns in the ways client actors from both the hospital and the manufacturing company experience working with the consultants on the assignments. The basic idea of the four chapters is to show how internal actors differentiate consultants in ways that attribute them with special abilities or value-adding potential in other words, but also how the position they come to occupy is one of ambiguity.

The point of departure in each of the four chapters is one aspect of this value potential; the 'outsider magic' as I also refer to it. The theme of chapter 4 is the ability to challenge and question. In chapter 5 it is the ability to influence, convince and negotiate. Next is the ability to document and prove in chapter 6. Lastly we have the ability to provide solutions and new ideas in chapter 7. These abilities are all related to the way consultants become positioned by internal actors as particular kinds of outsiders in relation to the client organisation. By way of this differentiation they are attributed with abilities to do things 'we' cannot do.

However, as we shall see in each of the chapters that position is at the same time vulnerable, under risk and potentially marginalising in different ways. Each of the four chapters thus explores how the particular aspect of the outsider position dealt with in that chapter creates both opportunities and limitation. But also how the magical potential might be sustained and realised. These strands on realising the value potential are pulled together in chapter 8 by suggesting a way of conceptualising a theoretically ideal consulting position. A position from where the ambiguity might be most fruitfully negotiated based on what we have seen in the analysis.

Before entering the empirical analysis, we have first chapter 2 on research and methodology and chapter 3 on how client-consultant relations have been dealt with in existing literature as well as my analytical framework. Chapter 2 goes into detail with the research process and how I conducted fieldwork by observing and interviewing. Furthermore I reflect on the methodology of fieldwork and representation within anthropology and specifically in relation to my research context of consulting. Chapter 3 has the dual purpose of firstly exploring selected texts within the literature on management consulting in order to position the thesis in relation to these different ways of conceptualising client-consultant relations. From this follows the outline of my approach, analytical framework and the basic argument that is unfolded in the four empirical chapters. Without further ado it is time to embark on the journey that starts with my research process.

Research and Methodology

"My entire scientific enterprise is indeed based on the belief that the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated, but with the objective of constructing it as a "special case of what is possible", as Bachelard puts it, that is, as an exemplary case in a finite world of possible configurations" (Bourdieu 1998: 2).

The methodological approach of the research that forms the basis of this thesis is qualitative and exploratory. The research was designed as a fieldwork study focusing both on following change assignments in the context of client organisations and subsequently interviewing involved actors. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of client-consultant relations embedded in organisational contexts. The design was inspired by an anthropological approach concerned with ongoing interaction in concrete situations and the related meanings and interpretations of involved actors. The fieldwork activities constituted a combination of observation, informal conversations and qualitative interviews with actors involved in the consulting process, both external consultants and internal actors in the client organisations.

As described in the introduction, the focal point of the analysis in this thesis is client perceptions and definitions of consultants. Interviews with the internal actors that worked and interacted with the consultants, therefore comprise an important source of empirical material around which the empirical analysis evolves in this thesis. It is the themes and patterns identified through content analysis and coding of the interviews with internal actors that guides the analysis in its textualised form. The analysis is nevertheless intimately tied up with

and informed by the fieldwork experience as a whole[9]. This sum of experiences, conversations, observations and interviews is an integrated part of the analytical process that resulted in the present text. Hence, in the text itself I also present material from interviews with the consultants on assignment in the two client organisations I focus on as well as descriptions of situations I observed to further illustrate the themes from the client interviews.

The purpose of this chapter on research and methodology is to provide a sense of how my field was constructed and how I 'fieldworked' it, so to speak. As well as the methodological reflections related to fieldwork and representation within my academic discipline that is anthropology. Fieldwork is, however, only the first step in a research process. The research, as it finds expression in this text, is fundamentally 'at one remove from life' to use Hastrup's turn of phrase (1993: 155). Analysis and textualisation constitutes yet another process of construction which means that the thesis does not constitute a report on the field research and empirical material as such. The choices made with regards to representation is therefore an equally important part of research methodology. In the following I focus firstly on the part of the research process I call fieldwork and the empirical material produced.

FIELDWORK AND EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

With the concept of field I am not referring to a particular locality or context, but to the field as it emerged through my process of being present at the client sites, interacting, observing and interviewing with the purpose of researching client-consultant relations. The field is thus not just 'out there'; it is emergent. Fieldwork creates the field in this sense and it is determined by the situations and the people the researcher experiences and encounters.

The main fieldwork activities were observation, informal conversations and interviewing in relation to the two assignments described in the introduction, one in a hospital and one in a manufacturing company carried out by two different consulting firms. Three consultants were involved with the assignment in the hospital, one is a partner who participated mainly in steering group meetings. In the manufacturing company seven

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[9] In addition to fieldwork on consulting assignments, I have throughout the PhD-project met, talked with and presented my research to consultants from different consulting firms and the conversations, discussions, comments and responses have all in some way or another influenced how I think about client-consultants relations.

consultants were involved, but the situations I experienced mainly involved the five of them, one of whom is a partner. All consultants from both firms are relatively experienced as consultants and/or has previous management experience. The client engagements were less hierachically organised than what has traditionally been the case in firms like McKinsey for instance and the consultants engaged in interaction, to varying degrees, with client actors at all levels.

The fieldwork took place over the course of two periods, June-December 2005 in the hospital and November 2005-August 2006 in the manufacturing company. During those periods I followed the consultants in their ongoing work with the assignments at the client sites. Towards the end of each period I carried out interviews with relevant internal actors and consultants amounting to a total of around 50 hours of interviewing. Prior to these two main fieldwork periods had been a process of working on achieving formal access to consulting assignments as well as a pilot fieldwork period, March-April 2005, where I followed a short, smaller assignment with a third consulting firm[10].

Access to follow consulting assignments

Gaining access has traditionally been difficult in the context of research on management consulting. In my case the process was, if not easy, then at least made easier because the research was part of a development project in a practitioner context as described in the introduction. I was employed by DI[11] as an 'Industrial PhD'[12] and the negotiation of access was a team effort accomplished by the project team in DI responsible for the overall project. DMR[13] was as a partner in the project setup representing the management consulting industry

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[10] Empirical material from fieldwork on this assignment is not directly included in the thesis, but the experience was important for my initial process of learning about management consulting as well as developing the research design.
[11] Dansk Industri (Confederation of Danish Industries)
[12] I was employed by DI to carry out PhD research as part of the development project. On an Industrial PhD Fellowship programme the student is employed by a company, and timeshares 50/50 between the university and the company. The student is enrolled in a PhD graduate school at a University (CBS in my case), with the same requirements as for an ordinary PhD plus a business course and a business report. The obligations regarding disseminating knowledge are the same as for an ordinary PhD, except that the student does not have teaching responsibilities at the university. The purpose of the Industrial PhD programme is to educate researchers with an insight in the commercial aspects of R&D, increase R&D and innovative capacity in private companies and to build networks disseminating knowledge between universities and private companies. The Danish Industrial PhD fellowship program is supported and administrated by The Danish Agency for Science and Innovation under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (http://fi.dk/site/the-industrial-phd-program).
[13] Dansk Management Råd (Danish management consulting association)

and promoted it to the members. As a project team we[14] held meetings with a range of DMR members who had expressed interest in participating. The response at the meetings was generally very positive and a number of consulting firms initially agreed to give me access to follow one of their assignments. However, as it turned out, it proved more difficult when it came to actually identifying a concrete assignment, especially with regards to getting the client to give consent.

The process illustrated that the issue of access to observe consulting assignments is complex not least because it involves two parties. Going through the consultants as we did meant leaving the negotiation of access in their hands when it came to the client organisation. It is thus difficult to say precisely how the consulting firms went about doing this. It is possible that the consulting firms were not in the best position to negotiate access for a researcher at the same time as they were themselves negotiating their own access, i.e. selling their services, and it is equally possible that they did not give it the highest of priorities.

The consulting firms that succeeded did so firstly because they clearly made it a priority to participate in the research. Secondly they both negotiated access for the researcher in client organisations where they were already working. This meant that I did not get to experience the buying process or the commencement of the assignments. The assignment in the hospital had been running for about a month when I started the fieldwork and in the case of the manufacturing company there was already a well established relationship as the consulting firm had previously been working with this client helping them with their strategy. When I started fieldwork the consultants had just started working on a number of projects in different areas within the organisation as part of the overall turn-around process.

In the project team in DI we also tried client organisations as an entry point for gaining access and contacted a range of DI member companies, but that approach did not yield much result. Firstly because it was difficult to identify when a company was about to, or in the process of, working with consultants in the context of a change initiative and who precisely to contact within the companies. Secondly, client companies were generally not nearly as interested in or motivated for contributing to a research project on client-consultants relations as the consulting firms. Although managers who use consultants generally find these issues important and interesting, they are not in the role of client for a living, so to speak. It is not part of their daily activities or primary responsibilities on a continuous basis. On one occasion

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[14] Henrik Valentin Jensen, Vagn Riis (both senior consultants in DI) and myself.

we did have a dialogue with a client company that was interested in participating, but the consulting firm they were using turned out not to be very enthusiastic about the idea and nothing ever came of it.

This illustrates that the process of gaining access with two different parties is far from simple. In the context of the present research it succeeded thanks to the consulting firms who put action behind their wish to participate and made it happen. And thanks to the commissioning client managers who were both open and interested in the research. Ultimately, however, access was possible because a good relationship between the two parties had already been established. The commissioning managers in both organisations were happy with their consultants both when I began the fieldwork and when I finished. That is an important point, because it says something about the assignments I followed. They were in other words characterised by a good personal relationship between the commissioning client, a top manager in both cases, and the partner from the consulting firms.

In the present thesis I am not focusing on these one-to-one personal relationships that are often the main object of attention in existing literature on consulting, particularly with reference to the commissioning manager as I will get back to in the next chapter. It is however a contextual factor worth mentioning here. It forms part of what characterises these particular assignments along with the fact that the consultants were brought in by a top manager in both cases. The consultants I followed were generally quite successful with their relationship building in relation to these commissioning managers and it was an important focus area for them in their approach to achieving the all-important 'client-consultant collaboration' as described in the introduction. In this thesis I deliberately push these aspects of client-consultant relations to the background, because I want to 'zoom in' on patterns of how consultants are experienced and interpreted by the wider range of internal actors that they interact with in the course of assignments. In this sense I focus mainly on collectively held perceptions and definitions of consultants and what they do as described in the introduction.

Confidentiality and anonymity

A condition for access was in both cases confidentiality with regards to the specifics of the methods of the consulting firms, details of the assignments and the change process and related information about the client organisations that I would become familiar with in the course of the fieldwork. Both clients and consultants seemed most concerned with confidentiality in

relation to these aspects, and I accommodated their concerns because my aim was to study client-consultant relations in the context of change initiatives rather than the change initiatives themselves or the organisations for that matter. I thus agreed to confidentiality in relation to these aspects as well as securing the anonymity of individual consultants and client actors. Neither the consulting firms nor the client organisations requested that their identity as organisations were concealed. Hence, I could have chosen to name both consulting firms and client organisations in this thesis without being technically in breach of the agreement. I have, however, chosen not to do so, both as a matter of principle but also because it would make it more difficult to honour the confidentiality and anonymity I did promise. All parties that participated in my research, both consulting firms, client organisations and the involved individuals have shown me an enormous amount of trust and have not requested to see or approve either interview transcripts, field notes or the thesis.

In representation confidentiality and anonymity is a challenge, but it is part of our task as researchers to do our outmost to write up our research in a way that does not expose the specific individuals and organisations who agree to participate unnecessarily. Both in relation to the public, and when it comes to individuals, even more importantly in relation to local contexts. As a researcher I have an ethical responsibility to take into account that what I write and quote people for could potentially be read by colleagues and superiors internally in both consulting firms and client organisations as well as by consultants and client actors that still work together. This means that simply giving people synonyms is far from sufficient.

My way of dealing with confidentiality and anonymity in relation to both organisations and individuals has been to do it as extensively and consistently as possible throughout the thesis. There are no case descriptions of the organisations or the change assignments and all details and specifics that do not relate directly to the point I wish to illustrate are omitted in both interview quotes and descriptions of situations. The anonymity of individuals is protected by identifying them only as either top-, functional-, middle manager, employee or consultant and providing as little information as possible about the function or department they are affiliated with. When a name is needed for the sake of the text I assign a synonym. Any one individual is represented by the same synonym only within the context of the particular situation I am describing. This means that any one individual go by a number of different synonyms and thus cannot be identified across situations by a particular name.

With consultants on assignment

Observation and informal conversations took place in relation to situations where consultants interacted with people in the two client organisations, such as work in project offices, workshops and meetings of various kinds and at different levels, including meetings with top management and steering groups. By observation I mean being present, experiencing, listening and taking notes in a meeting for instance. All internal actors were briefly introduced to me and the research project at the start of meetings or other events if they had not met me previously.

In such formal situations, where activities related to the assignments were being carried out, I did not participate directly by asking questions or engaging in other ways. But before and after meetings, in breaks, at lunch and in other more informal work situations I interacted and talked with both consultants and internal actors. The consultants were my gatekeepers, i.e. it was through them formal access had been granted, as described above and it was the consultants and their activities at the client sites the fieldwork revolved around. I went to the hospital or the manufacturing company when I knew or expected that the consultants would be there. Sometimes in connection with scheduled meetings or workshops, other times the consultants were just there working on the projects.

Most of the time I kept notes during observation, but in some situations it was not possible or appropriate, for instance in the case of informal conversations between consultants and internal actors before and after meetings, at lunch etc. I always wrote up more comprehensive field notes on the computer shortly afterwards, based on a combination of the notes taken in the situation and memory. The resulting field notes, amounting to about 250 pages of text, were later coded in NVivo[15] according to types of situations, activities and events. The table below presents the categories of typical situations where consultants interacted with internal actors and the number of occasions on which I experienced each of them.

Meetings generally lasted 1-2 hours on average, whereas workshops and some meetings could be half to whole day events. The category 'working in the project office' in the hospital and 'at a desk in the open office' in the manufacturing company could cover anything from a couple of hours to whole days often in combination with for instance one or more meetings.

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[15] QSR NVivo Version 7. Program for qualitative data analysis.

Types of situations observed

At the hospital	No.	At the manufacturing company	No.
Steering group meetings	*4*	*Steering group meetings*	*4*
Meetings with top management	*3*	*Meetings with top management*	*7*
Interview-like meetings	*2*	*Fact-finding meetings*	*4*
Working in the project office	*18*	*Working at desk in open office*	*7*
Workshop	*1*	*Workshops*	*3*
Work group/project meetings	*9*	*Work group/project meetings*	*8*
Participation in regular meetings (consultants mainly observed)	*2*	*Participation and presentations in regular meetings*	*2*
Score-card meetings	*10*		
info/sales meeting	*1*		

Conditions for fieldwork

Generally the level of access to ongoing interaction on consulting assignments is relative high in my study compared to what has been achieved in the context of most other research on management consulting. One exception being the research project "Knowledge Evolution in Action: Consultancy-Client Relationships" carried out by Andrew Sturdy, Timothy Clark, Robin Fincham and Karen Handley as part of the Evolution of Business Knowledge Research Programme in the UK. Their research was carried out by following four consulting projects in the UK combining observation and interviews. Sturdy et al. (2005) similarly notes there are very few studies that as theirs "examine management consultancy in action over time, rather than relying solely on documents or actor's post hoc accounts of their relationships and practices" (2005: 18).

In the context of research on management consulting it is thus relatively unique to have access to follow consultants in action on assignments, but it is important to emphasise that access is an issue far beyond just having gained formal access. Other aspects of access become pertinent in the course of fieldwork. Table 1 above lists the situations I experienced, but does not represent all that the consultants did or how much they were at the client sites. I was neither present every time the consultants were at the client sites[16], nor did I see and experience it all when I was there. What I did *not* have access to is as important to mention

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[16] I was not always able to be at the client sites when the consultants were there. In addition to fieldwork and field note writing I also had other engagements both in DI as an employee and member of the project group and at CBS as a PhD student. I was thus not 'away on fieldwork', but did fieldwork alongside my other activities as an Industrial PhD-student.

here as what I did experience, because it points to the type of fieldwork activity possible and relevant under the particular conditions and circumstances that characterises fieldwork in the context of consulting assignments.

A lot of interaction between consultants and internal actors went on that I did not have access to. Not least through e-mails and phone conversations, but also face-to-face, particularly the more informal conversations, discussions, exchanging information, asking questions etc. On these types of assignments the consultants spend a lot of time on the client sites working on the projects and some days it involves less formalised interaction with internal actors. In principle most of the day can be spent in front of the computer, but being present on the client site means that the consultants engage in informal interaction with internal actors as colleagues do. It is easy for them to ask or answer a question and briefly explain or discuss a particular matter that arises with relevant managers or employees.

I did hear and experience a great deal of such informal discussions and conversations that took place while I was present, but I did not 'shadow' the consultants or follow their every move as they went about their work and their informal interaction. When the consultants got up to go somewhere for instance I would only follow if they invited me to come along or I knew where they were going and could ask if it was ok for me to come along. I tried of course to disturb them as little as possible in their work and part of the condition for granting me access to follow the assignments was that I was there simply to observe and would not require too much time, special attention or accommodation.

The consultants were generally open, communicative and up for a chat about the assignments when they had the time. I had many interesting and inspiring conversations with them and I will never forget their goodwill, openness and willingness to not only put up with having me follow them around, but also for texting, e-mailing or picking up the phone to tell me about that meeting tomorrow or in an hour. However they did not tell me about everything that went on and it was not always easy to find out when they would be working at the client sites or to get information on scheduled meetings in advance because I did not have a role on the assignments.

This was less of an issue in the hospital because most of the time at least one of the consultants would be at the client site working in the project office in the day surgery unit. I could thus just turn up and knew where to find them most of the time. In the manufacturing company the consulting presence was not as intense and the consultants did not work out of a

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project office. This meant that I was completely dependent on getting information on when the consultants were going to be at the client site and where. That information was easy to come by when planning occurred while I was present, but that was of course not always the case.

The consultants I experienced in action were generally very busy and their working life unmistakably hectic and full of pressures both in relation to the assignment I was following, but also in relation to other assignments with other clients. Consequently informing me about various meetings etc. was probably not on the top of their to-do-list. Quite understandably they would sometimes forget and other times they might have just preferred not to have an observer or third party present.

The consultants did on many occasions inform me about various meetings that I would not have otherwise known about and they never gave me the impression that they did not want me to be present in certain situations. Seen from my perspective it would have only been logical, understandable and also perfectly legitimate if that was sometimes the case. I therefore told them to let me know if there were situations where they did not think it was a good idea for me to be present and I always explicitly asked if it was ok for me to tag along whenever a new type of situation arose that I had not previously observed.

The consultants rarely said no and I had access to a broad range of meetings and other activities at all levels. The only exception I can remember was in the manufacturing company where different projects were running at the same time as part of the turn-around process. Here the consultants suggested that I did not follow a project in a particular department because the main part of the activity was related to one-on-one interviews with internal actors in a sensitive situation and having a third person present would not be a good idea. I of course agreed and did not participate in activities directly related to this project and also did not interview the involved actors. In general I concentrated on following two of the projects running in the manufacturing company as mentioned in the introduction, in addition to meetings related to the overall turn-around effort.

Interviews

I this section I have so far dealt mainly with the fieldwork activity connected with ongoing interaction in the context of the consulting assignments, but the meanings and interpretations of involved actors are equally important. Observations of 'naturally occurring events', as

Alvesson (2003) puts it, has clear advantages when it comes to gaining a deeper level of understanding of what goes on in social practice, but "without the accounts of the people being studied it is very difficult to say something about the meanings of and ideas guiding particular behaviours and practices" (Alvesson 2003: 172). This can be explored through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Such formal interview situations are particularly useful when doing fieldwork in for instance work contexts where time, space and opportunities for more extensive and in-depth informal conversations are rare. With the interview the researcher creates a formal situation where the necessary time and space is available to ask involved actors individually and in detail about their experience of concrete situations. The formal feature of the situation furthermore makes it natural to ask permission to record. In my study all interviewees gave that permission which makes it possible to later transcribe and code the interviews as I did.

Interviewing constituted an important part of my fieldwork activity and I draw extensively on interview material in the analysis because a central focus point is the perspective of involved actors. The interviews focused on how consultants and internal actors interpreted and made sense of situations and events related to the consulting process. In this way they took shape as accounts of and commentary on concrete events and experiences. As Czarniawska (1998) argues, such accounts are useful for answering the question of how everyday situations are experienced and interpreted because they relate to concrete, and not generalized or hypothetical events. Furthermore, since I had followed the assignments at the client sites I knew the client organisations, the central actors, the assignments, important events etc. and I could relate the experiences of my interviewees to what I had experienced myself from a position as neither consultant nor client actor.

The interviews were carried out as openly as possible in order to let the interviewees talk about the issues they found important. I did create interview guides/notes specifically for each interview to remind myself of particular situations or issues I wanted to ask about. In the interviews with internal actors I started by telling them that I was interested in hearing their experience of working with the consultants and the assignments in general. I told them that even though I had experienced the assignments myself, it was important for me to hear their version, i.e. what it had been like for them and how they saw the consultants and the consulting process from their perspective. The interviews with the consultants had a similar

focus, but of course referring instead to how they had experienced working in the particular client organisation.

I did the interviewing towards the end of my fieldwork period in both the hospital and the manufacturing company. A total of 53 interviews were carried out and tape recorded. 7 of these are with consultants. The interviews have an average length of about an hour. 34 interviews, half in each context, were transcribed in full and coded in NVivo. The transcribed interviews constitute a total of 620 pages of text, in Danish. The quotes used in the thesis have been translated into English in the process of writing.

The interviews I did not transcribe in full are all from the hospital where I interviewed a wider range of internal actors because I was asked to help with an evaluation of the Lean project. I selected the interviews to be transcribed and coded based on how central the given interviewee was in relation to the consulting assignments as I shall get back to. The interviews that I did not transcribe were listened through and key points taken down.

The coding of the transcribed material was done as content analysis where I generated categories and themes based on what the interviewees were talking about and how they talked about it. In the spirit of the exploratory and inductive approach of my research I did not start with any pre-defined themes or categories, but created them dynamically as I coded. Through this process of coding the interview material, patterns of dominating themes emerged indicated by a combination of both a high number of total references in particular codes as well as occurrences in most interviews. These patterns were used as the starting point for the next step in the analytical process of writing and searching for analytical tools in the form of relevant theoretical concepts. These tools will be presented in the next chapter. The structure of the thesis is similarly inspired by the themes constructed through coding in the sense that each of the four empirical chapters is centred on a main theme referring to an ability internal actors attribute to consultants.

Client interviewees

The client actors I interviewed were selected based on their role in relation to the assignments, i.e. the internal actors that had worked and interacted the most with the consultants. In the hospital context, however, I also interviewed a wider range of internal actors as already mentioned, particularly employees. The criteria for selecting interviewees in the context of the evaluation of the Lean project were people affected by the changes implemented as part of the

project. In the context of my study on client-consultant relations, the selection criteria was internal actors I had experienced most frequently in situations of interaction with the consultants and who had a central role in relation to the consulting assignments. This was how I selected the interviewees in the manufacturing context and this is similarly how I selected the interviews from the hospital that were transcribed in full and coded systematically.

The reasoning for concentrating on the internal actors that had been directly involved in the assignments is related to the use of interviewing as a fieldwork activity closely linked with observation, i.e. I wanted to talk to the people I had experienced in interaction with the consultants. But it is also a way of delimiting and focusing the analysis on precisely this category of client actors. They are the actors that embody the *client* party in the common notion of close collaboration as a key factor for effective consulting as described in the introduction. Or in other words, they are the client actors represented in the ideal of client and consultant working as members of a team.

A majority of the internal actors who worked closest and interacted the most with the consultants are managers at different levels. Accordingly, the majority (approx. 75%) of my transcribed interviews with internal actors are interviews with managers at top, functional and middle management level in both contexts. The employees represented often had a role that involved activities that to some extent resembled or were closely associated with management activities. In some cases these employees also have such a role in the context of daily activities, but it was often, at least partly, in connection with working with the consultants that such tasks were taken on by employees.

It could thus be argued that client-consultant relations as explored in this thesis is primarily a matter of relations between consultants and client managers. However, this focus on client managers is empirically driven in the sense that these are the people the consultants mainly worked and interacted with. An interview sample constructed according to this criteria reflects the focus consultants have on working with and through management to implement change and the extent to which their activities are closely linked with management activities. As I shall get back to in the next chapter this is similarly emphasised in existing literature on consulting where it is argued that management and management consulting are mutually defining systems, i.e. management consulting is a form of management (Fincham 1999, 2003; Kipping 2002; Fincham and Clark 2002).

REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK AND REPRESENTATION

The description of my fieldwork in the previous section indicates that the context and conditions under which fieldwork is carried out greatly influences what it means to do fieldwork. It is therefore relevant here to reflect further on the methodology of anthropological fieldwork as well as issues of representation in the context of a study like mine.

Within anthropology, fieldwork has traditionally been understood with almost exclusive reference to 'participant observation'. As the Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology (Seymour-Smith 1986) has it: "Participant observation has come to be synonymous for many with ethnography or anthropological field research as a whole" (ibid. 215-16). I have chosen not to use the term participant observation to describe what I did in the field, because I want to emphasise how my study is different from the way anthropological fieldwork has traditionally been conceived. Although you might argue that I was indeed participating by being present, conversing and interviewing, I was not a participant as most commonly understood in the context of anthropological fieldwork where it is about taking part in the life and activities of the community or group of people under study as one of them. In the words of Van Maanen (1988):

> *"In its broadest, most conventional sense, fieldwork demands the full-time involvement of a researcher over a lengthy period of time (typically unspecified) and consists mostly of ongoing interaction with the human targets of study on their home ground. [...] What I mean by fieldwork is the stiff, precise, probably too visual, but nonetheless double-edged notion of participant-observation (Van Maanen 1988: 2-3)."*

Moeran (2006) describes the features that characterises anthropological fieldwork as intensive participant observation meaning being physically present and undergoing total or near total social immersion. This presence should be long-term (ideally at least a year) and it should result in an intimacy between researcher and informants that is not possible through other research methods (Moeran 2006: 117). Anthropological fieldwork is, in this classic sense, about participating in and experiencing first-hand as fully as possible the life and activities of those under study, i.e. doing what they do, living like they do, becoming immersed in the social life of the community and getting to know individuals on a personal level etc.

Moeran (2006) does, however, also note that these features are practised to a greater or lesser extent according to the particular circumstances of fieldwork in different contexts and situations. The level and nature of social immersion and intimacy is potentially quite different when fieldwork is conducted in work organisations or other 'part-time communities' to use Hastrup's expression (2003a: 17). As in my case, the anthropologist does not leave her own life behind to go and live and interact on a full-time basis, i.e. 24 hours a day, with 'the human targets on their home ground' as Van Maanen (1988: 2) puts it. You could not even say that my working life become that of a consultant with the consultants or a manager with client managers or the like. Instead I participated from a position as neither consultant nor internal actor which in the context of studying the relations between them was an advantage. The consultants did not see me as a client actor and client actors did not see me as a consultant. I had no role in the work contexts I was in and did not carry out activities related to the assignments, except things like for instance helping a consultant hang a wall-to-wall value stream map in a meeting room before a workshop.

Furthermore, I did not study a work setting as a 'community' but focused on particular kinds of situations in work contexts connected with consulting assignments. When it comes to the consultants I experienced only some of their activities in the context of two particular client organisations, never their other client engagements, and very little of their working life in the context of the consulting firms[17]. Members of the client organisations I got to know only in the context of their interaction with the consultants and not in relation to any of their other work activities.

In some ways my fieldwork shares features with what Marcus (1995) has described as 'multi-sited fieldwork' pointing to the adaptations anthropologist have made of traditional modes of fieldwork in response to objects of study that cannot be researched in the context of the traditional ethnographic ideal of holism (Marcus 1995). Such objects of study are typically not defined by a single locality or 'homogeneously conceived conceptual units' as Marcus puts it (1995: 102) and does not constitute an obvious community in which the anthropologist can immerse (Abu-Lughod 1997).

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[17] On one occasion I participated in an employee meeting at one of the consulting firms and I went with the other consulting firm on a four day internal development off-site seminar in order to gain just a sense of what these home or 'backstage' activities are like.

You might argue that the very idea that communities can be studied holistically is in any case problematic in most, if not all contexts in which anthropologists do fieldwork. At least it should be emphasised that long-term fieldwork characterised by intensive participant-observation, immersion and intimacy does not equal a privileged social position from where an assumed everything can be experienced, understood and known. As Hastrup (1992/1996) similarly argues, what we as anthropologists can grasp is dependent on the space others are prepared to share with us (Hastrup 1992/1996: 78). Fieldworkers become positioned in social interaction in particular ways like all other social actors and what can be experienced and learned is always closely connected with particular positions.

Multi-sited fieldwork refers to a fieldwork practice of moving across multiple sites of activity, interaction and meaning production rather than aiming to research a group or community through intensive and long-term participant-observation, social immersion and intimacy. Client-consultant relations is precisely such an object of study that does not constitute a community or in any other way a cultural whole assumed to be homogeneous and have natural boundaries. Consulting itself is a mobile, situational and relational phenomenon as it is continuously made possible in the encounter with clients and the relations formed are constantly shifting and evolving in different localities. My fieldwork was conducted across two such sites of consulting and is in that sense also comparative, another feature of multi-sited fieldwork[18] (Marcus 1995).

Anthropological fieldwork can be conducted in a variety of ways in all kinds of contexts and localities while remaining true, if not to idealised levels of intensive participation, immersion and intimacy, then to committed localism (Marcus 1995). This means research predicted upon attention to ongoing face-to-face interaction and activity in concrete situations in particular contexts and the related meaning production of involved actors. To this end I employed a combination of observation, informal conversations and interviews as described in the previous section. Combining presence in the context of ongoing situations with interviews is, as Alvesson also argues (2003), necessary in order to gain a richer

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[18] Marcus' concept of 'multi-sited' fieldwork refer specifically to "juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) 'worlds apart.'" (Marcus 1995: 102). Although you might argue that a hospital and a manufacturing company constitute fieldwork sites that are in some ways worlds apart, the association between the two sites in the context of my study is relatively obvious, i.e. consultants on change assignments. My reasoning for using the concept of multi-sited fieldwork is to point to other modes of anthropological fieldwork differently conceived than in more traditional approaches and perceptions of ethnography.

understanding of what is going on so to speak. Client-consultant relations, as with all social relations, are about much more than interaction that can be directly observed, because it includes how actors perceive and define each other and the relation between them.

Interviewing as participation

Interviewing is increasingly used in modern anthropology in the context of fieldwork and within anthropology this has been seen by some as a problem. And it has been debated to what extent interviewing is used at the expense of participant observation around which the identity of the discipline is built (Rubow 2003). As Rubow says it, the practice of asking people about their lives in interviews has been met with scepticism - one should rather *participate* in people lives (2003: 227). But as Rubow (2003) argues, to create such a distinction between participant observation and interviewing is problematic. Rather the two should be seen as functioning productively in interplay with each other. The increasing use of interviewing in anthropological research is part of the necessary move away from the holistic ambition, or 'inclusive participant observation' as Rubow calls it (Rubow 2003: 228), of traditional anthropology where the idea was that the fieldworker could come to know it all, the whole - the totality, by being there all the time for a long time.

Rubow instead argues for what she calls a 'selective form of participant observation' (2003: 229) constituted as a combination of being present in selected situations and interviewing. In this sense both forms of activities are seen as participation. Rubow's (2003) concept of 'selective participant observation' is similar to what I have described here in the context of my fieldwork. The interviews I conducted were formalised conversations and as such not essentially different from the informal conversations anthropologists always engage in with people in the field. It is in other words not new that anthropologists ask people about their lives, activities, events, relations etc. Far from it. However, when the field is no longer a village or a tribe where one can take up residence, 'hang out' and chat with people for a couple of years, formalised interviewing is a way of getting access, time and space to the type of conversations that continues to be a vital part of anthropological fieldwork.

It is worth noting that interviewing as part of fieldwork is different from other types of qualitative interviews, because the researcher has a certain degree of experience with and knowledge of the local context, situations, people, stories, physical space etc. of the interviewees, although experienced from a different position. In the interview situation it is a

distinct advantage to be familiar with these aspects of the local in order to be able to ask relevant and concrete questions and in order to further explore what the researcher has experienced or heard about in the context of observation. This familiarity with the context and ongoing action and interaction makes it, according to Moeran (2006), easier to distinguish between what people say they do and what they actually do. This is a problem for other researchers that walk in from the street with a series of predetermined questions to be answered within an hour by people they have never met and whose local circumstances they have no idea about (ibid.).

I would argue that it might be claiming too much to say that fieldworkers gain the ability to make this distinction between what people say they do and what they do. That is after all also a matter of interpretation and even supposedly fully immersed participant observers do not see or know it all as argued above. However, it is in any case possible in the interview to explore apparent contradictions between what is said and what the researcher has experienced and ask interviewees to relate what they say to concrete situations where both interviewee and researcher were present.

As part of fieldwork interviewing is a way of practising committed localism in research just like observation of ongoing interaction is. The resulting accounts of involved actors are crucial because they can tell us about experienced and interpreted reality. In the words of Jenkins: "How people define the situation(s) in which they find themselves is among the most important of sociological data" (2004: 83). As Barth (1994) similarly argue:

"Our being there ourselves, and noting exactly what really happened, retrieves just that: exactly what we think really happened and not what the events meant (and thereby indeed were) to any of the participants" (Barth 1994: 353).

In this sense reality is always mediated by interpretation and what I experienced while observing interaction between client actors and consultants can never come to constitute a privileged version of 'what really happened'. In this thesis I analyse and present my empirical material in a way that emphasises the point expressed here by Barth (1994), namely that what situations mean to the involved actors is, in effect, what they are.

The collage as means of representation

I have now argued for the particular approach to anthropological fieldwork to which I subscribe. This approach also has consequences for representation, i.e. how research is written

up or textualised. The empirical analysis in this thesis does not constitute a traditional ethnographic account predicted upon 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of everyday life and culture as ethnography is commonly understood. Ethnography in this traditional sense is a means of representation of culture as Van Maanen (1988) defines it.

> *"The fieldworker must display culture in a narrative, a written report of the fieldwork experience" (Van Maanen 1988: 4).*

This thesis is not intended as such a report of my fieldwork experience constituting a "written representation of a culture" (Van Maanen 1988: 1). Traditional ethnography, and the abundance of thick description with which it is often associated, is in other words not the means of representation of this thesis. Instead my empirical analysis takes shape as a 'collage' where 'clippings', such as quotes from interviews and *thin* descriptions of situations, are used to build up a picture of themes and patterns constructed through a process of analysis.

The collage is an appropriate means of representation for the present purposes of exploring patterns of how consultants are perceived and defined as particular kinds of social actors in particular social contexts. The issues of how the assignments evolved and personal relationships between individuals are pushed to the background while I zoom in on client-consultant relations as social processes of collective identification as I will get back to in the next chapter. A classic ethnographic account would imply an ambition of creating a holistic representation, rather than zooming in on particular aspects at the expense of other aspects that are in practice intimately connected.

As I have also argued above this goal of holism is not part of my research approach, neither in the field nor in representation. Accordingly you might also say that the collage is also the most appropriate way of representing a fieldwork experience like mine that is itself as fragmented and eclectic as a collage, if you like. Indeed, that is quite possibly often the reality of fieldwork in many other contexts as well. Traditional ethnographic accounts tend to easily create an illusion of holism and that people's activities, interactions and relations evolve as orderly and transparently as in the narrative that represent them. Not to mention the associated illusion that the author of that narrative knows all there is to know and had some kind of privileged access to such omniscient knowing through fieldwork.

Another problem with the narrative form is that it can be ethically problematic when it comes to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. The narrative requires extensive detailed

descriptions of context, chronological sequences of events and rich characters the reader can get to know, understand and identify with almost as intimately as the anthropologist supposedly did during fieldwork. To some extent this has become a value in itself in ethnographic representation; almost as if richness and intimate detail of context, storyline and characters in themselves equal good and valid research. Regardless of whether this is the case or not, such ethnographic accounts do, however, leave contexts and individuals widely exposed.

Working instead with the collage as a means of representation makes it possible not to compromise confidentiality and anonymity to the same extent as thick descriptions in narrative form. The collage as means of representation pushes individuals to the background (Jacobsen 2006) and in the context of my study this provides the dual advantage of making extensive anonymity possible as well as focusing the analysis on aspects of social relations rather than personal relationships between individuals as I shall get back to in the next chapter.

There are, however, also disadvantages related to not being able to identify individuals throughout the analysis, contextualise what they say and connect it with other things they say or do. The most important one for my present purposes is related to contradictions and inconsistencies in the way the same internal actors talk about and relate to the same consultants in different situations and in different parts of the interview. This played an important role in my analytical process because these apparent paradoxes alerted me to how ambiguous the outsider position is and prompted me to find ways of making sense of it. This ambiguity is a theme throughout the analysis in the thesis, but it is represented mostly without referring to how *specific* individuals talk about and relate to consultants in seemingly contradictory ways. However, as much as it sometimes felt like a disadvantage to not be able to connect these contradictions to specific individuals in the process of writing, it also had the effect of forcing me to stay focused on that which is most general, indicating the collectively held definitions and perceptions I want to zoom in on. In this sense issues of representation became part of my analytical process. A collage is a picture that brings forth and focuses our attention on particular issues or aspects. It is a picture that is the result of an analytical process of finding ways of interrelating various and fragmented nodes of meaning production and activity.

Thus, what I aim to represent is the result of such an analytical process. This also means that the reader should not expect to learn about all that one might imagine I witnessed and experienced during fieldwork. I want to emphasise this point further in the following because to be an anthropologist and do field research seems to carry particular associations and expectations related to revelation of intimate details. In the context of research on consulting this has turned out to be particularly pertinent.

Consultants through the magnifying glass

One of the interesting things about doing research on management consulting is the reactions you get. It has immediate appeal, especially the part about an anthropologist observing such consultants on assignment. The headline of an article about my PhD project in a Danish business newspaper[19] sums it up: "Consultants through the magnifying glass". The rest of the article actually talks about what the PhD research is about, namely client-consultant relations. But the headline is perfect here for the purpose of symbolising the implicit expectations an anthropologist studying management consultants is faced with.

Doctor Livingstone with 'the magnifying glass' always seem to linger. Apparently I am on a fascinating expedition into the unknown and mysterious activities of management consultants. The magnifying glass carries associations of secrets to be discovered and revealed about these mythical figures of the business world. An article in the Financial Times[20] about the previously mentioned research project carried out by Sturdy, Clark, Fincham and Handley's in the UK similarly indicates this perception with the headline "Less mystique, more reality":

> *" In a large study on the work of management consultants, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, researchers at Warwick Business School are for the first time being allowed to watch consultants at work with clients, and even attend some meetings. 'This apparently murky world of consultancy turns out to be a bit less dramatic than all that,' says Andrew Sturdy, a professor at Warwick and the leader of the study. 'They have meetings which look and sound a lot like any other business meeting'." (Financial Times 2005)*

Seen in isolation from the functions consultants come to fulfil in and for client organisations as I will show in this thesis, my experience in the field was very similar to what Sturdy

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[19] Børsen, 05.08.2005

[20] Financial Times, 27.06.2005

describes here. Indeed, consultants are ordinary people doing their job by going about seemingly ordinary work activities of collecting data, writing, attending meetings, reading and answering e-mails, talking on the phone, presenting, drinking coffee, discussing ideas and proposals, explaining, listening, instructing, asking questions. Searching for answers, thinking up strategies, making plans, managing projects, getting other people to do things and just trying to live up to everything that is expected of someone in their particular position. In some ways not really that different from the managers they work with and in other ways not that different from researchers like myself.

Indeed consulting is not very dramatic or murky as Sturdy puts it, but consultants are in many ways mythical in public discourse and getting them exposed to 'the magnifying glass' is clearly compelling. The combination of research approach and object of study creates the fascination. Finally we will get to know it all, i.e. what these consultants are really up to. The ethnographer will tell it like it is. And it probably won't be pretty.

This assumption is based firstly on the almost commonsense belief that there has got to be some dirt to dig up on consultants. In fact books have already been written by journalists and former consultants (O'Shea and Madigan 1997, Kihn 2005, Craig 2005) where the apparent truth and nothing but the truth about consulting is laid bare in all its scandalous glory. Secondly, ethnography seems to be viewed as the perfect research approach for revealing what really goes on in such murky worlds. The following portrayal by Alvesson (2003) referring to ethnographic research within the field of management and organisational studies says it all:

> *"Good organizational ethnographies often portray their objects of study in non-flattering terms. When reading them I often feel glad I work at the university. (See for example Jackall's 1988 and Watson's 1994, sharp studies of corporate managers.). Actually, hardly any social setting comes out of an ethnographic study unblemished. Most well-done studies working beyond front-stage and the level of image-production produce some far from positive descriptions and analysis." (Alvesson 2003: 180).*

Alvesson might be right in his depiction of organisational ethnographies, at least in some cases, but I strongly disagree that portraying people under study in non-flattering terms and producing negative descriptions is an indication of good ethnographic research. Although it might admittedly make for an exciting read as well as good headlines in the media. That is, however, not what research is all about as far as I am concerned. Anthropologists and other researchers doing fieldwork do get to experience things that could potentially be used to

portray managers or consultants or whoever else we are studying in non-flattering terms. But this does not mean that it is relevant, useful or analytically interesting to do so. Furthermore, a negative description is not more or less true than any other description and it is in any case a particular interpretation, not the truth about what something or someone is really like.

The point I want to emphasise is that my research is not about what management consultants *really* do or what *really* happened on the assignments I followed. It is also not my business to construct exciting, revealing or non-flattering stories about management consultants. My business is to do an analysis that transcends my own experience and relations in the field as well as those of the involved consultants and client actors by working rigorously with my interview transcripts and field notes in search of patterns and engage theory that can help us make sense of them.

'AT ONE REMOVE FROM LIFE'

The present study on client-consultant relations as it has gained expression and become textualised in this thesis is essentially "at one remove from life" (Hastrup 1993: 155). As I write about client-consultant relations in this thesis it is a representation of a process of analysis where I stepped out of the localised experiences and discourses of the fieldwork situation. By this I mean that as I constructed patterns and themes in coding and subjected them to relevant theoretical concepts I saw things I did not see while I was in the field observing, conversing and interviewing. As Hastrup (2003b) also notes, the most essential elements of the empirical material is often only realised retrospectively when the researcher is no longer in the field.

Analysis and textualisation lift the people who took part in my study, their actions, interaction and relations out of real existence (Hastrup 1992). Writing is not just reporting, but 'a rediscovery of the world' as Hastrup (ibid. 116) puts it; a reframing and redefinition of the real (ibid.). My textual reframing technique is the collage as described above. People are not presented as characters the reader can get to know and follow in a story. Events are disconnected from the chronological chain of events in which they took place and the empirical chapters are written in the present tense to emphasise that what I do is not realist reporting on past events.

"Although fieldwork took place some time in an autobiographic past, the confrontation continues.The past is not past in anthropology; it is ethnographic present. The referential discourse of realism gradually fades when we realise that is was built upon a confusion between genre and epistemology, a confusion which also implied that representation was taken for reality" (Hastrup 1992: 125).

Representation equals interpretation with the aim of transcending the mere collecting of stories people might as well have told themselves (Hastrup 1992). Empirical knowledge is transformed to scientific knowledge through the transcending processes of analysis and theorising (ibid.). This implies an understanding of validity that is different from a positivist assumption of validity as referring to the correspondence between representation and objective reality. This is, as Czarniawska (1998) argues, untenable because we can only compare representations with other representations. And this checking text against other texts, she argues, is exactly what validation practices are always about.

"To show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what is known is something other than showing that a conclusion is true… Validation is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation" (Ricoeur, 1981 p. 212 in Czarniawska, 1998 p. 69).

The empirical analysis in this thesis is an interpretation. The first step of building up the argument to show it as probable is taken in the next chapter where I position the study within existing literature on consulting and present the conceptual framework and analytical tools I used to continue the confrontation with the fieldwork experience and the empirical material produced.

Client-Consultant Relations

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it is to explore how the subject of client-consultants relations has been dealt with in literature on management consulting through selected texts in order to position the thesis in relation to these different approaches. Secondly, it is to outline the analytical framework employed in the thesis and the basic argument that is unfolded in the following four empirical chapters. This analytical framework, and the resulting argument, was developed inductively in the process of coding and analysing the empirical material as described in the previous chapter. Based on the empirical patterns constructed in the process of coding I searched for and selected analytical tools to help me make sense of them. What is presented in this chapter, both my positioning in relation to existing research on consulting as well as the conceptual framework and basic argument of the thesis, is the result of this dialogue between empirical material and relevant theoretical concepts. In the following exploration of existing literature, as in the thesis as a whole, the focus is on how client-consultant relations are approached and conceptualised within different strands of literature on consulting.

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In reviewing the literature on consulting, Poulfelt and Greiner (2005) found that the majority of work focuses on the roles and behaviour of consultants and is at the same time often normative in nature (Poulfelt and Greiner 2005: 347-348). In this section I focus on this type of prescriptive literature on consulting.

Schein's "Process Consultation" (1988) and Maister, Green and Galford's "The Trusted Advisor" (2002) represent examples of such literature written by consultants for consultants about the best way to behave with clients and the best role to assume in relation to clients. Both see the client-consultant relationship as crucial and focus, in different ways, on how

consultants should build the relationship, create trust and involve the client. And both argue that consulting should be approached as a joint journey (Maister et al. 2002: 13; Schein 1988: 10). This emphasis on relationship- and trust building also figures in other prescriptive literature (Schein 1999, 2002; Cockman et. al. 1999; Carucci and Tetenbaum 2000; Kubr 2002; Fombrun and Nevins 2004). Kubr (2002) for instance, in his guide for the profession, states that it is of critical importance to create and maintain an effective consultant-client relationship. As he goes on to say:

> *"Building this relationship is not easy. To achieve success, both consultants and clients need to be aware of the human, cultural and other factors that will affect their relationship, and of the errors to be avoided when working together. They must be prepared to make a special effort to build and maintain a relationship of understanding, collaboration and trust that makes the effective intervention of an independent professional possible. There is no alternative." (Kubr 2002: 61).*

Although Kubr (2002) emphasises that both consultants and clients have to make an effort to build and maintain the relationship the focus in this type of literature is mainly on how the consultant should do this as I will get back to. Another typical feature of prescriptive perspectives on client-consultant relations is the tendency to talk about the client as an individual and the client-consultant relationship as personal as also mentioned in the introduction.

In Maister et al. (2002) the client appears to be mainly the commissioning client or 'primary contact' as they call it. They furthermore state that they focus on the trust relationship that is to be built between two individuals - "an advisor serving a client" (2002: x). For Maister et al. the client-consultant relationship is thus essentially a personal relationship and their approach to how the consultant should behave and the skills necessary refers to interpersonal dynamics as their metaphor of romantic relationships indicates (2002: 37). The consultants have to create a close personal relation to the client that is based on trust in a way that has much in common with the relationships people build in their personal lives as the authors argue (ibid.).

At the same time they also mention that it is rarely just one person that is the client (ibid. 35). The consultant thus also has to be able to deal with politics and "learn the skills and methodologies for bringing the different players 'on board'" (ibid.). However, Maister et al. do not take it into further consideration how such social dynamics evolve or how the consultant come to participate in them as a social actor and with what consequences.

At first sight, Schein (1988) differs in his definition of the client, because he operates with the concept of the 'client system' and stresses that the client is the entire organisation (1988: 127). Schein does, however, also emphasise the importance of relationship building with the 'contact client' in his terms.

> *"One of the most important criteria for predicting the likelihood that a useful consultation relationship will result is the initial relationship formed between me and the contact client"* (Schein 1988: 121).

Schein seems to distinguish between the personal relationship with an individual, as for instance the contact client, and the consultation relationship as such and stresses that the client is the entire organisation. As he states:

> *"[...] my client is not just the contact person or the person of highest rank but the entire group with which I am working and, by implication, the entire organisation. [...] This concept of the whole group or organization as the client is one of the trickiest, yet most important, aspects of PC. In observing other consultants operating in the organization in which I have been working, I have noticed that many of them essentially take the highest-level manager, typically the president, as their primary client [...]. In contrast, as a process consultant, I have found myself to be most effective if I can gain the trust of all key parties with whom I am working so that none ever thinks of me as pushing someone else's ideas."* (ibid. 127-128).

Although Schein uses the concept of the 'client system', and stresses that the client is the entire organisation, there is nevertheless still a tendency to treat relationships as personal. The case story he uses to illustrate the above point indicates that it is, similarly to Maister et al., about gaining trust with individuals. Schein spends a good part of the book presenting his theory of 'human processes' that he declares is inspired by social psychology, sociology and anthropology (1988: 19). He does not, however, deal with the consultant himself as a social actor participating in social processes or situate client-consultant relations within these processes. In a later book, Schein (1999) makes the dynamics of the relationship his main focus of attention. As he says it in the preface, it is "necessary to understand the sociological dynamics of the helping relationship" (1999: xii). It is, however, mainly "the psychological forces that operate when one person asks another for 'help'" (1999: 30) that is in focus throughout the book, i.e. "the psychodynamics of the helping relationship" (ibid.) as he puts it. Thus in the conceptualisation of client-consultant relations, Schein (1988, 1999) and Maister et al. (2002) are similar in the sense that it is mainly about one-to-one interpersonal

relationships and relationship building. Both represent insightful and useful literature as such, but as I will argue further below, they leave other aspects of social relations more or less out of the picture.

The consultant as the active agent

As examples of prescriptive consulting literature, Schein (1988, 1999) and Maister et al. (2002) furthermore share the focus on the consultant as the main agent of creating the relationship regardless of whether the consultant is termed helper or advisor. As Schein formulates the focus of his book on relationship building (1999):

> *"What the helper/consultant needs to know, what skills she needs to develop, what attitudes she needs to hold to build and maintain effective helping relationships, and what she needs to do to implement this philosophy of helping are the primary focus of this book." (Schein 1999: 1).*

The consultant has to establish the relationship and secure that it is helping, useful, value-creating, effective and productive. Implicitly, this means that if the consultant has the necessary relationship and trust building skills, behaves correctly and assumes the correct role, as each author defines it, then the consulting process will (most likely) be successful. Maister et al. state that trust of course goes both ways and the client has to participate and reciprocate in order to build it (2002: 23). The book, however, focuses on the 'trust-enhancing techniques' (ibid. 24) to be used by consultants and the interpersonal skills they should possess and it is the consultant that has to take the lead in relationship building (ibid. 38).

> *"Sometimes our unconscious views of being a 'professional' are based on distinguishing ourselves from our clients. In some ways, this separates us from our clients. But relationship building requires us to find common, not separate ground." (Maister et al. 2002: 37).*

> *"The essence of professionalism lies not in distinguishing ourselves from our clients, but in aligning with them to improve their situations." (ibid. 56).*

As we see here the consultant is perceived as the active agent that potentially creates distinctions and should make sure not to do so and foster an 'us' with the client instead (ibid. 57). Schein similarly focuses on how the consultant should behave and 'define a relationship' (1988: 119):

"My behaviour must illustrate at all times my commitment to establishing a helpful relationship" (Schein 1988: 121).

"The most important point to get across is that I will not function as an expert problem solver in the traditional consultant role." (ibid. 125).

"For example, in the interview itself, my method of asking questions and the content of what I ask project a certain image of me. If I want to establish a collaborative, helping relationship with the person being interviewed, I must behave in a manner congruent with such a relationship. This means I cannot play the role of the psychologist who asks obscure questions upon which I then place 'secret' interpretations or the like" (ibid. 145).

It is also here quite clear who the active agent is. The implication is that the consultant is able to define his or her role if everything is done correctly. In his later book, Schein (1999) extends this idea and argues that the consultant also can and should switch roles according to what is relevant. Schein (1988) takes into consideration that clients might have expectations that are in conflict with the role the consultant assumes. But again the consultant has to, and implicitly can, make sure that these are cleared up so the client has the correct expectations:

"As many of these expectations as possible must be revealed early so that they do not become traps or sources of disappointment later if I refuse to go along with something that the client expects of me" (ibid. 127).

Again an image of the consultant as the agent in control is portrayed. The consultant can refuse to do things and in order to avoid client disappointment should make sure that client expectations are revealed and aligned. Schein mentions that clients might conceal certain motives, but in that case they can be dealt with when they arise. He illustrates this with a case story and concludes:

"Getting back to setting the proper expectations on the part of the client, I have to state clearly that I will not function as an expert resource on human relations problems, but that I will try to help the client to solve those problems by providing alternatives [...]. Finally I have to make it plain that when I am observing in meeting, I will not be very active but will comment on what is happening or give feedback only as I feel it will be helpful to the group in accomplishing its task". (ibid. 129).

The consultant 'sets the proper expectations' by stating clearly and making it plain how he or she will function and will not function. The consultant decides and knows best what is helpful and useful to the client in the consulting process. Schein sees the process consultation role he is advocating as clearly distinct from other consulting roles, namely the 'expertise model' and

the 'doctor-patient model' (1988: 5-9). Thus the consultant has to make the client aware of what the consultant's role is, and in what way it is different from other consulting roles, behave in accordance with it and make sure that the expectations of the client are aligned. If the client is not aligned with what to expect from the consultant it is better not to initiate the consulting process at all or terminate it.

Compared to Schein, Maister et al. (2002) are more focused on adjusting to the client and client expectations and they state that at the end of the day it is the client that is in charge (2002: 30). It is generally a slightly less powerful image of the consultant in comparison with Schein, but Maister et al. also talk about how the consultant should manage the expectations of the client (2002: 126) in a way that is very similar to Schein (1988). The general tendency in both books is the representation of the consultant as the main agent for building and maintaining the right relationship.

It is of course not surprising that prescriptive literature written by consultants for consultants take this standpoint. After all the aim is to help consultants improve and the focus is thus on what the consultant can do to do it right so to speak. As such this literature is valuable and useful to consultants. The popularity of personal trust and collaboration ideals and the wide ranging acceptance of process consultation ideals of creating client ownership of problems and solutions illustrates that the normative messages are embraced by consultants in different ways. Maister et al. themselves present several ideas that seem heavily inspired by Schein to say the least. As for instance, when they state that it is "a misleading belief that the advisor's job is to solve problems rather than to help the client solve problems" (Maister et al 2002: 57).

Prescriptive literature can become extensively influential and certain perceptions advocated are transformed into repertoires for making sense of what you do as a consultant, how you do it and repertoires for creating your identity and that of the consulting firm. As Alvesson and Johansson (2002) state, the consultants are not just the target group as readers of such literature; they are also a group being attributed with status and identity (2002: 229).

What is missing in the relationship equation?
One of the consultants in my study recommended that I read "The Trusted Advisor" (Maister et al. 2002) when I first started my fieldwork on the assignment he was working on. He told me that the book was a good representation of his own approach to consulting and that of his

firm. He explained that it is precisely the approach of creating trust, collaborating and involving the client that makes his firm unique and enables the creation of client ownership and learning. The other consulting firm in my study also subscribes to very similar ideas and Maister et al.'s "trust equation" (2002: 69) is on the wall in large print signalling the importance of the ideals of trust and relationship building.

I did as the above consultant suggested. I read "The Trusted Advisor" early on and over the course of my fieldwork I experienced consultants from both firms talking about and practicing ideals and using techniques not too dissimilar from what both Schein and Maister et al. advocate. Indeed the consultants I got to know generally have good personal relationship building skills and they would probably score relatively high on 'trustworthiness' according to the 'trust equation' (Maister et al. 2002: 69). A good indication is the extent to which the commissioning clients in both organisations were very happy with the collaboration. There was also an unmistakeable 'us' atmosphere (on most occasions), laughing together, common ground and common stories. My feeling and experience was that the consultants were generally trusted by their clients in ways that resemble the ideals prescribed in "The Trusted Advisor".

However, without being able to really put my finger on it at the time of the fieldwork, it kept occurring to me that something is missing in the equation. It is that something I explore in this thesis by conceptualising client-consultant relations, not as interpersonal one-to-one relationships, but as social relations and dialectic processes of collective identification. I focus not on stories of personal relationships, trust and chemistry but instead explore patterns of how consultants are perceived and defined as particular kinds of social actors in a social context that is the client organisation. This also means that contrary to most prescriptive literature my starting point is the client context and how internal actors position consultants.

In Schein's (1988) argument it is only in process consultation that client and consultant diagnose the problem and develop the solution together in a joint process. I argue that that is the case regardless of the role the consultant explicitly is attempting to assume or the approach used. Consulting is always a joint accomplishment. This has the implication that it is problematic to look at consulting roles in isolation from how internal actors position consultants.

Furthermore, I conceptualise 'the client', not just as the commissioning client and/or other individuals in the client organisation, but as collectivities of people. As also described

earlier, this means that I place less importance on personal characteristics of individuals and their personal relationships with each other. It is important to emphasise that by so doing I am not claiming that personal trust and other interpersonal dynamics of relationships are not important and I will maintain that the insights and advice on relationship building of prescriptive literature are useful for consultants. I will, however, leave these interpersonal aspects out of my analytical equation in order to highlight social aspects of relations and what this means for consultants' opportunities for taking part in creating change in client organisations as they aim to do.

With this analytical perspective the thesis also represents a shift away from the concern with normative evaluation of individual consultants as good or bad and individual consulting actions as right or wrong that is implicit to prescriptive literature. Instead the focus is on the social context within which consultants' actions are performed and interpreted. The consultants enter and become part of, if only temporarily, social contexts where they, from a particular position, interact with people who in one way or another identify as a collectivity. It is therefore the members of that collectivity, and how they define and position the consultants that are the starting point for my exploration. This is based on the assumption that no social actors are 'super agents' that can freely position themselves in the social contexts in which they interact or define their own role in and relation to collectivities. Any position in social interaction is a result of the dialectical process of positioning yourself and the way you are positioned by other actors.

PERSUASION AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Not just the prescriptive literature, but also the so-called critical literature (Alvesson 1993; Clark 1995; Clark and Salaman 1996a, 1996b; Legge 2002), focuses primarily on how consultants position themselves as we shall see in the following. This stream of literature on consulting is research-oriented, has other academics as the main target group and in reviews of the literature on consulting it is often contrasted with prescriptive perspectives (Fincham and Clark 2002, Alvesson and Johansson 2002; Werr and Styhre 2003; Fincham and Clark 2003). As Fincham and Clark (2002, 2003) argue, the critical approach developed as a

reaction to the normative and practitioner-oriented OD (organisational development) literature of which Schein is a key representative as both practising consultant and academic.

> *"Whereas the OD literature gained much of its purchase from the fact that many of the leading commentators were practicing consultants themselves, in more recent literature this has been viewed as a weakness. Instead it has been argued that a concern with prescriptive advice is potentially limited in its contribution to an understanding of consultancy work." (Fincham and Clark 2002: 6).*

It is both the fact that it is consultants writing about their own practice in a "self-congratulatory manner" (ibid. 7) and that these consultants are concerned first and foremost with prescriptive advice that is seen as problematic in critical approaches to the study of consulting. Alvesson and Johansson (2002) for instance comment that traditional, pro-consultancy texts "present a rather idealistic picture, portraying the consultant as a competent professional" (2002: 229). As they go on to argue, the critical perspective "may be seen as a healthy reaction to earlier dominant, self-celebratory texts" (ibid). At the same time, however, they also find it problematic that there is a lack of literature that looks at consulting from a neutral position. I tend to agree that it is unproductive with this tendency of polarisation between on the one hand pro-consulting and on the other hand critical literature. Whether a neutral position exists you might question, but I for my part aspire, at least, to be neither idealising nor critical, but aim to contribute to a richer understanding of client-consultant relations and develop insights relevant for practice.

However, as I see it, a more interesting issue here is not so much the opposition between the prescriptive and critical literature, but the similarities in the sense that both streams of literature tend to leave the client side too much out of the equation and portray the consultant almost as a kind of 'super agent'. Regardless of whether it is seen as positive or negative, consultants are attributed with an extensive ability to define themselves, what they offer and their position in social interaction.

A central theme within the critical perspective is the conceptualisation of consulting as a form of persuasion where consultants use rhetorical devices, performances and impression management in relations with clients (Alvesson 1993; Clark 1995; Clark and Salaman 1996a, 1996b; Legge 2002, Kieser 2002). Clark's book "Consultancy as the management of impressions" (1995) represents a classic example of a text within this stream of literature. It

has not been chosen here to represent Clark's authorship on consulting as such[21], but is explored as a text that is a key representative of the critical perspective, the conceptualisation of consulting as impression management and the focus on how consultants manage the relationship with the client.

> *"If service characteristics, particularly intangibility, imply that a client will have difficulty in evaluating the quality of a service delivered, then there is scope for the consultant to construct a reality which persuades clients that they have purchased a valuable and high-quality service"* (1995: 18).

Although Clark (1995) argues that "the client and consultant interact to create the service" (ibid. 61), the consultant is described as the agent that actively manages and controls the interaction process. In this sense the argument almost seems to mirror the above prescriptive literature.

> *The key to an understanding of consultancy work and its success is to appreciate that successful consultancy, in its methods at least, recognizes, and indeed stresses, the active management of the client-consultant relationship. That is, successful consultancy is essentially about relationship management (Clark 1995: 17).*

This last sentence seems to more or less sums up the message of "The trusted advisor". It does not seem farfetched to argue that what both Schein (1988) and Maister et al. (2002) advocates is precisely relationship management. Clark (1995) for instance similarly mentions the issue of managing client expectations:

> *"[...] in order to create the impression of a high quality service (i.e. convince client of their value), consultants must focus their efforts on the active management of the interaction process with clients. This emphasizes the importance of consultants managing the expectations and overall experience of the client in order to foster and convey the impression that they are delivering a high quality service." (Clark 1995: 62).*

Schein and Maister et al. would of course not agree with Clark's argument that consultants manage and manipulate (Clark 1995: 86) the relationship in order to give the client the *impression* that they are delivering something valuable. In the prescriptive literature it is taken for granted that consulting is valuable, but that value is realised through a good relationship

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[21] Within the academic research-oriented literature, focus and arguments change (more or less) over time as new research is carried out and debates between scholars evolve. This is not the case to the same extent with prescriptive authors like Schein and Maister that stand for a particular approach to consulting.

and common ground. Without a good client-consultant relationship, trust and collaboration the consulting process will not be useful or helpful. However, the idea that consultants manage, or should manage, the relationship is essentially the same. Implicit to both perspectives is the perception that consultants can define and manage the client-consultant relationship and through that create either actual value (prescriptive approach) or experienced value (critical approach). There is thus within both the critical and prescriptive literature a tendency to look at the client-consultant relationship from the perspective of the consultant and conceptualise consultants as the active agents who have extensive abilities to define and position themselves in social interaction.

The strength of Clark's (1995) perspective and contribution is the conceptualisation of the consultant as a social actor. Thus, client-consultant relations are explored, not as personal relationships as in the prescriptive literature, but as social relations that evolve in interaction. In his criticism of the prescriptive OD literature, Clark emphasises precisely the lack of attention paid to examining the dynamics of client-consultant interaction (1995: 93). In this sense, my analytical focus is similar to Clark's where social dynamics rather than interpersonal dynamics are the object of attention.

My approach does, however, differ in important ways from the critical perspective. Firstly, I disagree with the idea that consulting activities are intrinsically problematic and have inherent limitations because they are intangible, produced in interaction with clients, non-standardised and perishable (Clark 1995: 42-57). According to Clark this means that clients are forced to buy a promise (ibid. 58) and these characteristics of consulting activities are in his view "a major source of quality assurance problems" (ibid. 57). It means that it is difficult for clients to know what they are buying when they choose a provider, it is difficult to distinguish between high and low quality consulting firms in the purchasing process and it is difficult to know whether they got what they paid for.

These issues, however important, refer mainly to buyer-supplier aspects of client-consultant relations. In this sense, Clark (1995) seems to see the client as the actor/actors that make the decision to buy. If we are to understand the dynamics of interaction and the relations that develop between consultants and internal actors in the course of assignments, and thus also how the consulting service is jointly produced, the focus on consulting as problematic is less fruitful. As we shall see in the next four chapters, key internal actors who interact with

consultants actively construct and position the consultants in particular ways that create both opportunities and limitations for the joint creation of value.

Secondly, contrary to Clark's argument my analysis suggests that consultants have much less scope for 'constructing a reality which persuades clients' to paraphrase Clark (1995: 18). Clark's focus on the agency of the consultants means that neglects the role internal actors play in the interaction and how the consultants and what they do is constructed and interpreted. This is similarly pointed out by Sturdy (1997) who is critical of the idea of consulting as rhetoric and persuasion more generally. In his argument consultants are also vulnerable agents, because of the inherent uncertainties of consulting and individual pressures on consultants. Sturdy (1997) furthermore stresses the interactive nature of the consulting process and in a later text (Sturdy 2002) he argues that clients are active co-creators of the knowledge and ideas consultants are traditionally seen to advocate (2002). Indeed, in my argument, internal actors are active co-creators not just of knowledge and ideas, but of consulting and the role of consultants as such.

Clark's lack of focus on the active role of client actors might be due in part both to his empirical focus on executive search consulting and management guru presentations as well as the way he uses Goffman's (1959/1990) concept of the social actor as a manager of impressions. I will explore the latter in more detail below as Goffman's social actor also plays a role in the development of my analytical approach. With regards to the empirical focus I simply want to point out that Clark's argument is developed in relation to empirical contexts that are different from mine. His empirical examples represent situations where interaction is more or less a one-off event, as in the meeting where executive search consultants present candidates to the client and the public performances of management gurus. They are thus not the kind of management consulting assignments I observed where consultants attempt to implement change and spend extensive amounts of time working and interacting with a range of internal actors over a longer period of time in a particular social context.

Goffman's concept of impression management

Clark uses Goffman to conceptualise consultants as performers that seek to determine and control the client definition of the situation, and thus also the interaction, through projecting particular kinds of impressions (Clark 1995: 100). In Clark's analysis it seems to be self-evident that the consultant is the performer that manages impressions and the client the

audience. This might very well be the case in the context of Clark's empirical examples, but it cannot be taken for granted that this is so in other situations of client-consultant interaction. Goffman's (1959/1990) point is that all social actors seek to manage impressions and influence the definition of situations, including the definition of self and others, in interaction. This is what I refer to as positioning in this thesis, i.e. the attempts of social actors to position themselves in particular ways in social interaction. According to Goffman, it is in the interest of all of us to attempt to control the definition of the situation as well as the conduct and responses of others in interaction.

> *"When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interest to convey.*" (Goffman 1959/1990: 15-16).

These impressions that social actors seek to convey on others may be both intentionally and unintentionally and consciously and unconsciously created (ibid. 18.). Indeed 'trustworthiness' could be interpreted as an example of one such impression that we all seek to get across in most interactions with others. In this sense Maister et al.'s book (2002) could be seen as an attempt to teach other consultants how to convey and manage that particular impression as effectively as possible.

Clark (1995) argues that consultants create the impression and definition of themselves and their service as valuable. Goffman, however, emphasises that individuals are necessarily successful in controlling the definition of situations. The activities of managing impressions can always at the very least be interpreted differently than what they were intended to project (Goffman 1959/1990: 18). Furthermore, other participants also project their own definitions at the same time. Goffman thus argues:

> *When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. (ibid. 20).*

As all actors project definitions of the situation no single actor can be said to determine and control interaction. Instead for social interaction to be possible at all and work relatively smoothly in most situations, there has to be a 'working consensus' (Goffman 1959/1990: 21) about the definition of any given type of situation amongst the participants.

Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another, so that open contradiction will not occur. [...] Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured (ibid. 20-21).

Following Goffman, management consulting can be seen as a particular type of interaction setting in the context of organisations where a particular 'working consensus' is established. By this I mean collectively held definitions of what kind of social actors consultants are in relation to other actors, their characteristics, attributes and abilities, the roles they play as well as the value of their activities and attributes. Both consultants and client actors are participants in interaction and they jointly create such collective definitions that are, on a general level, 'sufficiently attuned' to use Goffmans expression, in order for consulting to be possible at all.

An example of a definition that is commonly held by both client actors and consultants is the perception that consultants can challenge the existing as outsiders which is the theme of chapter 4. This does not mean, however, that challenging when actually performed by consultants is necessarily successful. Other, and sometimes ambiguous, definitions come into play and as Goffman also emphasises, events occur within concrete interaction "which contradict, discredit or otherwise throw doubt upon" established definitions (1959/1990: 23). To stay with the example of the challenge, this means that even though internal actors want and expect consultants to challenge, and consultants perform what they believe to be effective challenging, internal actors might not necessarily interpret and accept it as positive, relevant or useful in any given situation as we shall see in chapter 4.

In my analysis the point of departure is the definitions and interpretation of internal actors and my approach represents an interest in the social conditions that form the context for action and interaction. As Pellegrinelli (2002) similarly emphasises:

"In carrying out their work consultants do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, their interventions are set within existing frames of reference, beliefs, commitments and action patterns of their client organisations" (2002: 351).

Thus, client-consultant relations should be seen as embedded in the social contexts where consulting assignments take place, i.e. client organisations. This means that organisational

perceptions and definitions frame and condition the encounter between consultants and internal actors.

As also mentioned ealier, this focus on the client perspective can be seen as a way of 'balancing out' the tendency in the existing literature to neglect the active role of client actors in the joint accomplishment of consulting. In this sense I aim to add to the insights of literature like Clark's (1995) that focus mainly on how consultants position themselves. As I will continuously emphasise throughout the analysis, any social position is the result of the dialectic of individuals positioning themselves and being positioned by others. Hence, although the perspectives of consultants are not the main focus of attention, consultants are not absent from my collage. This is often the case in other literature where the consultant-dominated focus is countered with a focus on the client perspective as for instance in Werr and Styhre (2003) where client constructions of the client-consultants relationship is explored.

The structural perspective

Despite the dominating focus on the consultant-side of the relation in the existing literature, an alternative structural perspective can be identified as Fincham's (1999) argue, where the focus is on the context of consulting. Instead of exploring the persuasive strategies of consultants, the structural critique focuses on the constraints on consulting and its dependence on corporate structures and processes (Fincham 1999). Consulting is thus seen as an activity defined by client demands. As Fincham (1999) puts it, "a structural analysis emphasizes consultancy being pulled along in the wake of change in inter-firm relations" (ibid. 341). Kipping (2002) represents a similar perspective in his analysis of the evolution of management consulting as a reflection of current managerial problems and concerns. As Fincham and Clark (2002) sum up the argument:

> *"[T]here is an important sense in which management and management consultancy have evolved together and are mutually defining institutional systems"* (Fincham and Clark 2002: 11).

Consultants and client managers are in this sense seen as sharing the conditions of their practice resulting in a resonance and symmetry within consultant-client relations making them symbiotic in the sense that the parties are mutually dependent.

"Consultants can be thought of as a kind of parallel management divided from the main body by the organizational boundary, and by the division between internal and external expertise" (Fincham 1999: 347).

In a later article Fincham (2003) conceptualises consultants as agents of management and argue that "the client-consultant relationship represents a kind of 'extrusion' of managerial authority" (2003: 74). To put it differently, management consulting is a form of management and essentially the relation between managers that are called consultants and managers that are called clients is more one of similarity than difference. Thus a common tendency in the critical literature more generally is to question management consulting as a distinct profession with a distinct knowledge base.

The analysis of the similarity and mutual constitution of management and management consulting and the symmetry of knowledge deployed provide important contributions to the understanding of consulting. It is always fruitful to question and challenge taken for granted perceptions of essential difference, because it forces us to explore other avenues toward an understanding of consulting and client-consultant relations. If we accept the argument that, theoretically and generally speaking, the distinction between managers that are called consultants and managers that are called clients is not about essential differences and exclusive content, i.e. differences in knowledge, skill and profession, then we have to ask what the distinction is about instead. 'Consultant' and 'client' are empirical categories that refer to some kind of difference that has real consequences in interaction. In the context of the concrete encounters and situations of interaction I observed in the field, consultants are in effect distinct social actors carrying out activities from a distinct position in relation to managers in client organisations.

My argument is that consultants and clients become distinct through processes of differentiation as I will show throughout the next four chapters. And that it is partly by way of this differentiation that consulting is accomplished in concrete situations in organisational contexts. An analysis of client-consultant relations thus needs to explore the processes of differentiation that *produces* distinctions. As for instance the distinction between actors inside versus outside the organisational boundary and the division between internal and external expertise that Fincham (1999) mentions in the above quote.

The point is that it might be less important whether for instance internal and external knowledge and expertise can be said to be essentially different as defined by researchers or

other commentators. What matters is how knowledge and expertise become defined and functions as distinct in the context of concrete encounters between consultants and internal actors in client organisations. Or how managers and consultants become defined and function as distinct social actors. This has been less explored in the existing literature. Definitions of what consulting is, what consultants do, what knowledge and skills they have, the value of their services etc. are either taken for granted or questioned and criticised. Rarely are these definitions explored in terms of how they are produced, what they mean, and thus in effect are, for the involved actors.

CONSULTANTS AS OUTSIDERS?

The conceptualisation of consultants as outsiders is one such classic, common and often taken for granted way of representing consultants in relation to clients. In most literature, regardless of approach, management consulting is explicitly or implicitly defined as *outside* advice, help or expertise. Schein (1988) for instance uses the perception of the consultant as outsider to argue for the need to develop solutions jointly (1988: 10-11). And Fincham and Clark (2002) use it when they talk about the mutually constituting systems of management and management consulting as in the following:

> *"It was almost as if the complexities and uncertainties of the management task from the outset compelled managers to open up their boundaries to outsiders" (Fincham and Clark 2002: 11).*

An example of how the perception of consultants as outsiders is used in the context of change assignments is Morris (2000) who explores consulting execution and change implementation. Morris takes a critical stance towards consultants' abilities to implement change and argues that because they are not part of the organisation they have limited authority in client organisations, they do not have the networks of power and influence necessary to execute and implement change and they lack tacit organisational know-how, as he calls it (Morris 2000). Morris concludes that change is a political process that it is very difficult for outsiders to influence (ibid. 136).

Morris's argument and critique of consultants' execution claims is thus based on the assumption that consultants are outsiders in relation to the client organisation. This assumed outsider position becomes the argument against consultants' ability to implement change. According to Sturdy et al. (2006) this kind of argumentation represents a long and influential tradition in the literature on consulting where the outsider status of consultants is both assumed and used to argue for or against the value of consulting. Sturdy et al. (2006) summarises the advantage argument as the idea of the 'strength of weak ties' and the disadvantage argument as the 'burden of otherness'. There thus seems to be a core tension associated with the outsider status of consultants. On the one hand it is argued for instance that their contribution to organisational learning is related to their outside status (Antal and Krebs-Gnath 2001). On the other hand, outsider status is said to pose problems and barriers (Kipping and Armbruster 2002).

Sturdy et al. (2006) criticise the traditional and dominant view of consultants as outsiders for being an organisation-centric perspective that does not recognize the fluidity of organisational boundaries. The perception of consultants as outsiders is located within a dominant discourse of organisational membership that is similarly dominant in organisation studies more generally (Sturdy et al. 2006: 7). It categorises people permanently employed by a particular organisation as a member of that organisation and thus an insider. External consultants are not employed by the client organisation, thus they are defined as outsiders. From this follows that consultants are expected to spend less time than members within the spatial domains of the client organisation, their presence is expected to be temporary, they are expected to be less involved in and have less knowledge about everyday activities and internal matters and they are expected to have different, less operational expertise and knowledge than members.

These are some of the markers of difference commonly used in the identification of consultants as non-members in studies of the client-consultant relationship as well as consultancy literature more broadly. As Sturdy et al. argue, "The core reference point for the ascription of status is that of the employment relationship combined with contrasting knowledge bases" (Sturdy et al. 2006: 7). The problem is that the outsider status of consultants is assumed. In reproducing this assumption the existing literature tends to neglect exploring other processes of inclusion and exclusion that might be at play and neglect to see insider-outsider boundaries as complex and dynamic (Sturdy et al. 2006).

Thus far I agree with Sturdy et al. (2006) and take a similar position. However, Sturdy et al. (2006) focus on how literature ascribes outsider status to consultants and not how consultants identify in relation to clients or how clients categorise consultants. The point Sturdy et al. (2006) ultimately makes is that consultants cannot be assumed to be outsiders. This point is important, but as much as the dominant categorisation of consultants as outsiders cannot and should not be taken at face value or treated as self-evident, it can also not be dismissed. Arguing, for instance, that consultants are *not* outsiders or that organisational boundaries are fluid instead of fixed could be potentially just as flawed as the opposite argument. What needs to be explored is the status consultants are ascribed in the context of client organisations and how client-consultant interaction is experienced and interpreted by involved actors.

Whether boundaries can be said to be fluid or fixed is thus not my main concern here. My position is that boundaries are socially constructed and they create effects and perform functions in concrete encounters between people as Barth (1969) argues with his anthropological approach to collective identity. In some situations boundaries become fixed, in other situations they become fluid. In some situations they function as enablers of interaction and in other situations as barriers to interaction. How they are constructed and with what consequences is the empirical question.

As we shall see in the next four chapters, internal actors in both client organisations in my study categorise consultants as outside the boundary of the collectivity with which they identify. The collectivity they refer to is mainly the organisation, but also sometimes broader identifications such as profession or sector. Internal actors thus often use the perception of consultants as 'them' coming from 'the outside' when talking about their experiences of working with consultants. Consultants are experienced, categorised and positioned as particular kinds of outsiders with particular attributes. These perceptions of difference play an important role in the way both consultants and client actors define and interpret the encounter and as such it influences interaction.

Collective identification and construction of boundaries

The dominant organisation-centric view, that Sturdy et al. (2006) criticise, refers to an aspect of the everyday life and experienced reality of organisations and thus also what they are about. An example in the literature of how organisational boundaries are constructed and maintained can for instance be drawn from Barley and Kunda's study (2004). They show how

contractors are symbolically constructed as outsiders by permanent employees that identify as members and thus insiders. These distinctions between contractors and permanent employees are drawn by way of badges, spatial inequities and limiting access to participation in events, computer systems etc. (Barley and Kunda 2004: 177ff).

Organisations function, among other things, as formal and task-oriented collectivities (Jenkins 2004: 23). And membership of such collectivities, i.e. organisational membership, is a form of collective identity. Barth (1969) is influential within anthropology for developing a framework for understanding how collective identification works along with Jenkins (1997, 2004) that builds further on the same ideas. Collective identity is constructed in interaction and is the result of processes of social differentiation. Or in other words, boundary drawing along the lines of 'us' and 'them' – inside and outside articulated by way of perceptions about similarity and difference (Barth 1969; Jenkins 2004). With his seminal text "Ethnic groups and boundaries" Barth (1969) changed the direction of the anthropological study of collective identity, at that time specifically ethnicity, by showing that social boundaries are not 'natural' and do not necessarily refer to essential differences. Instead they come to take on this quality.

Boundaries between inside and outside are continuously constructed and reconstructed in interaction and at the same time they contribute to the structuring of interaction (Barth 1969). Boundaries, divisions or distinctions between individuals and groups are always a matter of difference being socially constructed and organised for practical purposes. Namely, to separate actors and give shape to their interaction by framing and defining it as well as framing and defining the positions, roles and functions of actors within it (ibid.). This, I would argue, is part of the 'working consensus' of different interaction settings that Goffman (1959/1990) talks about. As Jenkins puts it:

> *"Without repertoires of identification we would not be able to relate to each other meaningfully or consistently. [...] Without identity there could be no human world."* *(Jenkins 2004: 7)*

The analysis in the next four chapters explores such repertoires of identifying consultants as particular kinds of outsiders. To paraphrase Jenkins' (2004) statement; without repertoires for identifying and positioning consultants as different from managers, and other internal actors, there could be no consulting. Consultants "exist and subsist in and through difference" to use Bourdieu's (1998) wording:

"Individuals and groups exist and subsist in and through difference; that is they occupy relative positions in a space of relations which, although invisible and always difficult to show empirically, is the most real reality and the real principle of the behaviour of individuals and groups" (Bourdieu 1998: 31).

What happens in client-consultant interaction is, amongst other things, related to the fact that it is constructed as and thus becomes in effect an encounter between actors identified as belonging (inside) and actors identified as *not* belonging (outside). Boundary drawing along the lines of 'inside' and 'outside' is in this sense an important aspect of client-consultant relations, as in all social relations (Jenkins 2004). The encounter that is the object of my study is in other words partly structured around the construction of a distinction or boundary between actors as either 'inside' or 'outside'. Both when that boundary functions to create opportunities and when it functions to create barriers as we shall see in the next four chapters. As Jenkins argues:

"People collectively identify themselves and others, and they conduct their everyday lives in terms of those identities, which therefore have practical consequences" (Jenkins 2004: 87).

Insider-outsider distinctions structure and frame everyday interaction in the context of consulting assignments, but they do not determine it. Thus, they cannot be used to predict how concrete situations will develop. Furthermore, 'the members' do not constitute a homogeneous or fixed collectivity. As Jenkins (2004) also argues, however formally fixed organisational boundaries might seem, they are also potentially flexible, permeable and negotiable depending on context and situation.

The emphasis in this thesis is on the empirical task of exploring the way consultants are perceived, defined and positioned by internal actors and the implications of their position in terms of opportunities for influencing practice in client organisations. However, as Bourdieu (1998) argues, social positions are not easy to show empirically. The route I take in attempting to show social positions empirically is based on the assumption that positions are essentially about social difference that is produced by being perceived as such by someone making the distinction. Perceptions of similarity and difference function as repertoires of identification and differentiation and as such they represent one possible route to show empirically how consultants are positioned in the space of relations in client organisations and with what consequences. My starting point is thus to explore the distinctions that internal

actors use when they talk about concrete experiences of working and interacting with consultants. By relating this to situations I experienced during fieldwork and sometimes also by bringing in the voice of the consultants I construct an empirical collage as described in the previous chapter with the aim of creating an understanding for the dynamics of relations and positions in interaction.

It should be emphasised that I did not explicitly ask internal actors to tell me about differences and similarities between themselves and consultants in the interviews. As described in the previous chapter, the approach was to ask them to talk about how they experienced working with the consultants, the projects and concrete situations that I had either observed or heard about. The importance of the perceptions of similarity and difference only really dawned on me as I coded the material where these repertoires of identification and differentiation were constantly drawn on. It was through the process of content analysis of the interview transcripts with internal actors that these perceptions and constructions of consultants were chosen as the starting point for the empirical analysis presented in the next chapters. But before I move on to the empirical chapters, one particular perception of difference needs special attention here. Namely the perception that consultants, because they are outsiders, are able to do things insiders cannot do.

MAGICAL OUTSIDERS

Each of the following four chapters takes its point of departure in an ability internal actors attribute to consultants and that insiders are defined as lacking. I use the concept of 'magical outsiders' to refer to this perception of consultants that attributes them with special and desirable abilities that are constructed with reference to their outside status. The consultants are in other words endowed with a special significance because they are defined as something other than insiders. With 'magical' I mean this special significance that is attributed to consultants by way of differentiation and negation of insider characteristics. As Mauss (1950/2001) argues in his classic sociological text, "General theory of magic", it is precisely separateness that endows certain actors with magical powers and magicians always have an abnormal social status in one way or another.

"The magical value of persons or things results from the relative position they occupy within society or in relation to society. The two separate notions of magical virtue and social position coincide in so far as one depends on the other. Basically in magic it is always a matter of the respective values recognised by society. These values do not depend, in fact, on the intrinsic qualities of a thing or a person, but on the status or rank attributed to them by all-powerful public opinion" (Mauss 1950/2001: 148).

Mauss is writing about magical powers that are empirically very different from the abilities consultants are endowed with and my point here is not to compare consultants to magicians in any common or traditional sense. It is thus not about supposedly 'irrational' mysterious rituals and performances that induce ecstasy or other supernatural effects. I am also not, as it is sometimes done in the existing literature on consulting, representing consultants as magical figures, as for instance shamans, witchdoctors or sorcerers (Woodworth and Nelson 1979, Clark and Salaman 1996b) to emphasise "the surreptitious or insidious nature of the power of manager's advisors" (Fincham 2003: 68).

As Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) similarly point out, such metaphors have been used to depict consultants as powerful agents in relation to clients. This similarly my critique of the existing literature as we have seen in this chapter. Czarniawska and Mazza on the contrary argue that consultants are often "treated more like witches than witch-doctors" (2003: 269). At the same time however, Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) also show how consultants are invested with special powers by internal actors in very similar ways as in my empirical contexts.

What is relevant for the analysis in this thesis is the principle of what magic is as a social phenomenon deriving from the functioning of collective life (Mauss 1950/2001). The point is that whatever special powers consultants possess they have been attributed with by way of differentiation. It is quite illustrative that the antonym suggested for 'magical' by the Microsoft Word thesaurus is 'normal'. As I will show, consultants are potentially valuable in the context of change because of the way they are differentiated from insiders, i.e. their value results from the relative position they occupy that is characterised by separateness as Mauss would put it. It is this principle I wish to convey with the term 'magical outsiders'.

The abilities of consultants are defined by way of perceptions about the disadvantages of being an insider in the context of change as we shall see throughout the following chapters. This differentiation creates a particular position from where it is possible to do particular things, because it is endowed with sources of influence that are less accessible to insiders. Such magical abilities are, however, only potential (Mauss 1950/2001). In the context of

consulting, boundary drawing between insiders and outsiders serves to create opportunities for influence, but only in some situations and under certain conditions as I shall get back to. Potentially, boundaries can be a source of both opportunities and limitations. The outsider position of consultants is thus not always and not necessarily magical in practice. This is part of what Kipping and Armbrüster (2002) refer to as 'the burden of otherness' of consultants and the resulting limitations of their interventions. And similarly with Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) who argue that consultants are sometimes treated as witches rather than witch-doctors.

The perceptions of the value of outside perspective, challenge, knowledge etc. is dominant in discourses on consulting more generally. Not least amongst managers. Most managers I have heard talking about why they use consultants include the advantage of their outside status in one way or another. At dinner parties, when people feel prompted to tell stories and experiences of consultants in response to hearing about my research, they never fail to mention that at the end of the day it is always good to get someone in from the outside. For a while I took it for granted and hardly noticed it as an interesting perception to be explored, because it is so commonsense.

Useful and special outsiders in other empirical contexts

The perception of the outsider's ability to do things 'we' cannot do and see things 'we' cannot see, is interesting not least because outside status comes with exclusion and marginalisation in a range of other empirical contexts. As for instance in the case of minorities. Through processes of social differentiation 'the other' is often created as opposed to 'us', the insiders, in a way that attributes outsiders with less desirable characteristics. The whole idea of not belonging and being an outsider generally carry negative connotations. However, perceptions of outsiders that endows them with a special and desirable significance useful for functions insiders are seen as unable to perform, are far from exclusive to the empirical context of management consulting in the western management and business world. Jansen (1980) for instance analyses the perception of the outsider as seer and voyeur and argues that it forms a cornerstone of folk wisdom throughout history:

> *"Acquinas offered philosophers an image of the traveller, the wayfarer, as a moderator of morals. But, it was Shakespeare who gave us the classic portrait of the objective stranger. In 'The Merchant of Venice', Portia is allowed to judge because she not only possesses the detachment of learning and the distance of a traveller from Padua; but she is also a woman - an alien in the world of commerce". (Jansen 1980: 23).*

Karakayali (2006) represents another example where the focus is on the uses of the stranger throughout history as a form of division of labour. This is interesting in the context of my analysis, because it is precisely about the use of outsiders to perform particular functions. Karakayaly (2006) builds on the argument of Simmel (1950) who conceptualises strangeness as a form of interaction created for particular purposes by society.

> *"Just like human beings create tools in order to realize their desires vis-á-vis nature, so do they create forms of interaction like exchange, cooperation, division of labor, and so on to realize their interests vis-á-vis each other" (Karakayaly 2006: 314).*

The purposes of the stranger vary in different societal contexts, but beneath these variations there is a recurring pattern. Karakayaly (2006) identifies two kinds of strangers. One is used to perform tasks that insiders are *incapable* of performing and the other is used to carry out tasks insiders are *unwilling* to perform. The latter type of stranger refer for instance to the immigrants and ethnic minorities of modern societies. Karakayaly argues that the first type of stranger was used mainly in pre-industrial societies for unorthodox or uncommon tasks that often required special skills. This stranger was perceived to be both more objective and more rational than insiders (Karakayaly 2006).

Karakayaly's (2006) analysis is limited to strangers categorised as such at the level of society and thus does not consider similar stranger relations in other types of collectivities such as for instance organisations. This is less important for the present purposes. What is interesting is the pattern of how social actors with stranger status are collectively created and used for particular purposes across varying empirical contexts. Karakayaly (2006) identifies the pattern across different pre-industrial societies and in my analysis we shall see it represented in the organisational perceptions of consultants as special actors that can perform functions insiders are incapable of performing in the context of organisations. It is essentially a similar pattern indicating the creation of a particular form of interaction, or interaction setting to use Goffman's term, that functions as a form of social division of labour. Following this line of argument, consultants are tools used in the realisation of certain interests or solution to certain problems in organisations where an insider position is not useful. As Karakayaly (2006) argues:

"What one can do with/to members of one's group, one cannot do with/to strangers, but also, one can do things with/to strangers that one cannot do with others. The assignment of strangers to 'special tasks' should be seen as a specific instance of this general logic." (Karakayaly 2006: 327).

The pattern is similarly evident in Colson's (1966/2006) analysis of the use of strangers or aliens amongst the Tonga of Zambia based on fieldwork carried out in the 1940's and 50's. The Tonga use diviners on different occasions, as for instance in situations of illness, accidents, death and other misfortunes, to find explanations for events or to get predictions on courses of action etc. (Colson 1966/2006). Diviners with stranger status, i.e. alien diviners, are used in cases where local diviners are not deemed appropriate for the job. In the case of minor matters people are usually content with the services of local diviners who are part of the community. For important matters and in difficult cases on the other hand alien diviners are preferred (ibid.).

Interestingly, the reasoning behind this preference for alien rather than local diviners amongst the Tonga of Zambia seems to correspond rather well with the reasoning of my interviewees when they talk about why outsiders are valuable in change implementation in organisations. The Tonga use alien diviners because they perceive them to lack knowledge about local affairs, be impartial, objective and possess impressive foreign techniques. In addition, reputation and high fees adds to the symbolic status of alien diviners. The similarities are striking as we shall see in the following chapters.

The most important aspect of Colson's (1966/2006) analysis however, is the point that "[i]n practice, of course, there are degrees of strangeness and different categories of alienness" (1966/2006: 221). The alien diviners might be non-members of the immediate local community or village, but they belong to the same social universe and share a common set of values with the Tonga.

"The alien diviner is precisely this, an alien whose behaviour is predictable because it is based on standards accepted by the patron community, and whose findings are therefore intelligible and acceptable. [...] He is not a stranger to the system of beliefs, or standards, that control the situation in which he is called upon to operate. [...] He will not suddenly redefine the situation in his own terms and demand that his clients accept his dictation." (Colson 1966/2006: 221, 228).

The strangeness that is desirable and useful thus seems to be a function of both difference and similarity. The alien diviners the Tonga use are *legitimate* outsiders because they are also

similar. Colson's (1966/2006) analysis brings to mind Simmel's (1950) concept of the stranger although she does not refer to him. According to Simmel (1950) it is precisely the synthesis of nearness and distance that constitutes the position of the stranger. The stranger is an element of the group itself and shares a certain level of general commonness with other members. Strangeness thus does not imply non-participation, but a specific kind of participation. The position of the stranger is produced through a special proportion and reciprocal tension between nearness and distance (Simmel 1950).

This conceptualisation of the position of the stranger is clearly relevant in the context of client-consultant relations. As we shall see in different ways throughout the empirical chapters, consultants are expected to behave, relate and know as insiders, but without losing the magic of the outsider's challenging edge, impartiality, objectivity and new knowledge and ideas. This indicates a delicate balancing act and a position that is inherently ambiguous. The outsider status of consultants is potentially magical and as such a source of value creation, but it is also potentially marginalising as the analysis will show.

It deserves mention that I incorporated the above perspectives on magic, useful and special outsiders in other empirical contexts and the sociological concept of the stranger relatively late in my analytical process. When I came across Simmel's conceptualisation of stranger relations for instance, I was using the terms relative closeness and limited distance in my attempt to describe the outsider position when it is positive and useful, as I was seeing it in my empirical material. This illustrates an inductive analytical process where I began realising the importance of particular empirical patterns and searched for ways of making sense of them. As I started using my newfound analytical tools the general social mechanisms at play became increasing evident to me.

EXISTING LITERATURE AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

As I set out to do this chapter has served the dual and combined purpose of exploring existing approaches as well as outline my own approach, analytical framework and central concepts. To sum up, I started with selected texts within the existing literature on consulting. Firstly, I looked at the prescriptive perspectives that focus mainly on one-to-one interpersonal relationships and relationship building. Such literature provides useful insights for

consultants, but at the same time it has serious limitations because of the individualised focus. The second point was that consultants are portrayed as the main agent of the relationship. The implication is that individual consultants have an extensive ability to position themselves in social space.

In the light of such prescriptive perspectives the present thesis can be seen as counteracting both the tendency to conceptualise relations in individual psychology terms and the tendency to privilege the agency of consultants. In this thesis the focus is instead on social relations and dialectic processes of collective identification. And contrary to most prescriptive literature I focus mainly on how internal actors in the client organisation define and position consultants and what this means for their opportunities for taking part in creating change as they aim to do.

After exploring examples of prescriptive literature I moved on to the critical and research-oriented tradition. This literature is often seen as a reaction to prescriptive perspectives. One important contribution in this regards is the conceptualisation of the consultant as a social actor. Thus, client-consultant relations are explored, not as personal relationships as in the prescriptive literature, but as social relations that evolve in interaction. This is also my approach.

However, there is at the same time a similar tendency within both critical and prescriptive literature to look at client-consultant relations from the perspective of the consultant. This has the consequence that the client perspective is less explored and consultants appear as the active agents. Implicit to both perspectives is the perception that consultants can define and manage the client-consultant relationship.

I challenged this in relation to the critical approach by emphasising that Goffman's concept of impression management (1959/1990), often used in the context of consulting, does not imply that individuals are necessarily successful in controlling the definition of situations. Goffman's concept of the social actor is also an aspect of my basic analytical approach, but I use it instead to emphasise how collectively held definitions are sufficiently attuned in order for interaction to be possible. Consulting can in this sense be seen as a particular type of interaction setting in the context of organisations that establish what kind of social actors consultants are and the roles they play in interaction, i.e. the "who's who and what's what" that Jenkins talks about (2004: 7) as we saw in chapter 1. It is such collectively held definitions in client organisations I explore in the following four chapters.

Another strand within the critical perspective focuses on the similarity and mutual constitution of management and management consulting and the symmetry of knowledge deployed. These insights provide important contributions to the understanding of consulting. However, it was emphasised that my approach is to look at consultants as, in effect, distinct social actors that carry out activities from a distinct position in relation to managers. What I will explore is the processes of differentiation that produce such distinctions. How such definitions are produced, what they mean, and thus in effect are, for the involved actors has been less explored in the existing literature. This is similarly the case when it comes to the assumptions in most literature that consultants are outsiders in relation to the organisation and the related perspectives on that status as either an advantage or a disadvantage.

I then outlined the basic theoretical framework for understanding social differentiation (Barth 1969; Jenkins 2004) that forms the basis of the analysis in this thesis. Distinctions, or boundaries, between individuals and groups are seen as a matter of difference being socially constructed and organised for practical purposes. Boundaries create effects and perform functions in concrete encounters between people (Barth 1969). In some situations they become fixed, in other situations they become fluid. In some situations they function as enablers of interaction, as thus also consulting, and in other situations as barriers. Differentiation separate actors and give shape to their interaction by framing and defining it as well as their respective roles in interaction. This is how social actors know 'who's who and what's what' so they can interact meaningfully with each other (Jenkins 2004: 7).

Finally I explored a particular perception of difference identified in the process of coding and analysing the empirical material. Namely the perception that consultants, because they are outsiders, are able to do things insiders can not do. This perception is of key importance in the analysis and has inspired how it is organised. Each of the four chapters show in different ways how consultants are differentiated from insiders and by way of that differentiation attributed with special abilities. I introduced the term 'magical', inspired by Mauss's (1950/2001) theory of magic, to refer to this perception of consultants and their abilities. I furthermore explored literature that deal specifically with social actors perceived as distinctively useful and desirable because of their outsider status in other empirical contexts. Particularly Simmel's (1950) conceptualisation of stranger-relations is relevant in my empirical context, because it indicates that the positive and useful stranger-relation is a function of both similarity and difference, i.e. the synthesis of nearness and distance.

With this summary of the basic elements of analytical approach and framework we are ready to begin the empirical exploration in the following four chapters.

The Ability to Challenge and Question

> *"Any diviner visiting a new area, whether he be a Tonga or a complete alien, is likely to find local clients who say that a man from a distance, knowing nothing of local affairs, is more likely to give true divination than a local man who knows all about the one who seeks enlightenment"* *(Colson 1966/2006: 222).*

This chapter, the first of the four empirical chapters, takes up the lead from the last section of the previous chapter by showing how internal actors differentiate consultants from themselves in ways that attribute consultants with special abilities. As in each of the four chapters the point of departure is one particular aspect of the outsider magic, here the ability to challenge the existing. I will show how consultants are positioned on the one hand as magical outsiders that are able to do things 'we' cannot do, but also how that position is at the same time vulnerable and ambivalent because boundary drawing is as potentially marginalising as it is potentially magical. The value of the outsider position is conditioned by a synthesis of nearness and distance to use Simmel's (1950) conceptualisation. The magical outsider position is in other words a function of both difference and similarity. The following three chapters build further on this basic argument by exploring the political aspects of the outsider position (chapter 5), key consulting activities associated with the position (chapter 6) and aspects related to the content, i.e. the knowledge and ideas these outsiders are perceived to possess (chapter 7). The first step in this chapter is to show how the magical outsider is constructed by internal actors.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHALLENGER

"The advantage of the consultants is that they go out and work somewhere else a couple of days and then they come back 10 days later and are here for a few days. And that is why they, better than an employee, can do that [challenge]. And that is also why you can justify paying them those fees, it is because they better than en employee can challenge. Because they leave, take a breath of fresh air and come back again" (Top manager).

As this top manager from the manufacturing company expresses it, the value of consultants is connected with their status as non-members of the organisation. They are *not* full-time permanent employees. Co-presence, either physically or mentally is a significant aspect of what defines this type of work organisation as a collectivity. A set amount of hours, often defined as 'full time', of co-presence and participation in the relations and activities of the organisation, is one source of group identification and a marker of membership. Non-presence on an everyday basis functions as a marker of difference that defines consultants as outsiders. As this manager perceives it, consultants are able to challenge, because of their difference – here defined as absence. You can justify paying consultants high fees because they are not there everyday like organisational members. Later in the interview he explains further what he got out of working with the consultants:

"You have had some sparring and challenging of your views, and things like that, in relation to the company you are in that you cannot get internally [...]. So you get some of those dogmas tested that are always there [...]. Where they [the consultants] come in, that is where they challenge the foundations, right. And say, but is it really necessary to do [x]? Question mark, right, etc. Those are some of the questions the company is rarely good at posing itself" (Top manager).

Thus it is *consultants-as-outsiders* that are able to challenge existing views, 'dogmas' and practices of the organisation. Outsiders, in relation to the work organisation as a collectivity, are in this sense seen as possessing a particular kind of ability that insiders per definition do not have. They are attributed with this ability because they are non-members. What they are good at, is defined by way of a perception of what insiders are bad at.

Also in the context of the hospital a similar perception is expressed by a top manager as he talks about the consultants' ability to ask 'stupid questions'; an expression he uses again and again throughout the interview:

"An advantage with the consultants is that they can permit themselves to be ignorant about the content of healthcare knowledge, and that means that they can keep asking the stupid questions until they get a satisfactory answer [...]. The other aspect of it is that they are not familiarised, because that is the biggest problem of all organisations that in the beginning when you are in the organisation you can see all the mistakes and the potentials for improvement, but a very short time goes by before you either cannot see it anymore or you build up rational arguments for why things are the way they are. So then there are advantages in bringing someone in from the outside" (Top manager).

We see here how consultants as outsiders can challenge, i.e. ask 'the stupid questions' because they do not know about the things insiders know about and they are not part of the organisation. The consultants are ignorant about healthcare knowledge and that in itself is one of the reasons for hiring them. Outsiders are in other words valued in the context of change efforts *because* they are different from insiders and thus do not possess certain attributes of insiders. The everyday presence, familiarity and knowledge of insiders, is perceived to stand in the way of seeing things and thus also changing them. Outsiders on the other hand can 'see'. Here is how a middle manager from the manufacturing company and an employee from the hospital express it:

"You know, many times when you have been doing it for many years then you don't really think about why you do it, but you just do it really. When someone else comes along and dispute the way you do it then you have to think about why you actually do that, right. And then sometimes it turns out that it might not be that smart after all." (Middle manager at the manufacturing company).

"[...] because you are simply so 'shelved in' in those tings, so you maybe don't really think about whether something could function more expediently, so I actually think it is good that someone from the outside comes and looks at it with completely new eyes." (Employee at the hospital).

Again we see how being an insider is perceived as a form of disadvantage in the context of change efforts in different contexts and at different levels. A functional manager from the manufacturing company describes a concrete situation of interaction with a consultant along the same lines:

"[...] and where we maybe looked at it very much with blinkers, he could get another dimension into it and then say: well could it be a possibility to go in this direction here, why haven't you thought about [...]" (Functional manager).

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A middle manager also in the manufacturing company describes, in a similar way, a situation where one of the consultants worked with her group of employees:

> "He was really good at opening people's eyes in order to say – are we actually doing it the right way? Because a lot of the employees have been sitting here for many years and didn't believe it could be changed. Because this is how we have always done it, right" (Middle manager).

Where the top manager in the hospital keeps stressing the advantages of the consultants asking 'stupid questions', this middle manager in the manufacturing company similarly repeats throughout the interview how the consultants 'opened eyes'. Both ways of talking about it refer to the same basic perception that members are somehow caught in and blinded by their daily practice and collective habits; i.e. what is usually done. Outsiders are per definition not caught up or blinded and they can therefore be agents of change. Again in the words of the same top manager at the hospital:

> "Here comes someone that is from the outside, that is impartial - he is not a doctor. They can take the liberty of asking stupid questions, because they pose them according to objective criteria and they ask stupid questions until they get the correct answer. I.e., 'why do you do it like that – well that's what we usually do – well I don't know what you usually do, you have to explain why you do it like that', right. Thus, have that approach to it and be insistent on getting answers that are useable" (Top manager).

In this statement we see how the ability to challenge is not just about everyday absence and ignorance, but also ascribed attributes of impartiality and objectivity. The consultants become in a sense 'impartial' and 'objective' *because* of their difference, i.e. they are not doctors. I will explore these attributes further in chapter 5 and 6, respectively. Of relevance here is the indirect dichotomisation of consultants in relation to organisational members and the associated disadvantages of being an insider in the context of change efforts. As Jenkins puts it: "When we say something about others we are often saying something about ourselves" (Jenkins 2004: 79). Or in other words, non-members are constructed using the image of the organisation and its different members.

The organisational relevance of the outsider
The above statements illustrate how a particular boundary between inside and outside is constructed for the purpose of and in such a way that a function can be performed. This is

precisely part of Barth's (1969) argument about boundary drawing as outlined in chapter 3. Differentiation creates a position from where a function can be performed that it is perceived as difficult for members of the collectivity to perform as we have seen here. Outsiders are thus attributed with a particular kind of agency that insiders are not perceived to have.

Being challenged by outsiders seems to attain an almost 'magical and miraculous significance' to borrow a phrase by Barth (2000: 29) from a different context, i.e. 'they opened eyes' as the middle manager expresses it. In this way these internal actors construct a transcendent agent, a magical outsider, that is positioned above and outside it all and thereby able to be an agent of change. It is the separateness of the position that creates the value, to refer back to Mauss's theory of magic (1950/2001). The organisational relevance of the construction of the outsider is related to perceptions of the organisation and its members. In order to change we need outsiders that are not contaminated by insider-ness.

As Barth (2000) argues, boundaries can separate actors for the purpose of giving "shape to their interaction in a way that […] positively enables it, since it frames and defines the nature of the opportunity" (Barth 2000: 28). Consultants are in this sense separated from internal actors by the drawing and maintenance of a particular boundary that can function as a source of opportunities for a type of consultant participation in the activities and relations of the organisation that potentially creates new dynamics and shifts things. The magic of consultants-as-outsiders is all about difference being socially constructed and organised for very practical purposes. Or to quote Mauss (1950/2001): "They possess magical powers not through their individual peculiarities but as a consequence of society's attitude towards them and their kind" (1950/2001: 35).

Similarly, the consultant-as-outsider is the product of internal actors in the relevant social contexts created for particular purposes and attributed with characteristics that are a negation of insider characteristics. Repertoires for differentiating the consultants from insiders can be related both to content as well role constraints and the forms of activity associated with consultants as I shall get back to.

It is, however, important to emphasise, as I also did in chapter 3, that consultants too are active agents that position themselves in particular ways in the social contexts they enter. The outsider position of consultants is accomplished through the dialectic of consultants positioning themselves and being positioned by different client actors simultaneously. As argued with Goffman (1959/1990) in chapter 3, both consultants and client actors take part in

creating the collectively held definitions, i.e. 'working consensus', of what kind of social actors consultants are in relation to internal actors and what their associated role is in interaction. In the following we shall see how consultants define and position themselves as challengers.

'You have to constantly challenge'

Challenging the existing is an important aspect of how consultants see their role as well as how they perform it on change implementation assignments. The consultants in both contexts have a persistent focus on questioning and challenging everything. This can for instance be illustrated with an example from the hospital where the consultants try to teach Annette, an internal employee and member of the project team, to perform as they do. By making it explicit to this client actors what they want her to do, the consultants indirectly express what they themselves focus on when performing their role as we shall see.

Two consultants are prepping Annette who is going to be leading a score card meeting for the first time. Ulrik, one of the consultants, emphasises:

> "If we are not realising what we are meant to realise there is a reason. That reason has to be identified and then a decision on what should be done has to be reached. It is important that everything is turned over and challenging. For instance this cancellation here due to [x]. Who is it that gives permission to cancel because of [x]?" (Field notes).

At the meeting Annette starts off by going through the score-cards. In addition to herself and the consultants, two middle managers and an employee from the relevant unit are present and they discuss the performance and the different problems. Annette performs her role of running the meeting mainly by bringing up the issues that have to be dealt with and then opening up for discussion. After a while she concludes on the discussion and based on that states what has been agreed. The consultants let Annette run the meeting, but frequently move in with questions and comments, urging the participants to make a decision or do something about this or that. When the problem with cancellations is discussed for instance, Ulrik breaks in to ask about the type of cancellation he also mentioned to Annette before the meeting. One of the managers quickly replies that there is nothing to do about that. Ulrik replies:

> "But what can we do to secure ourselves against it? Is it up for negotiation or is the patient just sent home right away?" (Field notes).

The managers and the employee both explain that they of course always try to find a solution. The discussion of the different reasons for cancellations continues for a while and then move on to other issues.

After the meeting the consultants give Annette feedback. Ulrik and the other consultant, Allan, say:

> Allan: "You have to be more challenging and you cannot be concluding and agree that something is not possible".
> Ulrik: "You have to constantly challenge. It might be that something is good enough in the practical reality, but it is never good enough. They are not good enough at challenging themselves, you have to help them." (Field notes).

This example is interesting because the consultants are trying to get an internal actor, an employee and member of the project team, to work and position herself the way they do. They are trying to teach her their craft so to speak and in so doing they focus extensively on challenging. This indicates how they position themselves in interactions in the client organisation. Their feedback to Annette after the meeting is in this sense a description of how they work as consultants and what they believe is necessary in order to move and change things. Interestingly, this description almost mirrors how internal actors construct the value of the challenge as we saw earlier. The consultants say 'they are not good enough at challenging themselves' and internal actors say 'we are not good at challenging ourselves' as we saw it expressed in different ways earlier. Clearly there is a working consensus on the definition and function of consultants as particular kinds of social actors.

The situation is, however, also an example of the difference between a particular insider positioning and the outsider positioning of consultants. Annette identifies as an insider in contrast to the consultants and she does not position herself the way they do although she is a member of the project team working side by side with them on the assignment carrying out consulting activities[22]. Accordingly, the consultants want Annette to challenge the insiders as they do - as an outsider. She does not perform the role partly because it is not open to her the way it is to external consultants and partly because she does not want to and is not used to position herself like that. She does not see her role or position this way as it is clear in the

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[22] Annette normally works in central hospital administration in a role as a type of internal consultant. As we shall see later in this chapter some members of central hospital management and administration do actually identify more with the external consultants than they do with clinical staff and management. This is however not to the same extent the case with Annette.

interview. For instance in the following extract where she is talking first about another similar situation to the one described here and then more generally about the challenging and confrontational aspects of how the consultants work:

> *"It is as if they [the consultants] don't think that one step further, well that she also… you know it is not my role to be the boss in relation to them [other internal actors], that is not my role at all, I'm just a colleague right, at the same level as them. […] You know they [the consultants] are used to just push things […] because in principal they don't have to care, they can just push straight through. You know they have some kind of impact that the rest of us maybe don't have, because they don't have to look at people afterwards, they can be hard as nails and say: 'boom, boom, boom' and be totally professional and not care whether they step on somebody's toes, if you understand what I mean. The rest of us can't do that. So it is of course maybe also partly a question of personality, but it is also a question of what kind of role you have, right" (Employee).*

We see here how Annette clearly identifies as a particular insider that is neither an outsider nor a manager. It is interesting to note that she interprets what the consultants want her to do as something a boss does, i.e. the consultants are performing management activities from an outsider position. It is obvious again how the consultants are seen to be able to do things 'the rest of us can't do'. Annette identifies as belonging to 'us' and she carries out her work accordingly. As for instance in the above meeting where she aims to reach consensus and accepts more or less without question when the middle managers claim that something is not possible. She does not confront and challenge them.

The consultants on the other hand are not looking for consensus and they will not accept or agree that something is not possible as Ulrik puts it in the feedback to Annette. Everything has to be challenged. The consultants are looking for the ideal and they want to create discontinuities and change the direction of how things are normally done. Here is how one of the consultants describes it:

> *"That is what I call 'boundary seeking', it is constantly testing the limits. Why does this have to take 8 days if it can be done in 2, right. Why does it have to be tomorrow if it can be done today? Constantly, right. Every time, right. Never ever taking an answer at face value. And that… well you might call it conflict seeking, but you don't seek out conflict to get into conflicts with people. I am trying to get results quicker and that's why I call it more of a 'boundary seeking'-style. […] So it is about this thing, yeah I call it 'boundary seeking', right, you know, constantly to challenge". (Consultant).*

Performing the challenge, confronting and creating discontinuities represent one of the ways consultants position themselves in client organisations and thus also how they contribute to

the differentiation between themselves and insiders. In the next section I explore further how the differentiation between consultants and insiders is achieved and with what consequences.

SOURCES AND CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENTIATION

The image of the consultant as a challenger from the outside is also emphasised in a wide range of literature on consulting (Schein 1988; Cockman et al. 1999; Carucci and Tetenbaum 2000; Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath 2001; Pellegrinelli 2002; Clegg et al. 2004). Carucci and Tetenbaum (2000) for instance talk about 'tough love' (ibid. 133), Schein (1988) talk about 'confrontive intervention' (ibid. 148) and Cockman et al. (1999) similarly present prescriptions for consultants on how to challenge using a confrontational intervention style. Based both on this literature and the statements by internal actors in the previous section, where the ability to challenge is linked with outsider status, one might be tempted to conclude that the position as outsider in and of itself creates opportunities for effectively challenging the existing and be an agent of change. And indeed this is part of the working consensus about the kind of social actors consultants are and the definition of situations that involve them. In that sense it is part of where the magic potential of their position is to be found.

However, in practice the outsider position of consultants can be one of both advantage and disadvantage. The outsider might be magical in any given situation, but the outsider position is also at the same time vulnerable and constantly at risk of being interpreted as illegitimate or irrelevant. In the context of both the hospital and in the manufacturing company 'coming from the outside' comes to mean different things under different circumstances and in different situations as we shall see. The very lack of knowledge about and involvement in daily practice that is the source of the differentiation that creates the outsiders challenging magic is also at the same time a source of vulnerability. The differentiation is in other words also potentially marginalising. This means that differentiation potentially creates both opportunities and limitations for consultants.

Everyday knowing as repertoire of differentiation
A key source of differentiation between insiders and outsiders is everyday working life and daily managerial and operational activities in the organisation. No matter how many shared

references by way of for instance similar education and experience in similar functions and industries, insiders and outsiders do not share the knowledge and experience of present membership of the particular client organisation and carrying out its particular activities from a particular position. At least initially, consultants and internal actors never share the *knowing* grounded in the activities, relations and experience of everyday life (Borofsky 1994). This everyday knowing or knowing in practice is a key source of differentiation between insiders and outsiders in any context and thus also a potential source of distance and marginalisation that risks rendering outsider challenges illegitimate and irrelevant. This is expressed for instance by an employee in the hospital context:

> *"I think it is really irritating when you come and look people over the shoulder and sit and comment on some things and stuff like that, it is irrelevant. When you haven't been out there yourself and seen how the daily run of things works. Things like that I think is not very clever. Really it is little comments, it is little sources of irritation that just make… it just doesn't become... it doesn't come off well". (Employee).*

This statement clearly illustrates the challenging when it is interpreted as irrelevant and irritating. The consultants have not got the experience of local everyday working life and circumstances. As a middle manager also in the hospital puts it:

> *"Sometimes our world is much more varied than it is in their eyes, because we know all the little things that happen [...] so sometimes you just have to take those things into account and make them [the consultants] aware of them [...] Because anything is possible on paper and on computer, of course it is, but when you are standing in the middle of it, then it is completely different things that show up all of a sudden that you maybe hadn't anticipated " (Middle manager).*

It is precisely this experience of carrying out everyday activities and all that they involve that differentiate consultants from insiders in important ways. An employee in the manufacturing company also expresses the outsider disadvantage when describing what he, as an insider, would have done differently in a particular workshop:

> *"[…]in the [x] workshop, you were there as well, there was maybe some of that I would have done differently with my knowledge of the company and my knowledge of the people that have to be part of this. Where I think we would maybe have gotten something different out of it if we had done it my way rather than their way, where many of the things they did I think were very… superficial and I also think that maybe it was a bit sort of insubstantial" (Employee).*

What is emphasised here is the outsider's lack of knowledge about the company and the people. Instead of interpreting this ignorance as an advantage making the consultants able to challenge the existing, as we saw previously, it is in the context of this particular situation interpreted as making what they deliver superficial and insubstantial. The same outsider characteristic - 'lack of insider knowledge' - can be used to interpret what consultants do as both valuable and worthless.

The risk of being undermined with reference to outsider status is especially pertinent in situations where consultants challenge internal actors, particularly managers, directly on their own practice. Here as expressed by a functional manager in the hospital:

> *"Rasmus [the consultant] had the suggestion that I should do [x] so that we could correct what was going on and what wasn't going on, so things could go a bit faster. So then I said but that is completely unrealistic because of [x], it just won't happen. Rasmus then says to me: 'Yes but you can choose to undertake or not undertake management'. And I was a bit offended by that, because I am trying to describe the management possibilities here in the hospital" (Functional manager).*

This manager feels that objections, related to what is realistic based on internal knowledge of how things work, is not being taken seriously by the consultant. Instead the consultant delivers a challenge by insinuating that this is not a question of whether it is really possible or not, but whether the manager assumes the responsibility of management and makes it happen. Consequently, the manager feels that the consultant does not understand the specifics of the situation and the circumstances that restrict what can be done. Therefore the challenge is also not legitimate. Or in other words, no eyes are opened but instead a manager is offended.

Similar reactions to the consultants' challenging are quite common in both contexts, because challenging 'the way things are' and 'this is how it is done' as an outsider in a way that is not interpreted negatively as lack of understanding and insider knowing is difficult. Two examples from concrete situations will illustrate this point.

A challenge saved

The first is from a workshop with a group of employees in the manufacturing company. One of the consultants introduces the message they want to get across:

"It has been a pleasure to have been around and across [the company] hearing about all this". [...] "The funny thing is that nobody trusts the system and people do things in all kinds of different ways. [...] From now on everybody has to work according to ONE way of doing it" (Field notes).

The consultants give examples of how things are done in different ways now and the problems it creates. One of the employees in the workshop objects and gives examples of situations that contradict the consultants' claims that the way it is being done now is problematic:

"It is not as simple as it is being said here, I have to be free to say." (Field notes).

The consultants are being charged with not recognising the complexity of everyday working as insiders experience it. In this particular situation the consultants do, however, manage to walk the fine line and re-establish the legitimacy of their challenge to how things are done. They do so by recognising the objection. They admit that the employee is right and show that they know and understand what the objection is about. They confirm that there has in fact been good reason for doing what the employees have been doing, but those reasons will now also be changed and the consultants reassure the employees that they will not again be experiencing the type of situations the employee described.

What saves their challenge in this situation is precisely the fact that they know enough about the particular aspect of everyday practice they are challenging. The employee accepts that they know and the workshop moves on to other issues. But it doesn't take long before other claims by the consultants are similarly called into question by internal actors. The outsider position is vulnerable and under constant risk of being charged with lack of knowing and understanding of the complexities of activities that insiders have first hand experience of.

The degree to which internal actors feel that consultants know and understand specific local content and daily practice influence the specific conditions for how and when consultants are able to interact across the boundary in ways that create opportunities for challenging and moving the internal actors in question. As Jenkins (1997) argues: "Boundaries, and the interactions across them, are intimately and indissolubly bound up with the content" (Jenkins 1997: 121-122). As one of the consultants working in the manufacturing company expresses it:

"I have to know just as much as the client, otherwise I'll be left behind [...] if I don't know as much as... or more because that is often what happens - I end up knowing more, but if

I don't then when I want to implement I run into him or her that know precisely that 10% more than I do, right. And then I'm out, because if I stand there and talk about this or that solution and someone sits there and says: 'well but have you thought about this or that or the other?' No. And then I'm out. So therefore I have to know preferably more, but at least as much. And that requires a thorough pre-analysis phase" (Consultant).

As this consultant experiences it he has to know the same as insiders or maybe even more. If he doesn't know like an insider he is out. He will be undermined and marginalised. The second example will illustrate how vulnerable consultants are to precisely this and why they feel the need to know, not just enough, but more than insiders.

A challenge undermined

This example is from a meeting with two top managers and a middle manager in the manufacturing company. It illustrates a situation where a consultant is positioned as magical outsider in a way that is almost impossible to perform and thus highlights the inherent vulnerability of the position. Prior to this meeting the consultant has been through a process of working together with the middle manager to come up with the changes that has to be implemented in his unit and their collaboration on the task has been extensively successful. The interview with the middle manager clearly indicates this. The consultant has managed to work with the manager in a way so he feels that these are his suggestions as much as they are the consultant's. The consultant has also convinced the manager to present what they have come up with to the top managers at this particular meeting.

After the middle manager has presented and there has been a discussion, one of the top manager's expresses that he is not too confident that it is enough what the consultant and the middle manager have worked out together. The consultant responds:

"Yes we talked yesterday and you asked if this is the full assessment from [the consulting firm]." (Field notes).

Apparently the consultant and this top manager talked on the phone the day before the meeting where this concern was expressed. In the meeting the consultant goes on saying that he does have some points and he has also spoken with one of the partners on the assignment and this is what they have to add. He starts listing their points:

"Can it really be true that we can't take home anything for a whole year on [x]. If we throw that much after it?" (Field notes).

They discuss it back and forth. The different options, what can be done to speed up the process etc. The middle manager says that it takes a long time, he has tried it before. He describes in great detail what happened before and why it is not that easy to just do it faster. The consultant tries to modify and suggests something else that could maybe be done instead. The middle manager responds that yes we can do that and it might reduce the time a bit. It sounds like a compromise has been agreed. The consultant goes on to his next point:

"Are we doing [x] to a Rolls Royce model? What is the right level?" (Field notes).

The other top manager reacts promptly:

"Now I have to laugh a little. I have been other places and nowhere do they do [x] to such a low level as we do here." (Field notes).

The consultant expresses his surprise. The top manager confirms again that that is definitely the case. The consultant nevertheless goes on to suggest that it might still be a good idea to take a period with a consistently lower level so that everybody gets the message loud and clear. The top manager responds:

"We have to be aware that it is not as black and white as that!" (Field notes).

This example illustrates how the consultants are being constructed as outsiders with the expectation that they deliver something that insiders cannot - something almost magical. The consultant has done all the right things and achieved both client involvement and ownership, in this case with a middle manager. Probably too much so and he is asked by top management if this is the full assessment of the consulting firm. They want the outsider magic uncontaminated by insider-ness so to speak.

So in the meeting the consultant is ready to perform the 'real' outsider role and has come up with some additional points. His first challenge is partly successful because it is concrete and directed mainly at level of the middle manager. Even if the middle manager wanted to dismiss or undermine it, he is not in any position at this meeting to do so. Instead a negotiation takes place and a sort of compromise is reached. The second challenge, however, is much more general, directed at management at a higher level and is clearly interpreted as both irrelevant and illegitimate. The top manager hangs the consultant out to dry by exposing what he perceives to be lack of understanding of what is going on 'here'.

In this situation the consultant thus commits what is interpreted by the top manager as the outsider crime of both displaying lack of knowing and being too 'black and white' in his challenge. However, the point is that in this particular situation the consultant cannot win. He has been pushed into an outsider position where he is cut off from the very thing that can potentially render his outsider challenge legitimate. Namely the knowledge and understanding he gains through working with insiders and the mutual development of shared ideas. Since this shared product is not enough, the consultants have to come up with something at the top of their heads so to speak - in isolation from insiders - and the result speaks for itself. The challenge the top manager wipes off the table is precisely too general and too standard. It smells like the kind of thing consultants could potentially be saying in many other situations and the top manager spots that immediately and has to laugh. He renders it irrelevant and illegitimate without even giving it a second thought.

It is interesting to note that this top manager is generally very happy with and likes this particular consultant both before and after this situation. What I am representing here is thus not an example of a client-consultant relationship gone bad, general lack of trust or the like. Dynamics of social relations shifts in different situations and the point is that even when there is a good personal relationship it can be very difficult in concrete situations to achieve the balancing act of performing as enough of an outsider and enough of an insider at the same time. In this situation the consultant is first questioned with reference to being too close to a particular insider perspective. The boundary is not sufficiently maintained, the differentiation not clear enough. When he tries to react, differentiate himself and perform as an outsider his challenge is undermined and rendered irrelevant and illegitimate because he displays lack of understanding in the eyes of this top manager.

Professional identity as powerful source of differentiation
In the hospital context, particularly amongst operational staff and management, the repertoire for differentiating the consultants is not just about lack of knowing and understanding of everyday life and activity in the organisation that is always a potential source of distance as we have seen. Boundary construction functions differently in different contexts and that has important consequences for what it means to be an outsider in any given context or situation.

The hospital context is different from the company context in ways that have consequences for how and when consultants are able to interact across the boundary in ways

that create opportunities for being part of creating change. Operational (clinical) management and staff construct a distinction between the consultants and themselves not first and foremost with reference to membership of the organisation as in the manufacturing company, but with reference to a perception of wider cultural 'otherness':

> *"You could also see from their way of thinking, that they were not used to working in the healthcare world" (Functional manager).*

> *"They are in a different world from me, right" (employee).*

The consultants do not belong to 'the healthcare world' as this statement indicates. They are not just coming from outside the organisation as in the context of the manufacturing company. They are from a completely different world, i.e. they are constructed as outsiders with reference to the much wider collective identification of the healthcare profession essentially differentiated from other professions and other worlds. Internal actors in this context talk about 'the healthcare world' in contrast to the private business world that the consultants and their methods and concepts represent. Coming from the outside is thus not just about organisational non-membership here. It is about wide-ranging differentiation based on perceptions of distant 'otherness'. As a middle manager puts it:

> *"So with regards to the Lean-people [the consultants] I would say that it is my clear impression that they have not understood what it is they went in to. I.e. they have not understood the processes [...]. So you should have someone that is more familiar with medical and hospital processes" (Middle manager).*

It is also not just about lack of understanding of daily practice and specific aspects of activities as it is sometimes the case in the manufacturing company. It is about not understanding 'medical and hospital processes' as distinguished from processes in other types of organisations, i.e. business and industrial organisations. A functional manager phrases it slightly more positive:

> *"It is often very refreshing, and I actually think the consultants have been very good at this, to have people from the outside who do not know anything about the healthcare sector, but sometimes you also spend a lot of time telling them what is really going on" (Functional manager).*

Despite finding it refreshing, this manager still feels that it might have been more productive to use consultants with a healthcare background:

"[...] because they would have the ability to argue healthcare professionally"
(Functional manager).

In the context of the change project in the hospital, the stories internal actors tell centre around the uniqueness of the healthcare-world and sometimes the scope of identification is as broad as the public sector. The consultants are categorised by the majority of internal actors, apart from top- and central hospital management, not just as non-members of the organisation, but almost as 'foreigners' coming from another world far removed from healthcare and the public sector. They belong to a distant world of private business and management and their expertise in Lean production serves as an added marker of the foreignness they represent as I will get back to in chapter 7 that explores the role of the ideas and expertise the consultants are associated with.

Their non-belonging and lack of knowledge about healthcare, that the top manager quoted earlier talks about as an advantage, is thus easily interpreted as a disadvantage amongst clinical management and staff. Or in other words, whether 'stupid questions' is a good or a bad thing is a matter of perspective. In the clinical parts of the organisation, non-belonging to 'our world' is used as a sign of problematic difference. And the consultants' perceived lack of understanding for this world, its practices, culture and content, forms a significant barrier for the consultants and puts their challenging at risk of being interpreted as illegitimate and irrelevant.

The perceived differences between the consultants and these internal actors are differences that make a difference, because they refer to cultural and professional content that constitute an important aspect of the identity of internal actors. In addition they refer to a strong societal identification with 'the healthcare-world' and differentiations between the public and private sector. This experience of problematic difference influence relations, interaction and the role the consultants come to play in the hospital context. Differentiation easily functions to marginalise the consultants rather than infusing them with magical properties. This means that their challenge and questioning is often rendered irrelevant or illegitimate and sometimes also used as a sign of lack of understanding rather than as a value adding activity.

A MEASURE OF NEARNESS

As we have seen so far in this chapter, the position of the consultant is ambiguous and the value of the outsider is not just about distance or 'the strength of weak ties' as Sturdy et al. (2006) summaries the common argument in existing literature where the outsider status of consultants is seen as an advantage. My study shows that when internal actors talk about the outsider status of consultants as positive it is linked with attributes that indicate similarity and closeness, not difference and distance. "Just like a colleague", "deeply involved", "part of the company", "understands the culture", "knows a lot of people", "knows the details" etc. are examples of expressions used to describe the particular consultants that are also described as being good at challenging and 'opening eyes' for instance. When consultants are constructed as magical outsiders by particular internal actors there is usually also an expression or sense of relative similarity and closeness as well a degree of shared understanding and frame of reference with the consultants.

This indicates that shared content, i.e. shared understandings and frames of reference, as well as an experience and sense of relative similarity and closeness conditions the potential of the outsider position. Shared understanding and knowing are important conditions for how and when consultants are able to interact across the boundary in ways that create opportunities for taking part in creating change in client organisations. Similarly to what Colson (1966/2006) found with regards to the alien diviners the Tonga of Zambia use, there are degrees of strangeness and the useful aliens are those that share the same values and beliefs as the client community. This relates precisely to the measure of nearness that combined with distance creates the positive stranger relation in Simmel's conceptualisation (1950).

Handley, Clark, Fincham and Sturdy et al. (2007) are critical of prevalent assumptions in the consulting literature and in client expectations, that consultants can create change in client organisations by challenging existing practices and meanings. They argue instead that without insider knowing and understanding external consultants cannot challenge clients effectively. Based on my study I would agree. Handley et al. (2007) thus also highlights the inherent risk of marginalisation consultants face, i.e. the negative differentiation that marginalises the outsider. However, Handley et al. (2007) see this necessary knowing and understanding as difficult if not impossible to achieve.

My argument instead is that it is possible for consultants to learn to understand *sufficiently* to be able to realise the opportunities of the outsider position. This is not about knowing the same as insiders, or more for that matter as the consultant quoted earlier put it. It is about being able to interact meaningfully with a range of different internal actors and engage in common activity as a kind of 'insider-outsider'. It is about being able to interact meaningfully enough to gain some of the above mentioned insider attributes that indicate similarity and nearness.

All external consultants will lack this from the outset, to a greater or lesser degree, and that means that they have to enter processes of learning to participate in the relevant daily activities of the organisation and learning to interact with different internal actors. As Borofsky (1994) argues:

> *"Instead of emphasizing that people need to share certain knowledge in order to effectively interact, I would suggest that people share certain knowledge because they have learned how to interact with one another. What people share is the experience of getting along with one another, of participating in meaningful activities together"* (Borofsky 1994: 338).

The shared understanding and knowing to a certain extent that can be generated through participation in common activity, i.e. from learning to interact with each other, is crucially important in client-consultant relations. The value of consulting depends upon it. In chapter 8 I will explore this further by conceptualising consulting as participation using the concept of peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) to suggest a theoretically ideal consulting situation. Here I will focus on showing how a certain measure of nearness is achieved by the consultants in both the hospital and the manufacturing company.

Challenging from a position characterised by nearness

To start with the hospital context, it is interesting in this regard, because it is here that the negative differentiation is strongest as we have seen. Nevertheless, the experience of the advantages of the outsider challenge is not restricted to top- and central management and that is important. Despite the barriers and the dominant storyline of problematic difference and ultimate distance, some internal actors amongst clinical management and staff also describe the outside challenge as positive and constructive in much the same way as top management in the hospital as well as the internal actors in the manufacturing company. As we saw it earlier, a functional manager in the hospital does actually think the consultants have been very

good at being that refreshing outside challenge. And the following middle manager also expresses the challenge as positive, at least in some situations:

"You see it in a different way all of a sudden – 'oh yeah, that is actually true'. Sometimes you can be there, having done some things, where they then come and say – well why like this and like that. Why don't you do it like this instead? Oh yeah, that is a lot easier. You can't avoid getting some of those, you just can't". (Middle manager).

This illustrates that even though the main focus in this context is on problematic difference, positive experiences of the outside challenge is still possible. As an employee explains it:

"I actually think it is quite good that it is kind of gone over with a fine toothcomb to see if there are things that can be done differently. The thing is, that when you are in it every single day then you don't necessarily think about it in this change perspective, right, you know, you just don't. So then you just think that well everything that is usual is probably quite good [...] so you maybe don't think about that something could function more appropriately, so there I actually think it is good that someone from the outside comes and looks at it with completely new eyes, right." (Employee).

As we see it here the magical outsider challenge is possible even in a context where the conditions for its realisation are generally poor. If we look at who the particular internal actors are that talk positively about the challenging we get an indication of how the magical outsider position is achieved in the context of clinical management and staff. These are actors that are generally positive towards the changes the consultants are there to implement and that work side by side with the consultants to make it possible. Consequently, a sense of closeness and shared agenda with the consultants is achieved over time. Intense, daily interaction and working closely together result in a certain amount of familiarity and common understanding that reduces the experienced distance and render the challenging legitimate and relevant at least in some situations.

This can be further illustrated in the context of the manufacturing company where there are more consultants involved making it possible to see patterns of how they are interpreted differently by different internal actors. The dominant and general storyline in the interviews from the manufacturing company focuses on the outsider challenge as positive and constructive and the conditions for realising the potential of the outsider position seems to be generally much more favourable here than in the hospital as I shall get back to. However when talking more specifically about individual consultants internal actors in the manufacturing company make clear distinctions between them as I will show in the following.

These distinctions are precisely related to the presence or absence of the kind of shared knowing and understanding generated in interation that Borofsky (1994) talks about.

The specific consultants that internal actors talk about as constructive challengers and sparring partners are described as having a good understanding and knowledge of the company, the people, the culture, the processes, the products, the industry etc. They are attributed with the ability to listen *and* understand, "sense of occasion" and ability to "identify themselves with" what is going on, broadly speaking.

These ways of talking about the consultants internal actors are most happy with, refer mainly to aspects of closeness and shared understandings that are achieved *in* the process through interaction. Let us think back to the top manager that opened this chapter with the idea that consultants can challenge because they are not present on an everyday basis like organisational members. When I ask him if he can be more specific as to what the consultants do when they do the challenging and sparring, he says:

> *"Ok, yes. You know this as well - it is about everything. It is about who should have what tasks, who is strongest in this and who is strongest in that and how they work together etc. etc. So both organisationally and in the strategic process, it is good sometimes to get that outside-and-in view on it. And that is in particular one of Henrik's incredible… that's where he is one of the best I have worked with when it comes to that" (Top manager).*

The interesting thing about this description is that it does not sound like anything an outsider could provide. Whoever is providing what this manager interprets as an 'outside-and-in view' is someone that has a level of knowing related to specific activities and specific individuals; their capabilities, personalities and how they work together. It is someone that is somehow quite involved in relations and everyday activities of this organisation. Someone that participates in management talk; discussing and reflecting on tasks, competences, personalities and roles of lower level managers and employees as well as coordinating, planning and making decisions about their activities. In actual fact it seems to be much more about presence and participation than the absence this manager started off talking about. The description is also a clear contrast to the kind of challenging delivered in the above situation that was so quickly dismissed by another top manager as too 'black and white'.

At a different level of the organisation and in relation to a different consultant a middle manager talks about exactly the same. I will quote him at length as he talks repeatedly about this:

"I actually used him for sparring, like a good colleague. I actually did, when it comes to that, we talked about persons directly. Typically a consultant would say – well, we have someone with that and that education, he can perform this and that job. And then doesn't think about that you... someone else is sitting there that maybe have been here 25 years and who could also do the job, but doesn't have the education.. It is that kind of insider-knowledge, right. That is the kind of stuff I know, right. But on the whole he knew that... almost the same as me. That's how I experienced it." (Middle manager).

Earlier in the interview he makes a direct comparison between Michael, as I will call the consultant here, and another consultant the middle manager had encountered on a few occasions. This is how he describes the other consultant:

"He is the prototype of a consultant that I could never work with. That's it. He is way too superficial. Way too... bla bla bla BLA... and then out. What? Hello! Right. That's just not me at all. And we would have never made the same results with him, if it was him I had worked with like I did with Michael. And that's how it is. [...] I don't think I have ever talked persons with any consultants before [...] but he [Michael] knew when I said Tobias, then he knew... do you mean Tobias Petersen? It was Tobias, and he knew that. He was like a good colleague; he knew who I was talking about. And he also had his opinion about it. Well, we pretty much agreed, we actually did, right. I talked a lot with him about [x] and how it could be done and he... well I actually wasn't 100% in agreement, but well... I also took it to heart what he said. [...] I actually saw him more like a colleague who just had to help with getting things changed in this organisation" (Middle manager).

This description is quite extraordinary in its depiction of what it is that makes the crucial difference between the two consultants. The manager makes it abundantly clear what he thinks of the consultant he interprets as 'superficial'. He comes in, says lots of things and is gone again. The interesting thing is that there is no talk of 'good chemistry' here in relation to Michael - a common idea that is often used as a way of explaining good relations between clients and consultants. Instead it is about very concrete matters of knowing people and details – 'insider-knowledge' as he calls it. The experience of superficiality that we also heard about earlier from an employee in relation to two other consultants is about experienced distance. In this case because of the nature of this consultant's role in the project that does not involve working and interacting closely with either the manager or the details of his people and tasks of the unit. He comes in for certain key meetings to facilitate and contribute with expertise and experience. As we see it here, it does not go down well, at least not with the middle manager. In fact it sounds like a very similar experience to that of an employee in hospital quoted earlier. Let me reiterate:

"When you haven't been out there yourself and seen how the daily run of things works. Things like that I think is not very clever. Really it is little comments, it is little sources of irritation that just make… it just doesn't become... it doesn't come off well". (Employee).

What makes Michael so fantastic in the experience of the middle manager is the fact that he knows the people the manager is talking about. The consultant knows who his employees are. They can talk about his people and other specific details related to his practice because the consultant has 'insider-knowledge'. *And* the consultant also has an opinion about it! This, not just knowing about things, but having an opinion about them, is important. That is where the challenging comes in. The manager starts off by saying that the consultant had an opinion, but they agreed anyway. Then he remembers a concrete issue and realises that – no wait a minute he didn't actually agree really, but in the end he took what the consultant said to heart. He let himself be challenged on his view of matters related to his own unit and became convinced. The consultant's outside challenge is both legitimate and relevant because the relation between them is characterised by closeness through a degree of shared understanding and knowing. The consultant has 'insider-knowledge' as this manager expresses it.

As already mentioned, there is across the interviews in the manufacturing context a pattern of relating the consultants' detailed understanding of internal matters to a positive outsider status. In the following statement by a functional manager this understanding is directly linked with the relevance and value of the challenging:

"They pose the right questions to some issues where we say, well things run this way and that way. 'Well why do they do that?' And then if we can provide a good explanation on…well it is because [x] 'Oh yeah ok, we can't change that then'... 'CAN we change that, they then say', right. No we can't. 'Well ok, well then we have to think in a different direction'. Where they understand it and I think that has been really good. I don't think I would have gotten so much out of it, if it had been Brian and Tim that had been on it. I don't think so" (Functional manager).

Prior to this statement the manager makes a distinction between Brian and Tim, and then the two other consultants on the assignment that he feels he has the best sparring with:

"Because they have been able to… we feel anyhow that they have had a better understanding of the things that are just not possible in production, in this, in that, in a sales process or just anything. That's what they have a better understanding of." (Functional manager).

This illustrates, similarly to the above, that when internal actors feel that consultants understand their context and the content sufficiently it renders the challenge legitimate and relevant.

The importance of how challenging is performed

Whether a challenge is interpreted as legitimate or illegitimate is, however, not always related to how much or how little the consultant actually understands local affairs. The way the challenging is done can itself contribute to the interpretation that the consultants do or do not understand. The way the functional manager talks about it here illustrates this circular dynamic when it is positive. The two consultants that are attributed with understanding, question the explanations given to them, but they also let themselves be convinced by internal actors and they accept that a different route has to be sought out. This is interpreted as a sign of understanding that again contributes to the experience of closeness that renders the challenge both legitimate and relevant. Successful challenging is in effect mutual negotiation rather than a one-way process of outsiders challenging insiders. As the statements by this functional manager illustrates the consultants are also willing to be moved and convinced. As such it is a two-way process where both parties move towards a new third point that is a result of their mutual negotiation in interaction.

When on the other hand consultants challenge too much and too insistently it easily becomes interpreted as a lack of understanding that contributes to the experience of distance. Here is how a middle manager in the hospital context expresses it:

> *"You get a bit… oh no, just relax a bit, right. Really, because sometimes they become… a BIT too… too much consultants, right*
> *I: what does it mean to be too much consultant?*
> *Well, a bit too much these question words all the time. When there is something… if you say something: 'yes but WHY, why can't that work, why can't you do this and why can't you do that'. And where you think… argh, no really, we just can't". (Middle manager).*

The questioning and challenging is clearly a marker of difference associated with consultants – all the whys that never seems to stop as the same manager puts it in another part of the interview:

> *"And then the fact that you have to constantly explain yourself and you get so tired of constantly both having to explain and defend yourself actually, right. Really, I feel I*

spend a lot of time… like yesterday when they kept talking about that I should [x] NO, I should not! It is really not my job to [x] and they have to accept that that is how it is" (Middle manager).

The consultants of course are not meant to accept 'that is how it is' and they don't. As we saw it earlier they see themselves and their function this way and they have been given the role of challengers by the internal actors in the hospital that hired them, i.e. top management. As indicated for instance in the many references to the value of the 'stupid questions' of someone from the outside. But as these quotes here illustrate it does not always produce the effects the top manager talks about, because the challenging is at risk of being interpreted as a lack of understanding that in turn contributes to an experience of distance. How different internal actors interpret the consultants, their outside status and their challenging is an important aspect of what it produces. As we see in these statements, the challenging and questioning is interpreted as "too much consultant" and it is hereby rendered illegitimate at the same time as it contributes to negative differentiation.

MORE SIMILAR THAN DIFFERENT

As I have argued, relative similarity and closeness are conditions for rendering the outsider challenge legitimate and relevant. Such nearness, to use Simmel's (1950) term, can facilitate interaction across the boundary at the same time as processes of boundary maintenance allows for it to persist and function as a source of opportunities for challenging and creating change. In the final section of the chapter I will turn to the issue of relations that are characterised more by similarly than by distance. This is important because boundaries and differentiation should not be taken for granted.

In the company context for instance it often appears as if the consultants internal actors talk about as 'coming from the outside' are actually not that different. An indication of a high degree of similarity between insiders and outsiders in this context is the fact that one of the consultants is a former '[company] man', as he is described, that worked in the company some years back before he started his consulting career. Another consultant changes status from outsider to insider in the process by becoming an employee and thus a member of the client organisation.

This illustrates that in some instances consultants and the internal actors they interact with could potentially exchange roles and perform the activities of the counterpart because of similar education, knowledge and experience related to the tasks at hand. In the hospital context we also find internal actors, especially in top and central hospital management, where the relation with the consultants is characterised more by similarity than difference as I shall return to.

This point seems to resonate to some degree with what has also been argued in part of the literature on consulting, as we saw in chapter 3, where the similarity between managers and management consultants is emphasised (Fincham 1999, 2003). However, as we have seen in this chapter, some managers see themselves as indeed very different from consultants. The degree of similarity between consultants and managers thus depends on which particular managers we are referring to. It depends on different situations as well as level, roles, tasks, approaches, education, experience and so on. Some managers are in other words less similar to consultants than others and specific local everyday knowing always has the potential to function as repertoire for differentiation as we have seen.

That aside, what I want to focus on here is the situation where there does in fact seem to be more nearness than distance and where consultants seem more like insiders in relation to particular members of the organisation. The hospital context provides a clear example of this which can also at the same time illustrate the role internal differentiations play for how consultants become positioned.

Organisations are not homogeneous or characterised by unity and similarity, as Jenkins (2004) argues. Organisations are also networks of specialised identifications in the form of hierarchical positions, functions, departments, jobs etc. Organisations are thus constituted both in the differentiation between members and non-members as well as in internal differentiations between different kinds of members (ibid. 146). These two simultaneously constituting distinctions are for instance being evoked in the statement by the top manager in the hospital that was also presented earlier. To recount:

> *"Here comes someone that is from the outside, that is impartial - he is not a doctor." (Top manager).*

There is the obvious distinction between organisational members and the consultants 'from the outside', but there is also an important internal distinction at play between top/central

management and clinical management and staff, in this case exemplified as "doctors". Although this top manager is himself a doctor by profession he is not a practising one and most importantly his position implies that he does not belong to the operational part of the organisation.

Clearly, he is not talking about the consultants questioning and challenging how he conducts his own practice of top management. He is talking about organisational 'others', i.e. practising doctors and clinical management and staff in general. *They* are the ones the consultants should question on what they usually do. As the top manager puts it in another part of the interview where he talks again about the advantages of consultants asking 'stupid questions':

> *"Because it has always been a free pass if you had a resistance that was contingent on all kinds of other things – to say it has something to do with the healthcare-professional approach: 'You don't know anything about that'. Or 'it is in the best interest of the patient'."* (Top manager).

Again an internal boundary is evoked, namely the distinction between top- and central management located in the main administrative building and on the other hand members whose daily practice is related to patients located in different units of the hospital according to specialisation.

This internal differentiation means that the consultants come to be almost included in the 'we' with top and central management. A functional manager also in central management expresses how she feels there is not much difference between her and the consultants:

> *"You could say that I speak a bit the same language as they [the consultants], I think. Actually it is more [an issue] in relation to healthcare-professionalism, but there I also think they have been quite good. [...] But that is really very much the same way we work ourselves here in administration, it is exactly the same role we are in all the time. And what makes it so interesting to work here is that I am constantly in collaboration with a completely different culture, right." (Functional manager).*

Here the internal boundary is directly and explicitly expressed. Clinical staff and management represent a "completely different culture". They, not the consultants, are in a sense 'the other'. This internal distinction is continuously evoked in the way top- and central management and the consultants talk about and work with the organisational 'others' that need to change. Facing the internal other, the consultants become more like insiders in relation to top and central managers because of their similarity and corresponding difference in relation to the

rest of the organisation. Here the markers of similarity and difference are not formal organisational membership, but professional content and practice and the related language and culture as it is expressed in the above statement. The construction of boundaries is thus situational (Barth 1969) and connected with both cultural content and power relations (Jenkins 1997).

The issue of power relations is explored in the next chapter and particularly in this context the close association between consultants and specific insiders can be just as potentially undermining for the outsider magic as lack of nearness. It might, however, not be interpreted as a problem by either internal actors or consultants. Instead it is often interpreted positively as an indication of very good and close collaboration and a real team effort as for instance in the hospital. And indeed you could argue that it is positive to some extent if the sole purpose of hiring consultants is to challenge and change *other* parts of the organisation. But the challenging and sparring consultants can provide also in relation to top management itself, as we saw it in the manufacturing context, risk losing its potential.

If we look at it from the perspective of the opportunities that can be created and the functions that can be performed from an outsider position, too little differentiation is just as problematic as too much differentiation so to speak. The position of the outsider has to be retained while insider attributes and knowledge has to be gained. Consultants need to interact *across* the boundary but the boundary itself has to be continuously maintained in interaction. Precisely because the boundary has the function of separating actors and organising their interaction in a way that potentially creates new opportunities.

Achieving differentiation in the face of similarity

When differentiation is achieved between consultants and internal actors in situations where there is a high degree of similarity, as described for instance in the manufacturing company, it is "a magnificent social achievement" (Goffman 1961/1991: 104), because of the relative uniformity of the actors. This social achievement is realised when a difference between the two constructed categories of social actors is continuously and constantly staged in interaction (ibid.) As Barth (1969) similarly argues, role constraints can allow for this maintenance of boundaries even when actors do not seem to be particularly dissimilar.

In client-consultant relations, such boundary maintenance is achieved not the least through the definition of particular activities as consulting activities. As for instance data

collection and analysis that is the theme of chapter 6, along with role constraints in interaction where particular performances are expected of the consultants; namely challenge as we have seen in the present chapter as well as negotiation, convincing argumentation, documentation, demonstration, new ideas and solutions 'from the outside' as we shall see in the following three chapters.

KNOW AS AN INSIDER - CHALLENGE AS AN OUTSIDER

The basic argument, as it has evolved in this chapter and as I will build on further in the following chapters, can be summarised in simple terms by saying that collaboration with consultants is most valuable when consultants are able to behave, relate and know as insiders, but without losing the perceived magic of the outsiders objectivity, fresh perspective and challenging edge. Clearly an ambiguous position and a fine balancing act not easy to achieve, but it is precisely in this insider-outsider position that consultants have the greatest opportunities for being part of creating learning and change in client organisations. Relative closeness and limited otherness condition the potential of the outsider position. Its magic is in the synthesis of both nearness and distance. Too much distance and otherness or 'foreignness' means that the outsider position becomes problematic rather than constructive and valuable. The boundary functions in other words to marginalise rather than to create opportunities. The boundary is nevertheless needed and has to be continuously maintained in interaction.

The social context(s) the consultants participate in when on assignment influence how they become positioned and with what consequences. The consultants and their roles are in a sense created by client actors in the image of the organisation with the use of categories, identities, stories, values and meanings that are important in this context. Whether consultants are seen to belong to 'us' or 'them' is a matter of context. And when consultants are constructed as outsiders, as they often are, it is similarly a matter of context whether that status has problematic or constructive consequences.

This is not to say that consultants themselves do not influence the role they come to play and how relations with different internal actors develop. Consultants too are active agents that position themselves in particular ways in the social contexts they enter; thereby taking part in creating the role they come to play. That position is created through the

dialectic of consultants positioning themselves and being positioned by different client actors simultaneously as I have emphasised.

However, the outsider position also has political aspects. That is what I turn to in the next chapter. The close association and 'we' between the consultants and top- and central management in the hospital context for instance, contribute to the processes of differentiation in relation to the rest of the organisation that thereby also becomes a matter of internal political struggles and power dynamics rather than just a matter of perceived 'culture' differences of outsiders. The creation of consultants as outsiders and with what consequences is in other words not just at matter of boundary drawing with reference to experienced and context-specific similarity and difference. The political situation in the organisation and internal power relations combined with the way the consultants become placed in this landscape is equally important for the role they come to play and the way relations with different client actors develop.

The Ability to Influence, Convince and Negotiate

"[The diviner] must therefore of necessity be an alien, a stranger. This ensures his neutrality, for as an unknown man from a distance he cannot have been involved in the local misfortunes that are the pretext of his summoning [...] his sole interest in this matter is his business contract with the village and the earning of his fee" (Colson 1966/2006: 224).

This chapter explores the political aspects of the way consultants become positioned as outsiders by internal actors in client organisations as shown in the previous chapter. The starting point is essentially the same as in each of the empirical chapters, namely to show how internal actors differentiate consultants in ways that attribute them with special abilities. The ability that is the point of departure in the present chapter is the political ability to influence and convince insiders and negotiate conflicting interests in order to bring about particular outcomes. Consultants are in other words endowed with a particular kind of outsider power in the client organisation. Power as in "a store of potential influence through which events can be affected" as Pfeffer (1981: 7) defines it in the context of organisations.

The analysis evolves by first showing how internal actors attribute consultants with the ability to influence, convince and negotiate by way of differentiation, i.e. outsiders are able to do things 'we' cannot do. They are seen as impartial and neutral in contrast to insiders. Secondly I show how that outsider position is also at the same time politically vulnerable and ambiguous. It is potentially a position of both power and powerlessness. Outsiders are under risk of being undermined, not just because they might be interpreted as not knowing or understanding as we saw in the previous chapter, but also for political reasons. Particularly in a change situation that is always political because it implies choice situations, uncertainty and

decisions over critical issues as well as different preferences and interests that have to be resolved, to use Pfeffer's (1981) definition of organisational politics. In change situations activities are initiated by different actors, including consultants, where power is exercised in the attempt to influence outcomes (ibid.). By exercising the potential store of influence consultants are endowed with as outsiders they become involved as political agents in client organisations.

   In the following section I start off by showing how the outsider is constructed by a range of internal actors as a particular source of power and influence. It relates to the perception that outsiders are able to influence and convince internal actors with different interests and positions across vertical and horizontal divides in the organisation precisely because they lack an internal position. Thus outsiders are constructed as free from that which all other social actors in a particular context are burdened with, namely a particular insider position.

CONSTRUCTING THE IMPARTIAL CONVINCER

> *"[…] it probably seems more credible that it is someone from the outside that comes and says this and that. Instead of it being one of us that… mostly sits internally, right. Where the employees can say… 'yeah yeah… but you are not out there in the everyday routine like we are, are you?'" (Functional manager).*

This first quote is a perfect illustration of how consultants are categorised as 'someone from the outside', here by a functional manager in the manufacturing company, and by way of that status attributed with a kind of credibility that 'one of us' does not have. It relates to the perception that outsiders are neutral and impartial; one aspect of the outsider magic. This kind of social actor positioned outside the boundary of the collectivity can be used to influence other insiders. In this example, seen from the perspective of a manager, they are useful for influencing employees.

   This is an aspect of the outsider magic that is closely related to internal differentiations in organisations. As we see it in the statement here, two different uses of the word 'out' is at play, namely 'outside' and 'out there'. The first serves to differentiate consultants from members of the collectivity of the work organisation as a whole. The second serves to differentiate members within the collectivity in terms of the kind of activities they perform.

Facing those that carry out the operational tasks, the manager feels that what he and his managerial kind says might be interpreted as lacking credibility. He is formally in a position of power as a manager, but that power base is also contested and can potentially be undermined in concrete situations of interaction with reference to different claims to legitimacy, here operational legitimacy. In this way a space and need for the outsider is constructed. Or in other words, the outsider position is endowed with a particular kind of power, as in the ability to bring about particular outcomes that insiders do not have.

The power attributed to outsiders has everything to do with the organisation and the power relations and politics of a collectivity where members are differently positioned. Particularly in the context of a change situation as argued above with Pfeffer (1981). The status of not belonging and thus being seen as a non-part in and detached from internal positions and interests creates a position endowed with the ability to influence, to overcome opposition and to convince different parties of the changes needed. As argued earlier with Barth (1969), it is difference being socially constructed and organised for practical purposes.

The above quote represents an example of how management sees consultants as useful for influencing the internal actors below them in the hierarchy. It is, however, important to emphasise that it works both ways as well as horizontally in the organisation, i.e. consultants are also perceived as useful for influencing internal actors above and at the same level as we shall see later in this section. Here first some more examples of the perceived advantages of using consultants for top-down influencing.

Using consultants to convince lower level management and employees

A top manager in the manufacturing company describes the function the consultants perform like this:

> *"[...] because of the complexity involved in changing the culture of the company, it has been necessary to have the consultants help with creating an understanding for the things that are being implemented." (Top manager).*

Implicit in this statement is the belief that the consultants are actually able to create an understanding in the organisation or in other words convince and influence. As the top manager sees it, the consultants can, on a broad scale, influence people in the organisation and thereby the culture. And it is not just top management that sees it this way. This perception is

very much the same at other levels of management as for instance expressed by the functional manager above.

An example also related to the change effort in the manufacturing company is the issue of who should present or take the lead in events like meetings and workshops – consultants or internal actors. The consultants have the approach and view that internal actors should be involved as much as possible and have the ownership of conclusions and the changes that are being implemented. They therefore want the internal actors that are involved in the work to present things themselves. To the consultants this functions as a marker of the involvement of internal actors that they attribute with such great importance. Internal actors on the other hand value the effects of the consultants presenting because as the functional manager above expressed it; it seems more credible. And by the same token it is more eatable as an employee describes it:

> *"You can also see it at that last [x] meeting, I think it was, where it is also [the consultants] that take part in chairing the meeting. If it had been me up there, then I would not in any way have said things the way [the consultants] did. We had the same message, but [the consultants] just managed to say it in a way that makes it eatable. And then people do the stuff. Instead of how you sometimes say: 'now, you have to, right, do as I say'." (Employee).*

In the following example it is a middle manager who wants the consultants to present. We are at a meeting where two consultants, a middle manager and an employee, are planning a workshop. After finishing discussing the content and resolving decisions that have to be presented in the workshop they move on to the more practical matters. The consultants try to get the internal actors to take the lead and ask them questions like: "what is it we need", "how are we going to run it?" The middle manager seems to take it for granted that the consultants will be running the workshop and wants the consultants to present their slides and wall posters that they have also presented on previous occasions. The employee asks the consultants:

> "There is going to be a lot of questions related to details and particulars, how do we handle that?" (Field notes).

The consultants come up with suggestions on how to get the argument across and get the employees to buy into it and they discuss it for a while. The middle manager says:

"I also want Niels [one of the consultants] to conclude and close. It should be you [the consultants], not us. " (Field notes).

As this middle manager describes it in the interview:

"[...] everybody is open towards them [the consultants] and happy to listen, we know that they listen... people listen to them, so that is also why I have asked them... well, I would like you to present that because... well yeah..." (Middle manager).

The arguments used for having the consultants do the presenting revolves around the perception that people will listen and be more likely to be convinced to support the changes by consultants than by fellow organisational members be they managers or other internal actors at the same level. When the middle manager says: 'it should be you, not us', that 'us' includes the employee at this planning meeting. As it is perceived, the outsiders can do what no insider can do, regardless of position.

Influencing across horizontal and vertical divides

The creation of the outsider as free from the burden of position has everything to do with internal differentiations. The perception is that what is said by any internal actor might be met with contestation, resistance or dismissal based on how it is said as described in the above statement by the employee and from what position. The consultants are seen as the perfect solution, because they are outsiders. They are defined as social actors that are not part of the equation. By definition they do not have any particular local position or interests other than what is best for achieving the change they have been hired to help implement.

The following statement by an employee from the manufacturing company further illustrates how this outsider power-base is perceived:

"Well, of course they have some... they have some power here, you know. They have permission to kick people and because they come from the outside the kick they can give different people [...] is worth so much more than the kick we would have been able to give ourselves [...]. When it is the consulting firm that comes and says:' hello, I am here to look at you and your employees', they [managers in different units] almost click their heels and bow because it is people coming from the outside, where you then... where they then and all of us maybe have the impression that... well they [the consultants] see it from above [...]. They also have the position in the sense that... they have the status in the organisation to be able to say: I come from the outside, I can see that you do this or that, try doing this or that instead" (Employee).

In this employee's interpretation the consultants have power in the organisation both because they act on behalf of top management, but also, and maybe more importantly so, because they are from the outside. At least it is the outsider advantage that is emphasised the most. As it is perceived, consultants see it all from above and not from any particular perspective. The employee here is expressing the idea that organisational members, differently positioned as they are, are caught in their mutual and interdependent relations that somehow seem to freeze the collectivity in place, making it difficult to exert influence over collective activities across the organisation, both horizontally and vertically in order to get things done.

It is tempting of course to question the assertion that outsiders have the kind of power suggested here and I can certainly think of situations in the manufacturing context where it does not seem like people are 'clicking their heels and bowing' as it is described. However that is precisely related to the ambiguity of the position as I shall get back to in arguing that the outsider position is both one of potential power and powerlessness at the same time. The task here is first to understand how and under what circumstances internal actors construct and position consultants as powerful outsiders and for what purposes.

Internal actors at all levels in both contexts feel it is an advantage to use consultants in different situations where others need to be convinced or influenced. It is based on the experience that insiders have difficulties influencing and convincing other insiders as for instance expressed by a top manager at the hospital:

> *"An important aspect of being the ones that come from the outside is that you are NOT part of the organisation. If I sent a surgeon over there with the same aim, trained to do the same, there would constantly be a prejudice concerning whether all the questions that were raised and the initiatives taken had something to do with an approach aimed at optimising self-interests. In other words, he is just out to better his own organisation, grab resources for the surgical section and so on. Here comes someone from the outside that is impartial". (Top manager).*

As we see it here, it is necessary to bring in someone from the outside to initiate change because no internal actor can do it. The top manager cannot use an insider to implement change in the organisation because whoever that insider is he or she will be interpreted as having some kind of own interest or agenda to further. As the top manager perceives it, the consultants are able to perform the role of change agents because they are outsiders to the internal political struggles over resources and influence, i.e. they are perceived as impartial and free from the burden of position in the political landscape of the collectivity.

Again one might want to question to what extent consultants are actually impartial understood as "not favouring one person or thing more than another" to use the definition given by the Oxford Dictionary (1995). Indeed in the hospital the consultants are what could be described as 'political allies' of top management in the struggles over changes as also mentioned in chapter 4. So in that sense the consultants do clearly favour particular things so to speak. Consultants will always come to occupy particular positions in the political landscape as allies of those that want and support the changes they are there to implement.

However, the point here is that even though consultants are probably in most situations on someone's side, and the internal actors in question know this, the consultants can still be constructed and staged as magical outsiders free from the burden of position as we shall also see it in a later example. This construction of an impartial political agent in the context of change situations tells us something about the collectivity and the dynamics of internal power relations that are often intensified in such change situations. To be identified as an outsider attributed with impartiality creates a position that is potentially influential.

In the hospital context for instance, it is not just the top manager who experiences the consultants as useful in this way. Different occupational groups as well as specialisations are clearly differentiated along particular lines that also sometimes imply a hierarchical relationship, as for instance that between nurses and doctors. The following are examples of how such internal differentiations creates the need for outsiders in relation to the change effort, as expressed by a nurse and two nurse managers at different levels:

"[…] and that's what I think [the project] managed to achieve, to collect all these… what can I say… different units and so on, and decisions were made. I am not sure that could have been done here in our own little forum if it wasn't for the fact that someone came from the outside. I have difficulty seeing that anybody else could have addressed it equally well, it helped I think. And I think that was a really good thing." (Employee)

"I think, it was so obvious […] and they [the doctors] couldn't see that they could do things more rationally, so in the end I thought it was nice that they were told to do it like this and like that, otherwise we would still have had [x], we wouldn't have changed it and it works so much better now" (Functional manager).

M: "[…] but it is also something with doctors, they tend to… well doctors are the ones that have the right to call the shots and they are the most important and only doctors can manage doctors, you know, nobody else can say anything. There you can say it is quite good with a project like this where someone comes and says: 'Well this is how it is going to be'. Someone who is NOT a doctor and NOT a nurse. Because I wouldn't have any power on my own. Really I wouldn't have been able to go through with anything, because they [the doctors] just wouldn't have it. […]
I: Do the consultants have the authority to…?

M: Yes in some ways they do, because they are external consultants in reality, because you won't get the doctors to swallow what I say, because I am just a nurse, so you just don't do that. And that can sometimes be quite irritating. [...] so you have to have someone from the outside who says: 'well then we just do it like this, now it is us who are saying it and that is how it is going to be'" (Middle manager).

The sentence 'you have to have someone from the outside who says: now it is us who are saying it' is quite illustrative of the way internal actors construct the agency of the outsiders and attribute it with a special significance and power. Here particularly in the face of internal professional differentiations where this nurse manager has very little power in relations and negotiations with for instance doctors. As she puts it in another part of the interview:

"If I had said, now we are going to do [x], then they would just have laughed at me" (Middle manager).

Consultants are in a sense seen as being able to 'elevate' agendas and convince other internal actors in relation to which you do not have the necessary power or influence.

The following extract from the manufacturing company, illustrates a similar thing, where one department feel that they have less power and are not taken seriously in relations with other departments:

"[...] and that's where I talked with Martin [the consultant] about... well he was really good because he took it up [with the other parties] and said that if you expect that from [x department], then [x] has to be taken care of. [...] And that is where he has been good at putting some things forward and say...well gather people if you like, because he actually sits in different groups, and says this is not going to work. [...] He has been good at getting through to them, because he...well I feel that we in [x department] are not always taken that seriously in the implementation. Where he has been good at getting through" (Middle manager).

The consultants are thus experienced as political negotiators that can resolve conflicting interests between different internal parties, because they are able to influence all these different parties. The consultants are not only positioned as such by internal actors, they actively take on this role. 'Elevating' agendas is part of what they focus on doing as the following description indicates:

"He is good, Frank [the consultant], at seizing the things he hears and saying: 'you know what, that is bloody good [...], but we have to lift it up a level'" (Functional manager).

Issues are, however, also sometimes taken down a level so to speak. The following examples illustrate that top management is also seen as the object of influence by actors at lower levels in the organisation and consultants can be the tool.

Using consultants to influence top management

> "You could say… that without [the consultants], it might be difficult to advance… I think it would have been difficult for me to move some things forward in the management above me [...] So you could say… that is were I think that the consultants are good at… taking part in influencing the people that have been here many years and that maybe… need to make a turn" (Functional manager).

As this functional management in the manufacturing company experiences it consultants are able to influence higher level insiders where lower level insiders cannot. This is similarly expressed by a middle manager also in the manufacturing company:

> M: Actually I have just come from over there [the main building, i.e. top management], but I don't come there much, you know, I'm not like… well I am more a technician I would say. And where you can say, that someone like Torben [consultant] he is more a… well he is a consultant and he is more a man who is used to walk those 'polished floors' or whatever you say, mix in those circles if you like [...] so clearly I also used him to… also the things I wanted to use upwards. You should bear that in mind. It is not just… I didn't just use him as an argument to say [to my employees] that he… the consultant says this and that for instance. I also used it to say [to the consultant], well can't you see that this and that… then I knew perfectly well that he would go over and then talk to them and say well listen to this and that. Because we are very alike, right. So I would say it is 50/50
> I: Yes, I was actually thinking upwards
> M: oh, ok, yes well I have seen that the whole time and well I am reasonably good at using it.
> I: Yes, I have noticed that
> M: precisely right, [...] there is no doubt that he listened to what I said and I could also hear that and feel it. And I could hear that there were things that came back again that I had actually said, right, when I spoke to them [management above] later. So great, then I just knew that the message had gone through, right. That was fine. So yes clearly, there I used him a lot." (Middle manager).

Leading up to this extract I ask the middle manager how he uses the consultants to back up his arguments in relation to the change effort in his department. As we see it here he assumes that I am referring to how he uses the consultants to get things across to the employees. Maybe because he perceives that to be the most obvious way to use consultants and indeed, as it appears, he does that too. In much the same way as the managers quoted earlier. However based on observing his interaction with the consultant it is precisely what he is talking about

here that I am curious to hear about, because in these situations of interaction I often have the feeling that he is 'planting messages' for his superiors or at least not just talking to the consultant. Without knowing for sure my experience is that he sees the consultant as a 'mouthpiece' in a sense and uses him to get his agenda through to top management.

His description confirms my experience, but it also gives us some hints to why he sees the consultant as useful in this way. The description is interesting, because it shows how the consultant is positioned both as a social actor with direct access to top management, i.e. walks the 'polished floors' as the middle manager puts it, and as a social actor who is at the same time 'very alike' himself, i.e. similar to and in some way equal to the middle manager. The consultant becomes in effect a magical 'hybrid' who can move in the organisation across the normal differentiations like no other social actors can.

Using consultants to convince team members - and yourself

The role as convincer and negotiator is also sometimes performed between actors at the same level, for instance between members of the top management team, as in the following example, where a top manager talks about his disagreement with the rest of the team on a particular issue. This issue is particularly hot at the time of the interview so the top manager is talking about it in some detail when the consultant (Hans) enters the story:

> *"And now it has come up again with Hans' recommendation. And I can't understand that since he has taken part in making [x], that he now says [x]… Well that's where I think it tips over right. And I would like to have a discussion [with him] about that. Precisely because I respect him so much and since I am in the minority I have to say: 'ok what do you do then in order to become convinced that it is a good idea'. And it might be that he could provide some good input so I say, well ok I am maybe still not 100% in agreement, but I can see that there are more advantages than disadvantages, so ok let's do it, right. We might do it anyway, but at least then I buy into it more, right." (Top manager)*

This top manager is in a sense describing the process of being convinced partly by himself partly by the rest of the top management team through a consultant. The example shows how involved this consultant is in internal matters, politics and decision-making, how fine a line he is walking as well as how influential the outsider position can potentially be. The situation is clearly very tricky for the consultant. This top manager is, between the lines, disappointed that the consultant is supporting a view he is not in agreement with and he can't quite understand it, but his respect for the consultant is nevertheless still intact. So much that he is ready to be convinced by him and more so by him than by his fellow top managers.

This is again part of the magic of the outsider. The top manager might have lost the internal battle already, but if he lets himself be convinced by the impartial outsider he does not lose face. If he is convinced by the consultant he has in a sense not really lost, but merely been enlightened by an impartial external party. The interesting thing is that the consultant is clearly on someone's side in this negotiation; he favours something in particular, but the top manager chooses to maintain the boundary and attribute the consultant with outsider impartiality for a purpose. In this way an apparently paradoxical role performance becomes possible. The consultant is performing the role as impartial political agent without being impartial.

Later in the interview I ask the top manager, referring to this situation, how he feels about consultants being that involved in decision-making processes. He does not answer my question, but instead talks about why it is an exceptional case with this particular consultant:

> *"But it is because you have developed a confidence around that person. It is particularly him you could say, right. Because he has… many of the inputs he has had you have been able to see - well yes the man is actually right and so that's why… and he can see some things you can't see yourself. And he is well up on the detail; we [the top management members] are not that much up on the detail." (Top manager).*

Three things sustain the consultant's magical outsider position, as the top manager describes it here, making it possible for him to let himself be convinced by the consultant. For one, the consultant has a history with the top manager - he has a track record so to speak. This top manager has personally experienced that the consultant has been right on other issues and so has the rest of the top management team. Secondly, the consultant is perceived as being able to see things insiders can't see thus referring to the aspect of the outsider magic explored in chapter 4. Thirdly, the consultant knows more about the details than the insiders in question. The paradox is obvious here - the consultant can see things you can't see yourself because he is an outsider, but at the same time he has more detailed insider knowledge than the insiders in question. Thus the ability to be an influential political negotiator who can successfully take part in resolving internal conflicts of interest is in practice a matter of achieving the ambiguous outsider-insider position where outside status is maintained at the same time as insider relations and knowing is gained as also argued in chapter 4.

However, the example with the top management negotiation also points to how potentially vulnerable and ambiguous the outsider position is and how difficult the magic of the position is to achieve and maintain politically. It seems like a truly fantastic balancing act

that the consultant avoids losing the attribute of impartiality or damaging his close relationship with the top manager for that matter.

It is partly a tribute to a very experienced consultant with well-developed social and political skills to navigate in these kinds of situations. But at the end of the day his position is sustained by the internal actors in question. The top manager needs him in the role as the impartial outsider he can be convinced by. In fact, the top management team as such needs the consultant in this role as impartial agent even though everyone knows that he supports a particular agenda. This is an interesting paradox as also mentioned above. The consultant is socially constructed and positioned this way for very practical purposes and the actors involved in this particular negotiation agree on the terms. It is what one might call 'working impartiality' that creates particular opportunities for action. It is part of the working consensus (Goffman 1959/1990) about what kind of social actors consultants are and their role in interaction. However, such 'working impartiality' is of course not always maintained as we shall see in the next section.

THE VULNERABILITY OF THE OUTSIDER POSITION

Situations become significantly more complex, than in the above example with the top management team, when they involve more and more differently positioned internal actors and greater diversity of interests. It is far from a given that all internal parties in political negotiations over change have an interest in and a need for sustaining the outsider magic as in the above example. Instead it might become too painfully obvious that the consultants are not impartial and that they do indeed have a particular agenda. Furthermore, it might be in the interest of particular actors to undermine the consultants with reference to the same outside status that in other situations is constructed as a potential source of power and influence.

A good example of this is a situation of negotiation in the hospital context where an internal actor uses some of the worst insider tricks in the book to undermine the consultant, i.e. things like 'you don't understand anything' and claims of agreements with top management that the consultant does not know about. Afterwards he finds out that they were false - there was no such insider agreement, but in the situation the internal actor won by drawing the insider card. As the consultant describes it: "It was a very unpleasant situation, it was a real

case of getting your pants pulled down". The example illustrates one aspect of how potentially vulnerable the outsider position is. Insiders can, if they feel it is in their interest, 'pull your pants down' at any time by stripping the outsider of legitimacy as a negotiation partner to be taken seriously with reference to lack of both insider understanding and insider power. In such situations the outsider position easily becomes one of powerlessness.

The 'power base' of the outsider is anything but stable or secure and it is never a given. Rather it has to be continuously mutually constructed in the dialectic between internal and external actors and it is contested, vulnerable and constantly at risk of being undermined and rendered illegitimate. In addition the very act of getting involved in political negotiations entails the risk of putting impartiality as well as relations with particular insiders at risk. In the following we shall see how consultants experience being in this role as political agents.

'It constantly challenges my consulting role'

Seen from the perspective of consultants, it is clearly challenging and puts high demands on their abilities to manoeuvre when they get involved in political negotiations in client organisations. Some would argue that by participating at all they let go of traditional consulting ideals of neutrality and detachment. In the context of the kind of assignments that is the focus of my research there is no choice. When consultants engage and interact with different internal actors across the organisation both vertically and horizontally and work to implement change they are inevitably pulled into political negotiations. This is so because part of the organisational relevance of and need for outsiders in the context of change is related to the way they can potentially be constructed as powerful agents who can perform the political role as impartial convincer, mediator and negotiator as we have seen.

Retaining 'working impartiality' while at the same time participating as a political agents in internal negotiations over change is extremely difficult. Consultants who enter an organisation to implement change are per definition not neutral, but proponents of particular agendas, directions, initiatives, decisions and they are there to help make them happen. This puts consultants in an ambiguous position. They are seen as valuable and effective participants in the political negotiations of change implementation because they are attributed with impartiality and neutrality as outsiders, but their participation risks undermining the very attributes that warrant and sustain the role. Thus, the maintenance of 'working impartiality' is

difficult and challenging for consultants. This is evident in the following statement by one of the consultants working in the manufacturing company.

There are also games internally in [the company] between the different management levels and functions [...]. So I work on those three different levels in reality. And so when I then sit with Klaus Nielsen, then I have to both make sure… well now how does his department get favourable conditions here and it is a fantastic advantage for Klaus that I can talk to the CEO and bring up some issues, but it is also something that constantly challenges my consulting role" (Consultant)

We see here how the consultant is perfectly aware of the value he represents for lower level managers when he elevate issues and bring them up with top management, but at the same time he knows that it implies risks - it challenges his consulting role as he puts it. Or in other words it puts his outsider status and 'working impartiality' at risk. Another consultant also in the manufacturing company tells me about an incident where one manager pulls him aside to tell him something another manager has done that seems to compromise what has been agreed in the context of the project. The consultant takes it seriously, but is also cautious as he describes it:

"So that is a bit like… there is a lot of politics [...] you know those two are not the best of friends, so when they pull me into a room then I have to pay extremely close attention to… well you know, we are also being used here in a political game, there is no doubt about that, and we have to be aware of that. So the way I deal with it, is that I sit there and ask into the situation a bit more and get him to… well ask more into it and some of it turns out to be a storm in a teacup and then there are some other things. And so of course then I go to Patrick [the other manager] and then I get a fuller story so… and some of it… you actually sit there sometimes and wonder what the truth is here, right" (Consultant)

'Working impartiality' can not be maintained in interaction by the consultant alone, no matter how skilled he or she is in manoeuvring and staying clear of the political pitfalls. The position also has to be continuously maintained by the internal actors involved in particular situations and negotiations. A consultant working in the hospital indirectly points to this when I ask him about a specific issue he has promised a middle manager to keep between them and how he sees his role as a consultant in such a situation in relation to top management:

"Well I have to make sure to preserve the integrity. I have several clients, so if I can't be trusted then I have lost everything. If Susan [the middle manager] finds out that she can't trust me, then I have lost everything. If Uffe [the top manager] does not respect that I have a confidential agreement with his employee, then he is not using his consultant the right way." (Consultant).

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It is clear from this statement that the consultant is perfectly aware that the top manager plays a crucial role in maintaining his integrity and position in relation to the middle manager. What the consultant does to manoeuvre in this particular situation is that he informs the top manager in general terms about the issue, on a kind of need-to-know basis, and lets him know that the specifics are confidential. The consultant trusts the top manager to respect it and as it appears in the meeting he does. One can only wonder what happens in situations where an issue is not relatively minor as in this case and instead acquires importance to the extent that top management might end up having a greater interest in getting the specific information than preserving the position of a consultant in relation to a middle manager. The example thus illustrates that consultants are to some extent at the mercy of internal actors because they can potentially jeopardise their position of 'working impartiality'. The extent depends on the relative power of different internal actors.

To do their job in change implementation consultants have to engage extensively with people at different levels and form confidential relations. That is only possible if their position is preserved in relation to all of them. In a sense consultants have to be both on everybody's side and on nobody's side at the same time. Strictly speaking that is impossible, but in practice it is nevertheless achieved in certain situations through mutual construction and continuous maintenance of 'working impartiality' by both consultants and internal actors. It is, however, always a delicate and difficult balancing act for consultants. A situation of negotiation from the hospital can serve as illustration.

Negotiating compromises

The consultants are working on implementing a new procedure as part of the change process that involves a number of units. One unit has sent a letter to top management with a list of objections to why the new procedure is problematic seen from their perspective. This letter has been passed on to the consultants. One of the consultants (Steffen) has a talk with a middle manager from the unit (Flemming) to see if they can resolve the issues.

Steffen starts off by simply asking Flemming to tell him some more about the problems he has with the new procedure. Flemming explains that he is afraid that if it is tried out it will not be possible to change it again if it turns out not to work very well, as he suspects. Steffen listens and assures him that there is nothing that can't be changed again:

Steffen: "That's how it is. If things don't work, then you change them again." (Field notes).

Flemming talks about his objections and Steffen listens and then counters each one by assuring Flemming that he takes his concerns seriously and that they will of course take all of them into account. On each one he suggests a solution that implies a degree of special treatment of the unit in order to accommodate their concerns. They talk back and forth about the suggested solutions and in the end Steffen gets Flemming to go along with making the attempt to implement the procedure.

The result of this negotiation is a set of compromises. I ask Steffen afterwards if he has the full overview of the consequences of what he has just promised this unit. Not everything he says, even though he of course knew the objections beforehand from the letter and had prepared how to counter and accommodate them. Steffen explains to me, that the main thing here is to get the unit to go along so the next step in the implementation can move forward.

This is, however, not necessarily how other internal actors in other units see it. For instance the following two middle managers, Marianne and Karsten, in another unit that are heavily engaged and invested in making the new procedure happen, and work closely with the consultants to do so. They are not too happy with the compromises made as the following situation illustrates.

At the beginning of a meeting with Steffen and another consultant the 'deal' with Flemming ends up as the main topic of discussion. Marianne is clearly not pleased with what Steffen has promised Flemming:

> Marianne: "Then he still ends up having the control." (Field notes).

And she doesn't buy the ideas the consultants are proposing to limit the effects of the compromises seen from her perspective. The other middle manager, Karsten, agrees with her and thinks the plan the consultants are proposing, that includes the compromise, is unrealistic. Steffen keeps saying that "nothing is impossible". Marianne continues airing her irritation with Flemming. In her opinion he should just be forced to comply. Steffen tries to defend Flemming's argument. Marianne dismisses it and implies that Flemming is not telling the consultants the whole story. Steffen replies:

> "Well that would be the hidden agenda then and we can't act on that. I am a consultant; I have to accept his professional argument." (Field notes).

Karsten does not agree with Marianne that Flemming is being in any sense manipulative in not telling it like it is. The consultants also persist in arguing that some of what Flemming is saying makes good sense regardless of whether there is a hidden agenda or not. The discussion continues for a while. One of the consultants comes up with a new idea for a solution that might satisfy both Flemming and Marianne and Karsten. Steffen is enthusiastic and says:

"See now we are beginning to think creatively." (Field notes).

Marianne and Karsten are less enthusiastic and do not seem to believe too much in that idea either even though they do not directly oppose it. The consultants convinces them that it is at least worth considering as a possible way forward and will present it to Flemming and see what he says. The meeting moves on to other agendas.

This situation is a good illustration of how consultants have to manoeuvre between conflicting interests and internal power struggles. The consultants are equally dependent on having stakeholders from all units on board in the implementation and what has been agreed with Flemming is not Marianne and Karsten's cup of tea. Thus the consultants now have to negotiate with Marianne and Karsten to get them to accept the compromises and/or find yet another compromise that both parties can live with.

In addition, Marianne and Karsten do not only seem to dislike the proposed compromises because of their content and the problems it will cause them, but also because they do not like the idea of giving in to Flemming and letting him 'get his way' as Marianne appears to perceive it. It is interesting, however, that it is mainly Marianne who expresses her irritation with this aspect of the compromise. Again it is internal differentiations between doctors and nurses at the hospital that play a role beyond the differentiation between different units and specialisations. Marianne is a nurse whereas Karsten and Flemming are doctors and although their respective specialisations and practices are worlds apart, Karsten still seems to feel a sense of loyalty and identification with Flemming. Marianne is the one who is most concerned that the compromise means that Flemming 'ends up having the control'.

This illustrates the complexity of internal relations and therefore also the extensive challenge consultants face when participating in these relations and at the same time maintaining 'working impartiality'. The situation is tricky especially in relation to Marianne

who is a very important 'ambassador' for the consultants because she wholeheartedly supports the change and pushes and markets it where she can.

The way the consultants position themselves here is interesting. Firstly, Steffen does not deny that there might be a hidden agenda, thus he signals that he is not siding with Flemming or defending him. Steffen refers to his status as consultant and positions himself accordingly as the neutral and impartial outsider who takes the *professional*, i.e. justified, objections of insiders seriously. Secondly, the consultants act as negotiators and mediators in the search for a new compromise that can make the first compromise eatable for all parties. As it appears in this situation the very suggestion of a compromise to the compromise does seem to soften Marianne and Karsten's objections although they are not entirely convinced. They do, however, let the issue go and they move on to other things.

The way the consultants view it, the compromises are relatively minor details in the big picture and their main interest is to move the implementation forward and to do that they need key actors to go along with it. In the interview with Steffen I bring up this particular negotiation and ask him whether he is potentially putting his relationship with Marianne at risk in this situation:

> *"C: Yes, I could potentially be doing that. And so in the situation it was a case of weighing up and counting on that I would be able to talk Marianne into it afterwards. Marianne was a less harsh opponent than Flemming, right.*
> *I: So you weigh up your…*
> *C: You weigh up what you do, in the negotiation" (Consultant).*

Again we see how a consultant is indirectly dependent on an internal actor to participate in maintaining his balancing act. Being able to talk Marianne into it is not just a matter of his powers of persuasion in isolation. He has a close working relationship with Marianne, he knows she wants the change and he therefore trusts that she will not let a disagreement stand in the way of the implementation. He trusts that she will maintain the terms of his position, because he is working towards creating the change they both believe is the right thing and thus is still in that sense on her side even though his actions might seem to indicate otherwise in this situation.

Flemming on the other hand is the harsher opponent. He is influential in his unit and has been opposing the change from day one and the consultant has absolutely no reason to believe that he would have any interest in letting details pass or give the consultants the benefit of the

doubt and maintain their position. The consultants deal with this by giving him what he wants on the issues he has listed, thereby attempting to strip him of legitimate resistance.

In other situations this is not a feasible route and the consultants find themselves in negotiations where they have to convince internal actors to go along with a particular decision without compromises as we saw it earlier for instance in the negotiation between different members of a top management team and in the example where the consultant had his 'pants pulled down'. Negotiating and convincing from a position of the impartial outsider is a potential powerful source of influence, but the position is also at the same time vulnerable.

Allies of top management

Another risk is that consultants become too closely associated with and aligned with top management; in agenda, ideas, approach and way of interpreting the rest of the organisation. Especially since it is often, as in the context of the assignments I followed, top management who initiates change and hires the consultants to help implement it. The consultants risk becoming in effect political insiders who function as the extension of top management power or mere tools of top management. Morris (2000) similarly criticises such use of consultants as hired guns of top management, but seem to do so mostly for moral reasons. The real issue is that it potentially undermines the most effective source of power and influence outsiders have and thus also why they are valuable in the context of change in the first place. As top management in the manufacturing company sees it:

> *"They [the consultants] simply have to work with the people themselves, independently of what I or anybody else thinks. [...] What matters is the framework that cannot be discussed; what the overall targets are." (Top manager).*

This top manager is clearly aware of the importance of maintaining the 'working impartiality' of consultants. They cannot be his or anybody else's soldiers, they have to work independently but of course within the parameters of what has been laid out by top management. The value of consultants in change implementation is closely related to their attributed ability to address alignment between conflicting interests across the organisation. This is all about the importance of the maintenance of the boundary between insiders and outsiders. It is thus always problematic when consultants become too much 'we' with insiders - whoever they are and however they are positioned internally.

Nevertheless, consultants place extensive importance on close relations with and backing from top management because as they see it, the power of powerful insiders, particularly formal institutionalised power, is necessary when it comes to implementing change, as we shall see in the next section. This relates to an experience of being much less powerful in concrete situations than in the perceptions of internal actors.

THIS IS HOW IT IS GOING TO BE… OR NOT?

Morris' (2000) in his examination of consultant change implementation takes a critical standpoint arguing that, although consulting firms make claims of execution, limits to their authority in client organisations significantly restrict consultants' ability to execute (Morris 2000:134-135). Morris argues, that change is a political process that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for outsiders to influence (ibid. 136), i.e. consultants do not have the power and influence necessary to implement change (2000: 125).

In saying that, Morris assumes that the only sources of power and influence to take account of are those of insiders in positions of authority. What he does not consider of course is the potential source of power that outsiders might be attributed with, as we have seen, by way of being constructed as impartial agents in political negotiations over change. Morris' argument is nevertheless still worth consideration since it points to another aspect of the inherent vulnerability and potential powerlessness of the outsider position that especially the consultants themselves emphasise as we shall see in the following.

'I don't have any power to induce change'
As consultants see it effective exercise of power is crucial in change implementation and the perception is that certain insiders have such authority. Authority defined as institutionalised exercise of power that is effective because it is accepted and legitimate in a specific social context to use Pfeffer's definition (1981: 4-5). In that sense consultants seek a source of power that is less contested and insecure than the power outsiders might or might not be endowed with in any specific situation.

Literature on change management in general also places great importance on change efforts being anchored in top management. Kotter (1995) similarly comments on this taken

for granted perception: "It is often said that major change is impossible unless the head of the organisation is an active supporter" (1995: 62). Top management are seen as the agents that have the power to make change happen. Outsiders are by definition not part of either the formal or informal power structure of the organisation and as such they are, in principle, in a position of no authority.

Therefore it is, amongst consultants, common knowledge that their jobs as external change agents are impossible without close collaboration with and strong mandate and backing from top management. As Salaman (2002) argues, consultants "define the executive as the group with the capacity to, and responsibility for, redesigning the organisation" (2002: 253). The following are examples of how two consultants, one from each consulting firm, express it:

> *"As a consultant it is always the challenge that you have to bring about lots of changes without having any influence. And that's why [...] you have to have a power sponsor, i.e. the relation to the decision-maker [...] because otherwise you don't have that person to stand behind it, to show the rest of the organisation that we want this [...] Otherwise it just becomes the sort of thing where you sit in the organisation with 'it probably goes away anyway when those consultants are gone', right. [...] As an external you cannot induce any changes, I don't have any power to do that if there is no willingness from managing directors and managers of the change areas that have been chosen, to be an integrated and participating part of the project." (Consultant).*

> *"You can never secure the result as a consultant. You can facilitate that it comes about, but at the end of the day it is the management that runs the place, so we can't do anything about that. But we can help that management with realising the results. [...] Because you can't go in and manage it, or I could do that [...] But that's not how it is supposed to be, because I leave again at some point" (Consultant).*

It is interesting to note the contrast to how internal actors describe the political position of consultants. Seen from the perspective of consultants themselves they have no influence - no power. As consultants perceive it they have to 'work through the management system' when doing implementation because they are outsiders; they are 'externals', as this consultant puts it, and as such they are in no position of authority and their presence is temporary.

Consultants also try to make internal actors aware of this in concrete situations when they are asked to perform activities they think are more effectively performed by internal management. Activities which internal actors want the consultants to perform precisely because they are not management or any other kind of insider. Here is how a consultant working in the manufacturing company reacts in one such situation in a meeting:

"It is difficult for us to be policemen, because we don't pay people's salaries. It never works that well. It has to be the management." (Field notes).

The consultant comments like this in the interview when I ask him about these kinds of situations:

"It is the sort thing where they expect… they actually expect that you also perform some of their role. For instance in an implementation where sometimes the manager has to step forward and explain that this is what we are going to do - 'I expect you to back it up' and so on and so on, i.e. sell the project so to speak. And there are some managers that have very much misunderstood this and withdraw themselves instead and say yes well that is what I have bought you to do. Well then I just have to say… but I can't do that. You know, it is not me who pays their wages. Of course I can get up there and talk about it and I can make a really nice power point presentation and I can also practice communicating it properly and so on. I might be much better at that than you are, but it has a completely different effect when it comes out of your mouth. […] You could say that there are some managers who have a misunderstood relationship with consultants and say well I have bought my way out of that, but that just doesn't have any effect at all" (Consultant).

Consultants place quite a lot of importance on the fact that they have no power to hire and fire and they do not pay anyone's salaries. From this follows that consultants have to have a strong internal mandate and continuous collaboration with management as well as active participation and support from both top management and other relevant managers who can provide them with what I would call 'authority-by-extension'.

As it appears from this statement there are also more symbolic aspects of why it is important with management backing. The point here is the aspect that has to do with the effective exercise of power. As consultants perceive it, such formal hierarchical authority is part of what it takes to implement change, especially when they face resistance. Their lack of this kind of insider authority is their constant companion on change implementation assignments. Therefore they appeal to top management throughout assignments to enforce their authority.

Appealing to top management
An example of this is for instance the following steering group meeting in the hospital where the problems with getting particular units to comply take up a significant part of the discussion. The consultants ask what their mandate is in relation to this and they express that it is at the margins of the scope and there is a limit to what they can do. One of the consultants says:

"I see a giant risk here in relation to reaching the targets." (Field notes).

He underlines that it is important that top management go in and dictate. He wants the top manager to clearly signal that:

"Now it is just going to be like this no matter what you [the opponents] think of it. […] You shouldn't be unhappy about getting that kind of intervention." (Field notes).

They talk some more about the different stakeholders in the units that are resisting. The consultants and internal actors tell stories about them to each other. Stories of the things that go on and how this or that unit is doing everything they can to oppose and delay the implementation. There is a lot of laughing. They talk about who has the power over whom in the system etc. etc. The top manager concludes that as far as he is concerned the implementation is now going ahead:

"They [the opposing units] have to dress the ranks." (Field notes).

The meeting moves on to other issues.

In the manufacturing company there does not seem to be a similar degree of overt resistance as in the hospital and resistance is therefore not talked about this much or that directly. The consultants working in the manufacturing company nevertheless still face problems with making things happen and getting people to do this or that. Here is an example from one of my conversations in the field with a consultant (Erik).

Erik has just arrived. He finds a free desk and starts up his laptop and I find a chair and place myself at the corner of the desk with a book. As he is starting up the computer he tells me that there have been some problems with getting one of the new procedures through. It was supposed to be ready by now and he has just found out this morning that one department has written it up, but then just implemented it in the IT system without passing it on to get approved by another department. Erik shakes his head. Unbelievable. When Erik talked to one of the top managers about it he said: "but you must know us by now…". Erik made sure that it got sent on to the relevant department this morning, but then there was disagreement and comments so now he has to get that one "dribbled home" as he puts it.

Other times people are just passive. One of the consultants talks about this one day when he gives me a lift to the station after some hours at the manufacturing company where he has been working with two internal actors. He feels it is difficult with them. He can't figure

them out, they don't really resist, but they are also not active. They are passive and difficult to engage and get on board. Another consultant describes the problems he has experienced in the manufacturing company like this:

> *"There has been very, very, very little drive in it and a great deal of pure political games and trying to convince them that this is what it takes. Where now they [top management] are to a greater extent saying that this is how it is going to be and if you are not on the train, then you are off the train". (Consultant)*

Thus the consultants working in the manufacturing company also continuously bring up the need for management backing and authority at steering group and other meetings with top management. Here are two examples.

The first example is in a steering group meeting where the consultant is going through the agenda for the meeting. He emphasises:

> " […] the implementation barriers where it is necessary that the group here is backing up".

The consultant recaps what has been happening in the process so far and where they are now:

> "Now we are at the point where we need to get some decisions."

The second example is a meeting with top management where the consultants are reporting on how far they are with the different aspects of the project. They emphasise that they are not where they want to be with a particular department and mention the problems they have with getting them onboard. Later on one of the consultants brings up another specific problem with things that are not getting done and emphasises the need for management follow-up. The consultant says that he can keep giving people reminders, but it is no good in the long run that it is him doing the follow-up.

Authority-by-extension seen from an internal perspective

From the perspective of internal actors a certain degree of authority-by-extension also seems to be important although it is not talked about much. It is probably taken for granted as part of the power they are endowed with and it has a symbolic effect of signalling that the consultants are not just any random outsider but someone to be taken seriously. This is for instance expressed by the employee from the manufacturing company that I quoted earlier on the

power of consultants and people 'clicking their heels and bowing' at the sight of them. When I ask him to elaborate some more on what this power is all about he says:

"Firstly, they have been given some authority by the board and the top management and the steering group [of the project] that says - well yes you can march into that office and tell a manager that now you have to do that because that is what I have decided. That is what they have the power to do" (Employee).

As it appears here the authority he says the consultants have been given seems to be more about permission to march into an office and tell a manager what to do. It does not say anything about whether this is exercise of power in the sense that the manager in that office then responds as if it was top management that marched in. Another employee in the manufacturing company makes the point that what consultants do is precisely not about exercising top management authority. This is what he says towards the end of the interview when I ask him if he has anything else he thinks is important:

"E: No I don't know… well you could say that I actually feel a bit that the company's management is disclaiming the problem by hiring a consultant. And when the consultant then doesn't solve the problem, then it is problematic. […]
I: So do you mean that they are given management responsibilities in a sense? That they then don't live up to as you see it?
E: Yes that is the issue, because they obviously don't go in and say - well, now this is how it is going to be." (Employee).

Consultants are given responsibility or at least co-responsibility for making change happen, execution is what they are expected to deliver, but at the same time they do not dictate and force things through the way top management could or would potentially do. Thus in his view, the necessary exercise of power is lacking because it is consultants doing the implementing, not top management who have the authority to say 'this is how it is going to be'. This kind of positioning is not open to consultants and full top management support and backing probably does little to change that. Furthermore, it might also be relevant to question to what extent top management authority is as effective as suggested both by this employee and by the consultants above.

The limitations of authority-by-extension

The effectiveness of authoritative dictates in change situations is often taken for granted, regardless of whether we are talking about dictates directly from those in authority within the

organisation, as for instance top management, or indirectly from consultants through authority-by-extension. As Pfeffer (1981) argues the legitimatisation of power is always problematic and the power of top management is never absolute however institutionalised. In addition hierarchical power as such is not the only dimension of power in organisations (ibid. 3).

This is particularly obvious in the hospital context where there is a historic tradition of autonomy in the relation between the management of operational units and top- central management as well as a particular power distribution between units. The consultants can thus not rely on that changes that are actively supported and sanctioned by top management are necessarily easily executed as the following example from a day in the project office illustrates.

One of the consultants, Mogens, and the client project manager, Katrine, are in the office working. An email has arrived from the management of unit K with reference to a meeting Mogens and Katrine had with one of their middle managers the previous day about certain practical aspects of the reorganisation. Unit management of K are not happy, because as far as they are concerned they have not given their consent to the reorganisation, but as the email reads:

> "[…] only declared willingness to help with the implementation as soon as a new procedure is ready." (Field notes).

Mogens is irritated. As he sees it, they are backtracking. He is still convinced that a previous email should be interpreted as consent. The only difference in the wording of the second email is the 'as soon as', but as Mogens says - "the new procedure *is* ready and decided", at least in his view. He is frustrated and tired of all these delays:

> "Every time we have to get into these negotiations with a unit we lose a week." (Field notes).

The clock is ticking and project time is running out. There is less and less time left for the consultants in which to secure the results the commissioning client, i.e. top management, are expecting.

> Mogens: "It is extremely irritating that these units are not put in their place from above. We need a clear order that this is how it is now. I'm tired of negotiating and negotiating all the time." (Field notes).

Katrine is not surprised - "it is a heavy system to dance with" as she says. Mogens goes on airing his frustrations with this lack of space for execution on a number of different other issues. He feels like just 'knocking' that one and that one into place. "Get in line - and fast". "Just do as you are told". Katrine brings up different reservations and obstacles to the things they want to happen. Mogens doesn't care at the moment: "No more excuses".

Katrine drafts up the answer to unit K management suggesting a meeting to discuss the matter. When Stephen reads it he takes over and gives it a different spin. He wants to signal "a hard-line approach" now as he puts it. He wants it to be clear that the proposed meeting should not be a negotiation - only information about the reorganisation that as far as he is concerned has already been decided by top management. He does not want to negotiate any more:

> "This is just how it is; this is how we do it from now on. We just can't have any more politics now." (Field notes).

This situation illustrates how frustrating it can sometimes be for consultants to have very limited power when it comes to getting different actors in the organisation to do what they need them to do in order to deliver what they have sold the client. The consultant here is faced with the realities of both his own lack of power as well as the limited scope of top management authority. The management of an operational unit is exercising what they believe is their right to give or withhold consent regardless of the fact that top management has made a decision. The consultant knows his only option is negotiation, but he has had it up to here with negotiating with unit after unit. He is asserting himself and dealing with his powerlessness by in a sense verbally imagining the exercise of powers he knows he does not have, i.e. the power to say 'get in line', 'do as you are told' and 'this is how it is'. The power to define that the meeting with unit management is strictly to inform them that the reorganisation is ready and decided by top management as well as what it entails.

In these statements of frustration aimed at non-present insiders the consultant is recreating himself "as a subject of the situation, verbally controlling rather than merely suffering it" (Jackson 2002: 17). As Jackson (2002) argues, this is a form of ritualistic action common when direct action is not an option. It is prompted by some kind of crisis where autonomy is undermined and action made impossible which is precisely what happens in this situation. The action that it is impossible for the consultant to perform in this situation is

effective dictating and authority-by-extension does not help him. Instead the consultants have to rely on negotiation as the following discussion between two consultants also in the context of the hospital illustrates.

The consultants, Bjarne and Ole, are discussing the different problems with the implementation. Ole seems frustrated and is raising the objections and obstacles they are faced with. Bjarne holds on to the usual 'solution-mode':

> Bjarne: "Nothing is impossible. This is change management in practice; we have the conditions we have. And that is what we work with". […]. We just have to take the plunge. I'm sure that if we do that it will work itself out".
> Ole: "Easier said than done".
> Bjarne: "My approach is that we just have to dive in. Force them into it - turn it around: now it is the way it is and then we just have to find a way to make it work".

Ole is still sceptical, but as Bjarne continues his argumentation he is coming around.

> Bjarne: "It is some of the last cards we have left to play, so think about it". […]. All we have is our ability to negotiate".
> Ole: "well yes then we will just have to see how far that can take us then…".

Consultants have, as we saw earlier, a strong focus on the need for management to enforce the changes that are being implemented. The dilemma of course is that the management authority they rely on is not necessarily, or not always, very effective. Consultants, however, maintain the perception that management authority is, or at least ought to be, effective when it comes to change implementation. When it is not so in concrete situations, it is because the management system in that particular case is not good enough. Then all they are left with is their ability to negotiate as one of the consultants puts it in the above discussion. And indeed the consultants are doing a lot of negotiating in the hospital. As one of the consultants expresses it:

> *"[The hospital] is a special case, because we had those negotiations, and you don't necessarily always have that.. If you think about a project where you have… in reality just good management, then you do your employee involvement in the sense that you collect good ideas and then you get management to prioritise. [...] Those are the best [ideas]. That is what we do and then management can announce it. [...] And then you can roll that way down. That is a quicker process. What is special about [the hospital], is in reality that we could not dictate, because there was not that kind of management that could say that. So therefore we had to do this instead where we say, we have to have consensus around how we do this when it comes to the different units." (Consultant).*

It is easy to believe that a hospital context is a special case with its traditional structure of a high level of autonomy of operational units in relation to top management and so on. And there is no doubt that the political challenges are significantly more extreme and complex in the hospital than in the manufacturing company. It is, however, interesting that both the consultants working in the hospital and the consultants working in the manufacturing company talk about these problems with management authority as we also saw it earlier. On one occasion they even do so in almost identical ways:

> *"He [the top manager] should have taken on a much more top-down style than they have been used to at [the hospital]. Then we could have got further" (Consultant).*

> *"As I keep saying, there I think we could have got further if we were… if we had seen a greater management job from [the company's] side, definitely" (Consultant).*

Just as the consultants working in the hospital talk about it as a special case, the consultants working in the manufacturing company also talk about that as a special case. The differences are more a matter of degree and the particular ways it manifests itself in each context, but the issue is basically the same. It relates to the problem that exercising hierarchical power, and the management system as such, is not necessarily particularly effective when it comes to implementing change. It could of course be argued that both contexts are indeed unique examples in this respect, but I suspect that it is more a matter of degree and different manifestations than anything else. As Kotter argues:

> *"If the existing hierarchy was working well, there would be no need for a major transformation. But since the current system is not working, reforms generally demand activity outside of formal boundaries, expectations and protocol" (Kotter 1995: 62).*

This point is important, because it highlights that consultants, if relying and focusing too much on securing internal managerial authority, potentially run the risk of being taken hostage by the ineffectiveness of the management system in relation to change implementation. More importantly, however, it means that consultants risk passing up opportunities for influence through "activity outside of formal boundaries, expectations and protocol" as Kotter puts it (ibid.). This is precisely related to the organisational relevance of the outsider as I argued in chapter 4, where a boundary is constructed for the purpose of creating particular kinds of social actors attributed with powers insiders by definition do not

have. As Kotter also argues, change that lasts is not created mainly through pressure or dictates from above. To last, change has to become anchored in the organisation:

> *"In the final analysis, change sticks when it becomes 'the way we do things here', when it seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body. Until new behaviours are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed" (Kotter 1995: 67).*

RETURNING TO OUTSIDER OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFLUENCE

To summarise this chapter's contribution to the main argument of the thesis, I have shown that consultants can take part in creating change through the opportunities for influence that the construction and maintenance of a magical outsider position makes possible rather than through pressure from above. This ability of outsiders to influence and convince is to be found in the combination of, on the one hand, the particular boundary between insiders and outsiders that creates opportunities for roles that no insiders can perform and on the other hand the crossing of that same boundary through participation and engagement with internal actors.

Politically the outsider magic functions somewhat differently to what we saw in the previous chapter and this adds to the complexity and level of ambiguity of the position consultants have to negotiate in the social contexts they enter. If this thesis had focused only on the consultant as challenger we could have simply concluded that a certain measure of nearness combined with outsider status is necessary for the realisation of that particular aspect of the value of consulting. However, when we throw organisational politics and power relations into the pot, nearness appears significantly more complex. It raises the central question of nearness in relation to the actors within the organisation.

On the kind of change assignments that is in focus in this thesis, consultants get involved as political agents who attempt to influence people, events and outcomes in a particular direction that is in accordance with the interest of specific internal actors. The very involvement in political negotiations puts the outsider magic at risk because it is dependent on being ascribed impartiality and neutrality as I have shown. Politically the biggest risk is loss of these outsider attributes and the greatest balancing act is to achieve and maintain the synthesis of distance and nearness (Simmel 1950) in relation to all involved internal actors.

Outsiders can, however, never gain the type of formal insider power that plays a relatively important role in organisations, namely institutionalised power, often hierarchically distributed. External consultants do not have a formal position of power in the client organisation[23]. When it comes to making things happen in organisations lack of such formal insider power is seen as a disadvantage by consultants and they therefore stress the importance of top management's backing. Being too closely associated with the agenda of these or other internal actors does on the other hand also constitute a risk. It means that consultants can in effect end up as political insiders. In addition, such authority-by-extension is not necessarily very effective as we have seen.

Interestingly, consultants generally start talking about other aspects of their opportunities for influence when I confront them with the apparent paradox that they work on implementing changes, but tell me that they don't have the power or influence to make it happen. As one of the consultants puts it:

> *"You can do it from the perspective that says, we can illustrate and we can prove lots of things that make clear why things are important, but… and they might also understand it in the organisation why they are important and why they need to be done, but to go from there to actually getting it done… […]. We can only support, and we can convince and we can illustrate and we can help, but we cannot determine. […] But of course there are also good and bad consultants. There are some [consultants] who are phenomenal when it comes to inspiring other people, and make sure that they see the light and create the energy around what has to change, so of course even though you don't have decision-rights and enforcement-rights organisationally with the client, you have some tools that can contribute towards making sure that changes happen over time, but it is much more difficult than if you had hiring and firing rights in the organisation, right. (Consultant)"*

'Illustrate', 'prove', 'make things clear', 'support', 'convince', 'inspire', 'get them to see the light', 'create the energy'… These are all ways of describing aspects of the outsider magic that insiders focus on because it has an organisational relevance and value as I show throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, this consultant still seems to place more importance on insider authority, i.e. 'hiring and firing rights', probably because as a consultant he experiences both the potentials and the limitations of the outsider position all the time. It is a position of both power and powerlessness. He lives, through his daily practice, the ambiguity of the potentially powerful position that is also vulnerable and constantly at risk of being undermined and

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[23] If they are appointed such a formal position of power they are no longer management consultants but managers.

rendered illegitimate. Nevertheless, it is precisely by way of living that ambiguity that consultants have opportunities for influence.

In the next chapter I turn to the third aspect of the outsider magic related to what is described by the consultant here as illustrating, proving and making things clear. Or in other words the concrete pieces of documentation consultants are valued for producing and using as 'proof-artefacts' in interaction. The outsider position is not only potentially influential because of attributed impartiality. As we saw in this chapter, it is more credible and eatable when consultants say something as opposed to if internal actors say the same thing. In the following chapter we shall see that this is also so because consultants are attributed with objectivity and say what they say with documentation and proof indicating that they use a particular form of politics.

The Ability to Document and Prove

"The pronouncement of the stranger is likely to be preferred and remembered as the correct diagnosis - because it has come from someone outside the community and because it has cost a good deal more in effort and money than any local divination" (Colson 1966/2006: 222).

The theme of this chapter is the consulting activities of 'fact-finding', analysing and documenting. As in the previous two chapters I focus first on how consultants are differentiated by internal actors in a particular way and through this differentiation attributed with special abilities. In this chapter the point of departure is the construction of outsiders as objective agents that by way of that attribute has the ability to provide 'proof' and document what the problem is as well as what is going on in the organisation more generally. Through consultants and by them, as agents positioned as 'truth-tellers' and 'pen-holders', stories and other kinds of information and data can be reconstituted and rendered visible and real. Magical outsiders are positioned in such a way that they are able, if the position is sustained, to function as agents for the social construction of evidence that in turn endows what they say with a privileged status as 'truth'.

In the previous chapter we saw how consultants can become political agents in the client organisation and how their outsider status potentially provides certain opportunities for influence. In this chapter I go further into how this role is concretely performed and made possible with reference to the particular kind of politics consultants are expected to use. Namely the politics of reification (Wenger 1998) through which a particular version of reality is made to count.

I will, however, also show that when it comes to performing the activities of documenting and proving the outsider position is no less vulnerable and ambiguous than what we have also seen earlier. The attribute of objectivity that sustains the legitimacy of these activities and the acceptability of the facts produced cannot be taken for granted. It is as always possible for insiders to undermine the claims of outsiders because neither facts nor their producers are inherently objective. Both have to accepted and affirmed as such by internal actors. But first let us see how internal actors differentiate to construct objective agents with the ability to provide documentation and proof.

CONSTRUCTING AGENTS OF DOCUMENTATION AND PROOF

I will start this section by returning once more to the statement that people are 'clicking their heels and bowing' at the sight of consultants presented in the previous chapter. The employee in the manufacturing company who says this, further exemplifies his point by talking about how even a top manager will listen when told by the consultants that something should be done differently, as opposed to if other insiders point out the same. Then he elaborates on why this might be so:

> *"It could also be that they don't say: 'It is no good that you are doing this'. So it could be that the consultants go in and say: 'listen if so and so… then…' right, and so they manage to shed light on it in a way that I might not do in… in my fit of irritation somehow"* *(Employee)*

The sentence 'they manage to shed light on it' point in the direction of yet another aspect of what it is that potentially makes the particular outsider position of consultants a source of influence. The stuff their magic is made of, so to speak. Outsiders are here again attributed with characteristics that insiders, including himself, are perceived to lack. They can do something he cannot do. Outsiders perform according to ideals of objectivity and rationality in contrast to insiders' emotive reactions and "gut feelings", as they call it in the manufacturing company. Here is for instance how a top manager, also from the manufacturing company, talks about the effect of the consulting analysis:

"Everybody can see, entirely objectively seen, that it is up there that we should be going, because that is what the analysis shows." (Top manager)

As we see it the consulting analysis has clearly acquired the status as objective. It represents what is objectively seen and the consultants are the agents that see objectively. As he describes it in another part of the interview when he talks about the value of using consultants:

"We try of course to be objective, but there are big variations in how objective we can be. And it is not ill will. It is sometimes a question of how long you have been here and how long you have worked with the same things and so on". (Top manager).

Objectivity is, similarly to fresh eyes/ignorance (chapter 4) and impartiality (chapter 5) an attribute created as a negation of what it means to be an insider. 'We' have difficulty being objective because we have been here too long and have worked with the same things for too long. By implication being objective is similarly a matter of *not* being an insider and it therefore becomes an attribute of outsiders. Or in other words, if you are too much of an insider by way of long-term membership and deep engagement with practice over time it is difficult to be objective. Just like it is difficult to even see things at all, to refer to the theme of chapter 4, and just like it is difficult to be impartial when you are deeply involved in internal politics and power relations, as we saw in chapter 5.

It is important to emphasise that these attributes of outsider fresh eyes/ignorance, impartiality and objectivity are closely connected and the distinction I make in this thesis is first and foremost analytical. An example of how for instance impartiality and objectivity are implicated in each other is the way internal actors value consultants presenting as described in the previous chapter. Clearly this also has something to do with the status of what they present as facts and documentation as well as how they present it using the related artefacts, i.e. slides, tables and charts. Another example is the statement by a top manager in the hospital that I also presented in chapter 4, where the ability to ask 'stupid questions' because of outsider ignorance is linked with outsider impartiality and objectivity. To recap:

"Here comes someone who is from the outside, who is impartial - he is not a doctor. They [the consultants] can take the liberty of asking stupid questions, because they pose them according to objective criteria (Top manager).

The different outsider attributes function together in any given situation to sustain the outsider position of consultants.

Making the provable argument

Documenting and analysing activities are an important aspect of how consultants perform, and are expected to perform, their role. This is part of how they are constructed as magical by internal actors and as such it is yet another aspect of the special abilities they are attributed with. As it is further described by the above employee from the manufacturing company:

> *"What I have learnt from the consultants, is that when you have to go in and argue a point in a discussion, it is vitally important to have some facts in place. Because before we used to just go in and say: 'But of course you can see that it is like this and like that'. And then they say something at the other end: 'No I can't see that, because my impression is that it is 180 degrees the other way around'. […] simply support the things you say with an explanation, with some facts, with statistics. It can be a simple pie chart that says this is what reality looks like. You might feel differently, but this is from the statistics. […] It is not just making an argument, but also making the right argument. Making the eatable argument. Because I can also easily argue without having my statistics with me, but in that I have them, well then the argument is eatable. It is provable, right."*
> *(Employee).*

The consultants always 'have some facts in place' and they make their arguments 'provable' by establishing 'what reality looks like'. As we see it here arguing a point through facts is described as something consultants do, but it is not as exclusive to consultants as the ability to challenge and negotiate conflicting interests as we saw in the previous chapters. It refers to an activity of creating facts as well as a technique of using them to make the 'provable' argument and thus also the 'eatable' argument and as such it is something that internal actors might also do in principle.

Nevertheless, as it appears here, it is indeed different from what 'we' usually do and it is an activity associated first and foremost with consultants because it is an important part of what they do. It denotes an aspect of what defines them and differentiates them from insiders and this differentiation in turn is part of what creates the magical properties of these activities. One of the top managers in the manufacturing company talks in the interview particularly extensively about the consultants as agents of proof and documentation. As he puts it: "they are bloody good at documenting".

"T: [...] if you look at what consultants do, at least here with us, I would say that I think that 50% of their time is spent documenting. Both good and bad. You know, they could document both the procedure as it is and what it could be, a future procedure that is.
I: What does this documenting do for you?
T: It does two things. One thing of course is when they actually come with a different way of doing things. That is a very tangible value you could say, right. The other is about making things evident for those parts of the organisation that don't know from the start. That can be a huge problem in an organisation when people don't know. And we are really bad at that [...] and that means when you see that it is not going well, then it is difficult to find out where we are going wrong in our old usual procedure." (Top manager).

As he perceives it a significant part of what consultants do can be termed 'documenting'. This is precisely about the role constraints that contribute to the maintenance of boundaries (Barth 1969). These role constraints are an important part of how consultants are differentiated from insiders. The activities involved in 'documenting' are defined as consulting activities - 'if you look at what consultants do' as this manager says it. The differentiation separates actors for particular purposes as we have also seen it in the previous chapters.

People in the organisation don't know what is going on, as this manager puts it, so outsiders are called in to find out and make what they find evident to insiders. Thus in interaction particular performances are expected of the consultants. They are expected to find out 'where we go wrong' and make this evident to all concerned internal actors so they come to *know*. Or in other words, consultants diagnose problems, prescribe the cure, here termed 'the future procedure', and make both evident to relevant internal actors so that this account of problems and solutions is accepted.

This is quite similar to how consultants describe it themselves. As we also saw in the previous chapter, consultants talk about how they can influence the client organisation with reference to 'illustrating', 'proving', and 'making things clear':

"We can illustrate and we can prove lots of things that make clear why things are important" (Consultant)

"If we were to make it plausible that there was surplus capacity then we had to make it fact-based and that's what we used those interviews for." (Consultant).

"So the implementation-consultant is only good if you also have something to shoot with." (Consultant).

"My role is to be friendly, nice and pleasant and prove the things I say, that they hold up." (Consultant)

The consultants are clearly aware that facts, proof and documentation are important in their interaction with internal actors. They have to have something to shoot with as one of them puts it. And it would seem that this ammunition, i.e. data, facts, proof etc. can be quite effective. The top manager from the manufacturing company who praises the consultants for being 'bloody good at documenting' exemplifies the effect in the following. He is telling me about a particular situation where a middle manager agreed with a conclusion he had never imagined she would accept:

> *"I: So what is it you are saying is fantastic about what Morten [the consultant] did? Is it that he got her to realise these things?*
> *T: No, he documented, in reality, that the way it was happening was completely crazy*
> *I: Ok, so it is again the documenting that you find useful?*
> *T: Yes, and what happened was that she actually nodded to it - that it is completely crazy." (Top manager).*

Consultants are perceived to be able to establish an authoritative account of 'the way it is happening' as it is expressed here. As he perceives it the middle manager accepts the account, because it is documented that it is really so. The conclusion is eatable because it is provable to paraphrase the above employee. Here are some more examples of how internal actors at different levels talk about it. First from the hospital:

> *"They have an ability to ask into things, to get it structured. They have been able to generate knowledge and render knowledge about what is going on visible. With the help of those who are already there, but it is they [the consultants] who have brought it out. [...] they have already generated so much knowledge about what is going on and so many unsuitable procedures [...] so I would say that the financial investment we have made has been worth it because we have acquired that knowledge." (Top manager).*

> *"It has been an opportunity to get the procedures described and an opportunity to get documented what it is we do in reality. So I think that is good. I like that and I think that the data collation that the consultants did about how we can do it, how is the handover of responsibilities in the process and the procedure in itself, it has been interesting." (Functional manager).*

And from the manufacturing company:

> *They have a bit more… well you can say that consultants they bite into it more and are better at [...] making such a full and adequate inquiry" (Middle manager).*

> *"They have gone through hypothesises that we often take part in outlining from the beginning and then they validate the things that lie behind that hypothesis - to see if it is really correct". (Top manager).*

Jan and David [the consultants] have been extremely good at forming the picture of [x]. They have delivered a fantastically good picture that I think it has been difficult for some to really see, right. They have delivered - what can you say - the bare, naked truth, right. (Top manager)

The consultants deliver 'the bare, naked truth' as this last top manager puts it. They form a picture of something that it is difficult for 'some', i.e. some insiders, to see and they form the picture in such a way that it is transformed into truth. The consultants generate knowledge about 'what is going on' as the top manager in the hospital describes it. The delivery consists of collecting data and analysing it, 'fact-finding' in consulting terms, but it is just as much about 'forming the picture' in the sense of representing and defining 'what is going on' in a way that counts, or in other words, in such a way that it gains status as truth. The top manager here does not specify who the dissenters are, i.e. those with a different interpretation, but through the process and through the consultants a common interpretation has been established. That is how the 'bare, naked truth' has come about as we shall see later.

'PEN-HOLDERS' AND REIFICATION AS A SOURCE OF INFLUENCE

When the consultants generate such knowledge about 'what is going on' as the top manager in the hospital calls it, there is more to it than a traditional consulting analysis. 'Documenting' is used as quite a broad concept and it is not just about providing evidence or proof of something as the Oxford Dictionary defines it (1995). It is just as much about describing and explaining in a particular way that insiders seem less able to do as a top manager in the manufacturing company describes it:

"[...] also the things you might be bad at describing yourself and you have just tried to explain it 10 times without... and you can see that people haven't understood it. All of a sudden they [the consultants] figure out - hey this is how we are going to describe it. Of course! [hits his head], you know. They are good at that. Also because they go back and discuss what the hell the facts of the matter are, right." (Top manager)

It is clear here that certain insiders, namely managers like himself, might very well know what is going on and what needs to be done, but they are unable to explain it in a way that other insiders will be able to understand or maybe rather - accept. Consultants on the contrary are good at describing and explaining. They are in other words good at reification and their

reifications can furthermore be endowed with objectivity by way of outsider status. Consultants 'go back and discuss what the hell the facts of the matter are', i.e. they remove themselves from insiders and daily organisational life to analyse and interpret from a distance.

Here is how other internal actors from the manufacturing company talk about the aspects related to 'forming the picture' or in other words defining and representing 'what is going on':

> *"They are a lot better at setting it up so it becomes easily intelligible [...]. It has made some things clear, right. [...] and they made it more visible in relation to management. [...] They are good at making some bullet points where we say... well this way and things like that, right." (Middle manager)*

> *[...] He [the consultant] is both analytical and gets everything. And quickly boils large data material down to the essence. [...] They are good at conceptualising and making it reasonably accessible. [...] simply get the main problems that loom lined up, get a discussion facilitated and get a conclusion synthesised and so on." (Top manager).*

> *"There we had Stig who is really good, I think, at assembling all the cues we had [...] get it all assembled and get it written down so it was understandable for everyone and clear, he was really good at that." (Middle manager)*

> *"He was good at being the 'pen-holder' so to speak and get it structured and things like that [...] I would always recommend having someone from the outside to be the 'pen-holder'." (Functional manager).*

As we see in these statements by internal actors at different levels it is about much more than 'fact-finding' and analysis in a limited sense. It is about defining and representing aspects, issues and processes of the organisation in different ways that can all be termed reification.

The process and products of reification

Reification is defined here as "the process of giving form to experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (Wenger's 1998: 58). These objects can be abstractions, stories, symbols, terms and concepts etc. that are attributed with substantial existence or "excessive concreteness and projected reality" as Wenger puts it (1998: 59). A particular interpretation is given form and thus also the status of object that serves to focus attention and negotiation of meaning. This is precisely what the expressions used in the above statements are all about. 'Setting up', 'making clear', 'making visible', 'making bullet points', 'boiling down', 'conceptualising', 'making accessible', 'lining up', 'synthesising',

'writing down', 'making understandable', 'pen-holding' and 'structuring' all indicate processes of reification.

Reification is useful because it enables new ways of thinking about, understanding, negotiating and making meaning about practice and as such it can be a very powerful source of change. It can change our experience of the world as Wenger argues (1998: 60-61). By giving a particular interpretation form it gains a new concreteness that has a focusing effect. It becomes something that can be pointed to, referred to, acted on and used in argumentation and negotiation of meaning (ibid. 61). Consultants use reification extensively in everything they do and not just when performing activities that are perceived strictly as 'fact-finding' and documenting. Consultants use reification when they attempt to challenge (chapter 4) and they use it when they attempt to influence, convince and negotiate (chapter 5). Again we see how the different aspects of the outsider function are connected and implicated in each other in practice.

It is important to emphasise that reification is something we all engage in all the time. As Wenger (1998) describes it:

> *"Reification occupies much of our collective energy: from entries in a journal to historical records, from poems to encyclopaedias [...], from gourmet recipes to medical procedures, from flashy advertisements to census data, from single concepts to entire theories, from the evening news to national archives, from lesson plans to the compilation of textbooks, from private address lists to sophisticated credit reporting databases [...] In all these cases, aspects of human experience and practice are congealed into fixed form and given the status of object". (Wenger 1998: 59).*

Reification is also important in organisations and as such far from unique to consultants. However, as we saw it above it is something internal actors associate first and foremost with consultants at the same time as they also see it as useful to learn from. This is beautifully described by an employee in the hospital. I will quote at length as the statement illustrates how useful the reification of consultants is experienced to be, because it is felt to be lacking 'here in this world':

> *"Well the good part, as I see it, is that they [the consultants] have managed to systematize some work processes, definitely. And they go into… I think it is where I tend to say - "well, we just do it like that" and so everybody knows. That is where they go a bit further into it and get it written down on a piece of paper and… so they get things sort of communicated. Also so they have something they can grab hold of afterwards and say "well that is what we agreed on, because it says so here" and so on. Here in this world we are probably a bit more like - well we make an agreement and then we do it like that and then new people come in and then they don't really know why we actually agreed on*

that, but those of us who are old do and then there is this silly roll back and forth, right. Whereas they have a completely different way of thinking that I definitely think we could learn a lot from here in this system. Because it is important to get it systematised and get things written down, so you constantly have something to hold it up against, because then you can also go in and measure things, but you can't do that if its just these loose talks, right." (Employee).

Again we see how the boundary is drawn between 'we', 'here in this system', and the non-members who 'have a completely different way of thinking'. The consultants reify processes and get the reifications disseminated contrary to what is normally done, as it is described here. There clearly seems to be a need for the kind of reification consultants represent as the previous statements also indicate. A top manager from the manufacturing company describes this differentiation between what 'they' do and what 'we' do in almost identical ways illustrating how the same experience is expressed both in different contexts and at different levels:

"[...] some of the things we do, we do intuitively, which maybe is not the safest if you can put it like that, right. And it is in any case difficult to explain to anyone. So what is being set up now... now Anders [the consultant] is describing it in principle[...] and then it is much easier to convince someone instead of just standing there telling them, you know, freely from the imagination, what it is we do, right." (Top manager).

'We' do things intuitively and communicate it 'freely from the imagination'. In contrast, consultants describe and document. Consultants are extensively involved with this form of reification of other people's practice and experience. They reify the client organisation and 'what is going on', as well as what ought to be going on. And they seem to do so more than most internal actors who often focus primarily on doing the reifying that is an integrated part of their practice. The consultants reify in ways that are different from how reification is done in the course of everyday working life. The objects consultants produce are both new reifications as well as reconstitutions of the reifications already produced by members of the organisation. Furthermore, consultants use reification as a form of politics - as a way of exerting influence on practice and creating change (Wenger 1998: 91). As exemplified by Wenger (1998):

"Calling upon the moral commitment of participants is different from presenting a statistical demonstration of consistent injustice. Though recourse to each can create a very different atmosphere, both avenues can be effective in influencing the development of practice" (Wenger 1998: 92).

Consultants take extensive recourse to reifications such as for instance 'statistical demonstration' and they are expected to do so, as we have seen. They produce abstractions that are given the status of objects by both internal actors and consultants. Reifications created by agents that are defined as outside the boundary of 'we' become important artefacts or focus points in internal negotiations.

'Pen-holders' - embodying reification

This extensive engagement with reification *of* the organisation differentiates consultants from members of the organisation who participate in its daily life and practices. Internal actors live and practice 'what is going on' - consultants investigate and represent it. In a sense consultants almost come to embody this form of reification. They function as tools for reification and this is closely connected with their position as outsiders to the practices and processes being reified. They are quite literally 'pen-holders' as the functional manager above describes it and they are able to be 'pen-holders' because of their particular status as non-participants:

> *"I would always recommend having someone from the outside to be the 'pen-holder'."*
> *(Functional manager).*

This manager might be using the term 'pen-holder' metaphorically, but the interesting thing is that pens and other writing tools are indeed very important in most interactions with internal actors and they are primarily in the hands of the consultants. As the employee from the hospital puts it: 'They get it on a piece of paper and get it written down'.

Writing and drawing on paper, flip-over, white board, brown paper etc. is a constantly recurring phenomenon in many types of situations of interaction with internal actors in both contexts. This is for instance how I reflect in my field notes on what has made an impression on me after a day in the project office at the hospital:

> Flip-over - everything is written down on the flip-over. An artefact that forms part of the consulting practice and becomes part of the project practice, but not part of the local practice. It is always the consultant who stands there. (Field notes).

The way consultants position themselves in the room and what they do differentiate them from insiders. They are always 'holding the pen' doing the reifying. The 'pen-holding' is not just about taking notes. It forms part of the interaction in itself. Consultants create continuous

focus points for the conversation and negotiation of meaning by drawing, structuring and conceptualising what is talked about. Here is for instance how I describe such a situation in my field notes from the hospital:

> I go back in the project room. A meeting between Dan [consultant] and the chief surgeon Line from [x unit] is about to begin. They are going to get Dan's description of their process clarified, as I understand it. There are also 3 employees from the unit present in addition to Line. It is interesting seeing them describe their process. At first Dan just listens while Line is taking the lead and the others contribute with descriptions of their part in the process. Dan asks questions to make sure he understands and draws and writes as they go along. They look at what he is illustrating. 'No that's not how it is'. Dan tries to illustrate it differently. They continue describing and eventually start agreeing with the picture. The consultant creates with his presence and activity a space where they can describe and reflect on their practice. (Field notes).

Sometimes these drawings, models and illustrations become artefacts that take on a life of their own throughout the projects. Like for instance the brown paper or the value stream map, along with the charts, models, maps and power point slides consultants make to document and illustrate the results of their 'fact-finding' and analysis. As described here by a middle manager in the manufacturing company:

> *"What he [the consultant] did was that he investigated how they did [x], you know the whole work process, and then he made, very very simple, on a big piece of paper and simply drew all the way through - a diagram you could say - an overview over what is done then, and when we get to that then… the whole flow back again and starts over and it was… it looked kind of like a train schedule" (Middle manager).*

Sometimes these 'train schedules', or value stream maps in consulting terms, hang permanently on the wall of a project office. At other times the maps are carried around and used in meeting after meeting, workshop after workshop along with big size prints of charts and models. What these artefacts do, along with the ever present power point slides, is represent processes and procedures of the organisation in fixed form. At the same time they also differentiate consultants from the insiders and symbolise the attributed matter-of-factness and objectivity of these 'pen-holders' from the outside.

There is, however, no guarantee that the politics of reification or 'having some facts in place' is an effective means for influence. Reifications have to be adopted by the relevant internal actors for practice to be influenced in any significant way. The truth or the knowledge about 'what is going on', that the consultants are praised for delivering, has to come to be believed. That particular version of reality has to be made to count. The effect of

making that version count authoritatively amongst a broad range of actors can not be taken for granted no matter how objective certain types of numerical and statistical data might appear to be. The establishment of a common interpretation has to be mutually achieved and it thus requires the participation of insiders as we shall see in the following.

CREATING ACCEPTABLE FACTS AND ACHIEVING AGREEMENT

Hastrup (1995) argues that truth is about acceptability in the face of potential disagreement (1995: 167). The knowledge about 'what is going on' or the 'bare naked truth' that internal actors talk about is a version of reality that has come to count in the struggle with other interpretations (Hastrup 1992/1996). In interaction people continuously negotiate whose definition of the situation is to count and some actors have more power to define and represent reality than others (ibid.). Thus, in order for the consultants to put their version on the agenda they are dependent on having some source of power to define and represent reality. One potential source of this power to define is to be found in the way the consultants are positioned by internal actors as instrumental in and as instruments for reification and creation of knowledge about the organisation. They are constructed as agents of facts and proof and given a position from where truth can be created and disseminated - a position endowed with the attribute of objectivity that functions as a source of power to define and represent reality.

The consultants similarly position themselves as objective in contrast to insiders. Here as a consultant working in the manufacturing company describes it:

> *"[...] it is maybe this thing that I maybe, a bit more from the outside and with a bit more objective and matter-of-factly eyes, articulate the attitude of [x department]. Where from [y department] and maybe also higher up in the system they have viewed it a bit as just another complaint" (Consultant).*

The problems a particular department has been complaining about for a while are all of a sudden taken more seriously by other parts of the organisation because they are articulated by an objective outside agent. The complaints have in other words been magically transformed and gained a different status as it appears in this statement. However, the mere articulation or reconstitution by an agent endowed with outsider objectivity is not enough for truth to be

established. When this particular issue is first brought up with top management it is not immediately received as objective fact the way we might imagine when looking at the above statement on its own. This is how a top manager talks about the same situation:

> *"When Peter brought it up, I realised what it was all about and then I said, I simply think what is being said is too one-sided, and then we had a really good dialogue about it. [...] The observations he had made were correct, but the conclusion was not necessarily correct" (Top manager).*

This illustrates that what the consultant articulates is also contested and not necessarily just accepted as privileged knowledge. It is interesting that the top manager here makes a distinction between an observation that is correct and a conclusion that is not. This highlights the importance of interpretation. Data is analysed and conclusions drawn from a particular perspective. The top manager interprets the issue differently based on his particular insider knowledge and perspective. A common picture or truth has not yet been established. No version of reality has been agreed upon and made to count.

The point here is that even though the top manager does not buy the interpretation at first sight it also does not mean that what the consultant articulates is dismissed because the observation, or in other words the reification, has done its work. An issue has been elevated to the top of the agenda. It is given attention and becomes part of the negotiation of what counts as the valid version of reality. It becomes the point of departure for a focused discussion amongst the top management team together with the team of consultants working in the manufacturing company. They agree that there is a problem, but they see it from different perspectives. This discussion marks the beginning of an emerging agreement on what the problem is. It is through such a process that a version of reality that counts is created.

Thus consultants do not by themselves deliver 'the bare naked truth'. Instead they deliver reifications that are used in the creation and negotiation of truth. In the following I explore how truth, defined as a version of reality that counts, is mutually achieved and established in one particular situation in the manufacturing context.

The meeting 'where it was definitively proven'
The situation relates to the point in the consulting process where the consultants have been doing their analysis, or 'fact-finding' as they call it, diagnosing what the problems are and they are now ready to present it to the internal actors who are involved in working on this

project with the consultants. Mainly functional and middle managers and a few employees. A top manager, Preben, has the overall responsibility for the project. This particular meeting is interesting to explore because it is perceived by Preben as significant and in some way a turning point in the change process. Here is how he alerts me to the importance of the meeting in the interview:

> *"P: [...] You know the discussion we have about [x] for instance*
> *I: Yes, what is happening with that?*
> *P: [...] I don't know if you remember that meeting where we sat over there in the [x] room, with that big piece of brown paper on the wall. It was sort of there where it was definitively proven that there are holes in the defence, right" (Preben, top manager).*

In Preben's experience this meeting is 'where it was definitively proven' that there are problems and what they are about, i.e. the 'holes in the defence'. Somehow it marks the point where an agreed upon version of reality is established. This is in other words an event where truth is created and products of reifications are involved, i.e. 'a big piece of brown paper on the wall'. It is therefore interesting to have a closer look at it to see how that comes about.

Already in the planning of the meeting it is clear that it is very important to Preben to get 'definitive proof' of the nature of the problems and what cause them. When the consultants are going through their conclusions with him and telling him what they are planning to present at the meeting some of his comments reflect this concern. Here are examples from my field notes from the situation:

> Preben: "If it is just claim versus claim then it doesn't matter." (Field notes).

> Preben: "There is no acknowledgement that the problem is many-sided and no ownership in [x department]. So you have to make sure that what you demonstrate holds water." (Field notes).

> Preben: "It is my view that what you are documenting, we already know so we shouldn't dwell any more on it. We have to move on. Some people will want to keep discussing it." (Field notes).

First Preben reminds the consultants that he expects them to deliver proof at the meeting. This means delivering something that will be accepted by the meeting participants as more than a claim, because claims will be met with counter claims, as he knows from experience. This is what usually happens and if that also happens at this meeting it becomes indifferent and all they are left with is yet another discussion that goes nowhere. As he goes on to say there are certain actors that have to be won over because they presently see things differently.

Therefore it is crucial that the analysis the consultants present hold water, i.e. that it cannot be disproved. He wants facts stated and then move on.

It is clear that the fact-finding exercise is not first and foremost about discovery. It is about documenting and 'definitively proving' what 'we already know'. However, this 'we' who know is not everybody. If it was, there would be no need for this exercise of persuasion and convincing. The issue is that there is no agreed upon version of what 'we already know' and that creates the need for objective fact-collecting outsiders that can magically transform diverse internal claims into one truth accepted by all stakeholders in order for them to move on together and do something to solve problems they all experience from different perspectives.

As we saw earlier the consultants also mention similar aspects when they describe what they do and in concrete situations they position themselves accordingly. Earlier that day before Preben joins the planning, two of the consultants talk about how they are going to run the meeting:

> C1: "We have to present the facts so they are value-free - so they can't do anything but agree. And then on to the improvement initiatives that are directly related."
> C2: "Yes I think that is the right way." (Field notes).

This statement corresponds almost exactly to what Preben emphasises to them later that day. The consultants know they have to make sure the analysis is not disproved and that nobody disagrees with the facts. The goal is to reach a common and agreed upon version of reality so the relevant internal actors can move on to acting *together* on the basis of what has been constructed as the 'shared picture' as consultants often call it. This common version is connected with "facts about which it is possible to achieve agreement" as Hastrup puts it (1995: 177). What has to be achieved is agreement through acceptable facts.

Creating facts and documentation

To create facts and documentation the consultants talk to people in the organisation, in both formal interviews and informal conversations, one-on-one and in groups. They collect and write down the hypothesises internal actors have about the current state of affairs and try to find other forms of data to document them. They collect all the numerical data they can establish exists and that someone can and will give them. They listen to stories and tell stories in return. They ask, discuss and talk about problems and solutions. Here is a little

extract from my field notes from one such 'fact-finding' meeting where a middle manager, an employee and a consultant is present.

> Mads [the consultant] is going through his list of what else they need in order to get data on the different points. The [x]: Mads questions whether it is a rational way of doing it? "It doesn't make too much sense to me. Have you got some input to how it could be done differently?". Mads continues going through his list. Rune and Keld explain and take on/are assigned to different tasks. Things that have to be described, data that has to be obtained. Mads gets up and draws on the brown paper. Asks them about some things on the paper - "is this how it works?" They confirm that that is how it is. "Ok, then I can get it into the value stream map". Mads continues to go through the different processes that have been drawn. "Shall we try to put some words on this" etc. "I don't think we can change that, and then we lose flexibility here". "Is there a previous history here? I remember there was a fairly strong reaction when we brought it up?" (Field notes).

'Fact-finding' is very much a conversation. The consultants discuss with internal actors how they think things should be, what should be changed and how they describe, explain and view the way it is organised today. They ask a lot of questions that are formulated as hypothetical situations and always problem-oriented and connected with ideas for solutions.

On the day of planning the meeting with the representatives they are finishing off their conclusions and getting ready to present the results. They engage in a long string of discussions back and forth with each other and with the top manager when he joins them towards the end of the process. They tell stories, talk about what they have heard and been told and what they believe. They interpret the numerical data when they can and call up internal actors for explanations when the data makes no sense. They make claims of simple straightforward causes to complex problems and repeat them again and again to each other. They agree and they disagree. They have doubts and feel they don't know enough so they go and see the relevant internal actors to ask some more and to discuss some more and are confronted with something new or different. When the top manager disagrees with a conclusion yet another discussion develops about the causes of the problems. The picture of what the problem is and what causes it constantly shifts as discussions, conversations and events flow. In my field notes from this particular situation I reflect on how much this reminds me of what also seems to happen all the time at the hospital:

> It is almost as if a problem construction serves a particular purpose in a given situation, but in the next instant that very construction seems just as inadequate as it was previously perfectly logical and clear. (Field notes).

Slowly, out of the chaos of infinite diverse beliefs about complex interconnected processes a number of clear statements and conclusions emerge. The consultants create the ways to represent, illustrate and visualise them on slides, charts and brown paper. Stories and perceptions have been reconstituted and infused with documentation to become conclusions in bullet point format on slides. Numerical data have become a selection of charts and models in slides and on posters. Work processes are now drawings with boxes and arrows on wall-to-wall brown paper. The necessary process of interpretation, simplification and reification is coming to an end and facts and results have emerged. The final step is to establish it as truth - as objective knowledge - as a version of reality that counts amongst the relevant internal actors.

Making the version count

This happens the next day in the meeting with representatives from different departments and later in a steering group meeting. The meeting with the representatives is the meeting Preben tells me about in the interview. The meeting 'where it is definitively proven'. Here the reifications are presented and confirmed as the correct portrait of reality. The slides, posters and brown paper are established artefacts that will be used by both internal and external actors in the implementation ahead where they will be held up and shown again and again to the same and different audiences to affirm and reaffirm the version of reality that now counts.

From the beginning of the meeting Preben emphasises that it is very important that they all say something if they don't agree with what is being presented by the consultants. The consultants confirm that they want it brought up "if this is not what your picture of the world looks like". Preben says:

> "What we have to do, is be 100% in agreement about the solutions and activities we initiate now. So no more data collection after this meeting." (Field notes).

Clearly the internal actors present at this meeting have an important role to play and Preben is reminding them of it. They have to participate in the construction of 'what we know'. Without their acceptance and affirmation the documentation and conclusions the consultants present cannot become 'the bare, naked truth'; they will remain just another interpretation. The goal is that everybody knows, i.e. subscribes to the same version of reality, after this meeting and agrees on what that means for how the current state of affairs is to be changed.

The consultants present their slides with conclusions, charts and models and they draw on the board when they need to illustrate points. They ask the meeting participants to get up and stand by the brown paper while they are telling the story of the process that has been illustrated and what is going wrong. Some of the meeting participants comment here and there, a few discussions emerge from time to time, but rarely directly about what is being presented. Often discussions focus on things that are somehow connected or inspired by what is being presented. As a consultant is showing and going through one of the models he has made to illustrate a point, one of the internal actors laughs and comments that it is a serious understatement. The consultant laughs:

"Well, yes I am being diplomatic, but I believe there is something to it." (Field notes).

Preben quickly comments that it is not a question of belief: "There is proof!" Again he is reminding everybody of the status of the reifications. Accordingly, people seem to accept the documentation and the conclusions. Maybe not least because they have all in some way helped the consultants gather the data and taken part in creating and discussing the stories of causes to problems in 'fact-finding' meetings with the consultants. The facts have in a sense been mutually constituted as acceptable facts from the beginning. But Preben wants to be sure. He stops the consultants about half way into the meeting:

"I just want to hear - around the table - is there a good gut feeling about this and that this is how it is?" (Field notes).

There is nodding and nobody protests or comments. They continue. After going through all the results, they move on to suggestions for solutions and improvements and the actions that have to be initiated. As the meeting is coming to an end Preben closes and concludes it by saying:

"It is good that we are relatively in agreement. Remember that it is us sitting here who have the responsibility. You have not been chosen by coincidence". (Field notes).

After everybody else has left, the consultants ask Preben how he feels it went. He answers that he would have liked to have got a bit further with the solutions and deadlines on actions, but he is very happy with the way the analysis was received. He feels that there is agreement and he expresses slight surprise that some of the conclusions went down so easily.

A week later when the same brown paper, charts, models and slides are presented for the steering group, Preben starts off by emphasising that what the consultants are about to present has been accepted by the relevant internal actors. As he puts it:

"There is a common understanding that this is the picture." (Field notes).

To the rest of top management 'the picture' is presented as no longer just a consulting analysis. It has become a shared picture and it rests on a combination of insider and outsider legitimacy.

The example of how truth is established illustrates how much the top manager focuses on using the consultants and what they do to achieve precisely what he describes to me in the interview, namely to get it 'definitively proven'. But also the other internal actors play an important role in what is in effect a mutual construction of knowledge throughout the entire process from the beginning of 'fact-finding' to the presentation in both forums with its official and symbolic acceptance. Some internal actors play this role actively and others more passively simply by not contesting or undermining the objectivity of the consultants and their products.

'Gut feelings' versus scientific inquiry

Nevertheless, 'the fantastically good picture' and the 'bare, naked truth' are talked about as something the consultants deliver as we have seen in the first part of this chapter. Providing evidence and proof is what the consultants do and what they are praised for being good at doing and it is perceived as the sole achievement of consultants. Internal actors experience it as such, because they collectively endow the consultants with the ability to define reality through fact-finding exercises and reifications as objective agents. When this construction is collectively achieved and sustained in interaction by key internal actors, as it is in the situation described above, it creates the conditions for a legitimate process for arriving at a *common* picture and an agreed upon version of reality. A version of reality that has a different, more objective status outperforming competing versions, because it does not come from anyone or anywhere on the inside and because it has been arrived at through data collection and investigation that lends legitimacy from wider societal perceptions of scientific objectivity.

The consultants are in this sense constructed as magical by way of traditional ideals of scientific enquiry[24] that lends what they do legitimacy. Especially in the manufacturing context where the analysis and conclusions of the consultants are frequently contrasted to the 'stories' and 'gut feelings' of insiders. Both internal actors and consultants take part in constantly constructing and reaffirming this idea that there are a lot of stories about what is going on circulating in the organisation, but nobody knows what is *really* going on and so people act on 'gut feelings' rather than facts. This is how an employee perceives that managers are being convinced by the documentation the consultants provide:

> *"[...] so then they don't say anything, because they have the paper in front of them that says so and so. Well hey... he [the consultant] is right about that, so my gut feeling was maybe wrong. And a lot of what I think has been done in the past is that you have operated on these gut feelings." (Employee)*.

Stories, gut feelings and intuitions are attributes of insiders and so through the process of dichotomisation facts and objectivity become attributes of outsiders. And the consultants position themselves accordingly. Here is for instance how one of the consultants emphasises the value of documentation in the steering group meeting:

> "There are a lot of discussions about causes. We have to get that changed. We have to document it all instead of acting on gut feelings." (Field notes).

The similarity between the statement by the consultant and the employee is obvious. Both consultants and internal actors are mutually constructing and reaffirming the idea that internal actors act or operate on 'gut feelings'. It is not least in the light of this insider attribute that the objectivity of the consultants and their documentation and analysis is constructed. This illustrates how context-dependent the positioning of the consultants is. As we shall see in the next section the hospital context is different from what we have seen here in the context of the manufacturing company, because there is no such identification of 'them' as objective in contrast to 'us' in the hospital. This has consequences for how the consultants become positioned.

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[24] Here one might want to add that science is also in many ways a similar phenomenon to magic as Mauss argues (1950/2001).

CONTESTED OBJECTIVITY AND LACK OF LEGITIMACY

As we have seen so far consultants collect different types of data, analyse and represent the results with models, charts and other reifications. However, neither the data nor the conclusions are inherently objective. Data always has to be interpreted and interpretation is done from a particular perspective. Internal actors are of course also active interpreters who make up their own minds about what the conclusions are. As for instance the top manager we saw earlier who makes a distinction between an observation that is correct and a conclusion that is not. The 'facts' consultants collect, i.e. information, data, numbers, statistics or whatever it might be, are not objective in and of themselves. As Hastrup argues, objectivity is situated (1995: 177). It is an attribute specific actors and their knowledge products are collectively endowed with to varying degrees in specific situations and contexts.

It is thus important to emphasise that it is not a given that the version of reality consultants attempt to establish through reification, is accepted or that the picture they form ends up as the version that counts. Creating the picture and transforming it into truth is mutually achieved and it requires some kind of collective acceptability and agreement as we saw in the previous section. And it requires that consultants and what they produce are endowed with objectivity and that this construction of them as agents of facts and proof is maintained in interaction.

To achieve acceptability and affirmation consultants are dependent on these sources of power to define what they are attributed by way of their position. If those sources are undermined or rendered illegitimate the opportunities for being agents of and instruments for truth creation is at risk. Just like we have also seen it in the two previous chapters, the particular outsider position of consultants is a potential source of opportunities for influence, but it is also vulnerable and at risk. The outsider position and the magic it is endowed with has to be continuously collectively maintained in interaction by both internal actors and consultants. So also with the attribute of objectivity as a source of power to define and represent reality.

This is most clearly illustrated with reference to the difference between how the majority of actors in the manufacturing company and in the hospital, respectively, talk about the consulting activities of fact-finding, analysis and representation. In the two previous chapters we have seen illustrative differences between the two contexts, but it is in relation to

the theme of the present chapter that the difference is most decisive and thus also important to highlight.

'We had expected something else from a consulting firm'

Actors in the hospital also talk about the analysing, documenting and reifying activities of the consultants and this is similarly an important aspect of how they perceive and construct consultants and how they expect them to perform their role. Thus in principle, they construct the potentiality of this aspect of the outsider magic in much the same way as the actors in the manufacturing company. However, they do not in the interviews use words like 'proof', 'facts' and 'truth' to describe what the consultants produce and what they do. The only exception is the top manager who comes close by talking about the knowledge about 'what is going on' that the consultants generate as we saw earlier.

Furthermore, actors in the operational units of the hospital contest the conclusions of the consultants a lot more often in interaction than internal actors in the manufacturing company. And in the interviews with these internal actors in the hospital it is precisely in relation to documentation and analysis that they are most critical of the consultants, not including top and central management of course. Internal actors amongst clinical management, particularly surgeons, bring up and talk extensively about areas where they feel the consultants do not document and analyse enough and thus do not live up to their expectations of what consultants are supposed to do as it is for instance expressed in the following statement:

> *I think there has been too little documentation.[...] We had expected something else from a consulting firm. There we had expected that they worked more in the field, basically, right. That they were out measuring what actually characterises the processes they had to change. [...] They should do what I perceive to be consulting work, but of course I don't know... we haven't seen what they were actually hired to do and what it said in their contract and how much one could demand of them, but surely the work processes have to be measured before you start anything (Middle manager).*

We shall see more examples of how the critique is expressed in a minute, but first I want to explore this perception of lack of documentation and analysis a bit more. It puzzled me as I was trying to get to grips with the interview material in the writing of this chapter and I didn't know how to make sense of the difference between the two contexts at first because it does not fit with my own experience of following the two assignments.

Analysis versus implementation?

One possible interpretation of the difference in the way internal actors in the manufacturing company and in the hospital experience the level of analysing and documenting activity of the consultants could be to suggest that the respective consulting teams simply perform and carry out the assignments differently. Maybe the consultants in the hospital do less of the analysing and documenting. In fact, I can imagine that the consultants working in the hospital would respond to the above criticism along the lines of: yes we do not do a lot of analysis and write reports the way traditional expert consultants do, because it is all about the implementation. As one of them affirms his identity as an implementation consultant in the interview:

> *"I don't think it is worth it doing reports that just end up collecting dust on a shelf, right."*
> *(Consultant).*

However, this is in no way different from how the consultants working in the manufacturing company would describe themselves. Furthermore, as I experienced it when following these two assignments there are no overall significant differences in the way the two consulting firms work when it comes to this aspect. As one of the consultants in the manufacturing context for instance puts it when starting the presentation of the results for the steering group:

> "We wanted to set in where your people think the shoe pinches and there is no time for a
> thorough and long-winded analysis." (Field notes).

So although there is what they call 'fact-finding' in the manufacturing context there is also no 'thorough and long-winded analysis' as traditional expert consultants would do it. Similarly, a top manager in the manufacturing company talks in the interview about how the consulting analysis is not very in-depth and thorough because it is all about getting from analysis to implementation as fast as possible:

> *"They don't necessarily start from 0 and go up to 20. It could be that if there is an
> [internal] observation that is a 7 on the scale, then they take their starting point in that
> and then maybe they push it a bit down in the direction of the zero to get some things
> validated, but by starting at 7 you get up to 20 a lot quicker, if you understand [...] Then
> they investigate what supports that hypothesis, you know if you are quite sure about it
> then it is just the last 20% you just have to get uncovered and then you get started on
> testing solutions quicker [...] and that means that you can get from analysis to
> implementation faster." (Top manager).*

Thus it seems plausible to conclude that there are no significant differences with regards to how much or how in-depth and thoroughly analysis is done by the two consulting teams in the two contexts. The interesting thing is that even though the consultants in the manufacturing context do not do the traditional consulting analysis, internal actors nevertheless put extensive importance on, and generally praise them for, their documenting, proving and analysing activities. In the hospital the consultants do much the same, but here the internal actors react and interpret it completely differently. Instead of praise it is criticism.

As I experienced it during fieldwork these types of activities are important and dominant consulting activities in all interactions with internal actors in both contexts. Both consulting teams focus on developing and implementing solutions, but part of how they work with implementation is related to using the politics of reification. As the consultants I quoted earlier describe it, it is very important to 'prove that what they say holds water' and to 'have something to shoot with'.

So the reactions in the hospital context cannot be interpreted simply as a result of the focus on implementation. Indeed the fact that the consultants focus on implementing rather than just writing a report is seen as very positive by internal actors in the hospital. As for instance indicated in the following statement by a functional manager who is also at the same time one of the critics when it comes to documentation and analysis:

> *"It was a project where you… instead of having a consulting firm out to romp around with all kinds of measuring and this sort of thing and then a report comes out that nobody understands a thing of. So it was process-wise a sound project, because everybody was involved from the beginning and could follow it and comment. So in comparison to all those consulting inquiries etc. I have been part of through my life as a doctor in different departments, this is by far the most interesting and the most down-to-earth and the most sensible and transparent. Where a lot of the rest has been nothing but hot air I have experienced, you know, waste of money simply." (Functional manager).*

Thus the critique is not related to the consulting approach as such and these internal actors in the hospital are not asking for traditional consulting inquiries and reports. Instead the difference has to be seen in relation to the context and how the consultants and what they do is interpreted in that context. Whether the documentation and analysis is accepted as objective and a version of reality that counts is influenced by the way consultants are positioned in the relevant social context. As we shall see in the following this is closely related to how the differentiation between insiders and outsiders functions in a particular context.

Objectivity as insider attribute

In the hospital context the consultants generally have to work hard on making their claims plausible and the demands on the ammunition are a lot higher than in the manufacturing context. The consultants are not attributed with the ability to establish truth because of their difference as in the manufacturing context where consultants are objective in contrast to 'us' and where 'we' operate on 'gut feelings' while 'they' are rational and operate on documentation. On the contrary, instead of being attributed with objectivity the claims of the consultants are perceived as relative in the hospital context. They have to earn objectivity. As the above functional manager who generally likes their consulting approach expresses it when talking about a particular issue:

> *"It probably came out a bit bombastic in the sense that it was something they [the consultants] considered as rational, but maybe without having done the completely thorough analysis in the units. [...] It is probably the right thing in the long run and it will end up working, but if the process had been a bit smarter and not had all the derivative effects, then it would probably have been a good idea to analyse what actually went on out there in the different units" (Functional manager).*

The consultants *consider* it as rational as he perceives it, but they have not proved that it is rational. This illustrates that the mutual process of establishing proof has not succeeded very well in the hospital context and the attribute of objectivity is a hard-earned one for consultants. The consultants have managed to convince at least some of the internal actors, as for instance this manager, but the process has been negatively influenced by the lack of a common agreed upon version of reality that counts and can be acted on by a broader range of internal actors.

The mutual creation of acceptable fact is difficult for outsiders to participate in because they are not attributed with objectivity the same way as in the manufacturing context. Perceptions of objectivity and plausible arguments are instead part of how internal actors identify themselves and what defines this organisation as a collectivity. The process of differentiation is thus radically different here compared to the manufacturing context. In the hospital context, perceptions of scientific objectivity form an important part of how many internal actors amongst clinical management and staff, especially surgeons, define themselves. Here it is the insiders who are identified as the scientists so to speak. It is what 'we' do that lends legitimacy from wider societal perceptions of scientific objectivity not what

the outsiders do. If we look at who the internal actors are who criticise the consultants with reference to lack of analysis and documentation they are mainly surgeons.

Objectivity is in other words an attribute of 'us' and not of 'them' even though the activities, they each perform, are different. This particular repertoire for differentiating the consultants does not attribute them with special abilities as a negation of insider abilities. In this sense the outsider position is more one of disadvantage than advantage in relation to documenting, analysing and representing. And objectivity is an insider attribute that has to be gained just like knowing and understanding as we saw in chapter 4. Because of that the reifications of the consultants are easily rendered illegitimate and undermined in this context especially early on in the project. This is precisely what happens in the first workshop as one of the consultants describes it:

> *"We had made some conclusions that were not very good. It had been generalised too strongly for us to get into a dialogue with our target group. These chief surgeons shot the argumentation down with thunder. So we were very much behind on points after the first workshop. [...] These are analytical people who will quickly shoot something like that down if they are not lit by the holy fire, then they will shoot it down. [...] You know, these are scientific workers. So it was a mixture of that and us having cut a heal and clipped a toe. And you shouldn't have done that at this point [...]. It put us behind from the beginning. It would have been a lot nicer to appear in the workshop as someone who were on top of what was going on than someone who were only half on top of it. So we had to... well, you know, we came into a phase afterwards where we had to legitimate ourselves again and luckily we succeeded with that, there is no doubt about that, that people down there have respect for us, but we were behind after that workshop."* (Consultant).

This is an example of a situation where the magical outsider position of the consultants is not maintained in interaction and the consultants have difficultly initiating the dialogue through which a common agreed version can emerge as a mutual product as we saw it in the previous section. In other contexts and situations it might matter less if the conclusions are bullet proof because the purpose is to create and use reifications to focus the negotiation of meaning in a particular way and establish a common version of reality that can be acted on. But in this context it matters and it will matter in any situation, in any context whenever the magic is not sustained in interaction, because there is always interpretation as also argued earlier.

No matter how much or how little consultants 'cut a heal and clip a toe' conclusions can always be contested. If enough internal actors have a different interpretation, and the power to make their version count, they will undermine and render the conclusions of the consultants illegitimate if they have an interest in doing so. It is easily done because the

outsider position is always just as potentially vulnerable as it is potentially magical. In the hospital context the consultants thus have to fight hard for their ability to define and reify because their outsider status initially works more against them than it works for them.

Lack of understanding and knowing

Another source of differentiation that contributes to undermining the documenting and reifying abilities of the consultants in this context is related to the same perceived lack of insider knowing and understanding related to the construction of them as distant cultural foreigners in the health-care world as described in chapter 4.

> *"They have never really gone into the details of it, as they have done with all kinds of other things. It is also important to understand that we also have some limitations that means that it curbs, you know, there are some things that become too inconvenient or it is not possible, because you have to run from one end to the other and the instruments are standing there etc. There can be some things that do it. I don't think they have really… they didn't really take the time to see what kind of workplace it is first. I would have liked that, that they had gone more into it". (Employee).*

This statement illustrates that consultants do indeed analyse things in detail, but when it comes to matters this particular actor knows, practices and cares about then the conclusion is that they haven't done enough because she does not feel that they really understand.

In the hospital context internal actors do not seem to buy the conclusions and arguments nearly as easily as they do in the manufacturing company. Both because they are not endowed with objectivity and ability to define and represent in the same way, but also because the construction of the consultants as distant 'others' work against them. This makes the politics of reification much more tricky business here and illustrates some of the limitations and vulnerability of the outsider position in relation to knowledge and truth creation.

> *"What I think has to be in place is a thorough analysis of work processes that are there and the agreements that are actually in place. So that someone from the outside doesn't come up with a lot of really good ideas about something that we have either tried before or where it is obvious to us, who work with it on a daily basis, that there are some barriers where it doesn't work. There has to be some proper analyses". (Functional manager).*

As this functional manager in the hospital expresses it, 'someone from the outside' can't just come up with good ideas without proving that they hold up.

In the manufacturing context where the outsider status of the consultants often works for them and where the magic is often sustained in interaction, there are also situations where it is undermined with the same reference to lack of insider knowing and understanding. One such situation is related to how thoroughly and detailed consultants work when collecting data as well as what data can potentially be used for. The consultants have been interviewing some employees about their work and neither the employees nor their manager like this particular activity as he himself describes it:

> M: There was no need for that. Everybody knew… all of us that have to use it. I knew much more. I could have sat and said all that […]. If you are going to make a description of the process on such a facility, then you can't do it in a few hours as they did […] You know, it was more a source of irritation, right […] That was the response I heard, right. That, 'listen we have these young lads standing here and then they have to write down, right. They have no clue about what I do', right. Here are people with 40 years experience that have to tell, again in a few hours, what it is… and that is how I got it back in my face […] It has no importance, nobody reads it. Waste of time.
> I: So what you are saying is that if they were to do it then they should to go into it much deeper or?
> M: Yeah bloody hell, a lot deeper. (Middle manager).

Here in this situation the reifications clearly have no legitimacy and just like in the hospital context they are undermined with reference to not being thorough and detailed enough. As it is expressed, what renders what the consultants do here illegitimate is a perceived lack of knowing and understanding on their part, i.e. 'they have no clue about what I do'.

Unwanted and disadvantageous reifications

Saying that, one might explore a bit further why the consultants are undermined in this situation. Why is it not ok to do the quick analysis, 'starting on 7' as described earlier, that the consultants do in relation to all other issues in this context and mostly with success. The middle manager himself is one of the actors who generally appreciates and praises the analysing and documenting of these same consultants. In the interview he does not give many clues as to why it is not working in this situation, apart from just asserting that it was unnecessary data anyway. One of the consultants also brings this situation up in the interview with me. Here is how he interprets it:

> "And there I remember that they were a bit like… or they were of course nervous about what we would use those numbers for. […] And there they maybe felt a bit… it was the only time, I think, where there was a bit of breach of trust maybe […] because it was also combined with that they felt that Mark had been a bit… maybe gone over it a bit fast with

some of them, so some of these [employees] had not really had the chance to tell the whole story about what else they did etc." (Consultant).

Maybe the data is said to be unnecessary because it is unwanted seen from the perspective of this particular internal actor. Some things are better left unreified you might say, because by being reified it takes on a new status as objective reality that can potentially be used for purposes that might not be to the advantage of neither this middle manager nor his employees. So when consultants create what is perceived as unwanted or potentially disadvantageous reifications it is very likely that the relevant internal actors will attempt to undermine them. And a good way to do that is always to refer to their outsider status, i.e. 'they have no clue about what I do' along with claiming lack of depth, detail or thoroughness of data and analysis.

In arguing this I am of course not blind to the fact that an analysis can be more or less correct and thorough and conclusions more or less valid. Consultants can make conclusions that are so obviously incorrect to internal actors that that in itself undermines them no matter what attributes and abilities they might otherwise have been endowed with. Certainly, the consultant above, who describes the first workshop in the hospital, does view the conclusions he himself took part in presenting as a bit problematic, because they had 'cut a heal and clipped a toe'.

However, he probably never would have given their validity, or lack thereof, a second thought if the workshop had instead developed successfully as a mutual negotiation and creation of a common agreed upon version of reality. Indeed, further data collection and analysis after the first workshop he describes does not lead to different solutions being presented at the next workshop. What it does instead is create more acceptance and less resistance than in the first workshop even though it is still not all actors who are equally convinced. The objectivity of the consultants and their arguments continues to be contested to varying degrees throughout this project as the above statements indicate. Ultimately that has got less to do with the quality of the analysing and more to do with how internal actors in this specific context interpret and position the consultants and their reifications.

By saying this I am of course not arguing that it doesn't matter whether consultants are thorough and draw valid conclusions to the best of their ability and according to certain standards and criteria. Validity is not arbitrary and consultants should, as a professional community, have standards for what constitutes valid analysis and adhere to them. Just like I,

in this thesis, have to adhere to standards of validity established in the academic community of which I am a part.

The point I want to make in relation to consultants is that no matter how well they do their analysis the validity of the conclusions ultimately has to be established by relevant members of the client organisation according to *their* criteria. Otherwise it has no meaning and no possibility of affecting practice in that organisation. In order for a conclusion to be valid in any social context it has to be possible to achieve agreement about its validity in that particular context (Hastrup 1995). To cite Hastrup: "[T]he hardness of facts is an expression of social agreement rather than a quality of the facts themselves" (Hastrup 1995: 175). Social agreement of course does not mean that every single person individually agrees with, likes or supports the conclusions of an analysis. Instead it means that internal actors agree on the terms, the working consensus again, and that the analysis lives up to the criteria of validity that are collectively accepted in that social context.

OUTSIDER REIFICATION CONDITIONED BY INSIDER ATTRIBUTES

As also argued in the previous chapters, outsider abilities are conditioned by being maintained in interaction. Consultants have to be separated from internal actors by the drawing and maintenance of a particular boundary that can function as a source of opportunity for influencing the organisation as a collectivity. At the same time the outsider magic is also conditioned by the extent to which the outsider is able to cross that boundary in interaction. The contribution of this chapter has focused specifically on the ability to reify and define a version of what is going on in the organisation.

In summary, the chapter has argued that if consultants are endowed with objectivity and power to define and represent, they can as outsiders create the kind of reifications that are important in the context of change because it focuses meaning making and negotiation in new directions and provides an agreed upon version of reality that can be acted on. At the same time however their outsider status can also be a source of differentiation that is potentially marginalising. In the present chapter we have seen this particularly in the hospital context where the process of differentiating 'them' up against 'us' leaves the consultants and their reifications initially lacking the attribute of objectivity.

Another source of differentiation that is also potentially disadvantageous when it comes to the ability to document and prove is perceived lack of insider knowing and understanding. Just like when it comes to the ability to challenge, the reifying magic is also conditioned by the degree to which internal actors feel that consultants know and understand local circumstances, processes and practices.

In the next and final empirical chapter I turn to the ability to come up with ideas and solutions to the problems documented. Consultants are not expected to simply reify and document problems, the way things are and the way things are done. They are also expected to have special knowledge and expertise that can be used in order to solve problems, change the way things are and come up with new ways of doing and organising things in response to what their analysis has shown.

The Ability to Provide Solutions and New Ideas

> *"The famous diviners who attract customers from distant areas have impressive foreign techniques, usually learned in areas whose people are reputed to have powerful medicines. They charge high fees for their services." (Colson 1966/2006: 222).*

The theme of this chapter is the definition of consultants as agents who bring management ideas, knowledge and experience 'from the outside' enabling them to provide solutions to problems, new ideas and help insiders learn how to conduct and organise their work and business in better ways. This is related to yet another aspect of the special abilities consultants are attributed with by way of differentiation and it is about the content that defines consultants as a particular kind of outsider; a management expert. By content I mean the knowledge and expertise consultants are expected to possess, both in the form of management theory, ideas, concepts and techniques as well as ideas and experience derived from their work in other organisations.

This relates to the classic depiction of management consultants as management experts. It is to a large extent a common-sense and dominant perception that practicing management consulting involves and requires management knowledge, expertise and experience that is both utilised in the process of solving client problems and should be transferred to the client. In the words of Kubr (2002): "Management consulting can be described as transferring to clients knowledge required for managing and operating businesses and other organizations" (2002: 4). According to Czerniawska (2002) there is an increasing focus on this expertise amongst clients with the consequence that process consultation for instance is no longer enough as clients see it, precisely because of the lack of focus on contributing with new knowledge and expertise (Czerniawska 2002).

In research on consulting the nature of the expertise of consultants and in what sense it can be seen as a specific knowledge base of consultants is debated and questioned (Clark 1995, Legge 2002, Salaman 2002) as we also saw it in chapter 3. Nonetheless, no matter how different authors deal with this aspect it is almost always there in description, analysis and discussion of the management consulting industry. Defining the nature of management consultancy is as Fincham and Clark (2002: 2) puts it, "a contentious task", but it is in any case closely associated with "management ideas and techniques" (ibid.) as it appears in the following statement:

> *"What constitutes management consultancy is constantly transforming. Management ideas and techniques are subject to swings in fashion in the same way as aesthetic aspects of life [...]. Thus, while consultancy is an advice-giving activity the nature of the advice and the composition of the advice-givers changes over time". (Fincham and Clark 2002: 2).*

As Salaman (2002) argues, we must analyse such knowledge and ideas by focusing on the conditions and circumstances under which they are produced, contested and made to count. How internal actors construct consultants as providers of outsider knowledge and how they negotiate and contest those ideas in the context of concrete assignments constitute part of those conditions. This is what I explore in this chapter. It should, however, be emphasised that the definition of consultants as management experts is similarly an important aspect of consultant identity and positioning. Of all the aspects of their potential value for client organisations as explored in this thesis, this is the aspect consultants themselves attribute with the greatest importance. Paradoxically it is also the most ambiguous as I will show in the present chapter.

AGENTS OF MANAGEMENT IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS

One look at the websites of the two consulting firms in my study is enough to indicate that the identity of these firms and their consultants is closely related to the content of what they offer their clients; namely management ideas, concepts, tools and techniques. Both firms list in very similar ways the areas of their expertise: Strategy, Lean Manufacturing, Lean

Administration, Supply Chain Management, Balanced Score Card, Sales, Performance Management, Innovation, Business Development etc.

Their websites tell us that they are selling expertise applied in the course of change implementation processes where problems are solved and results created in the form of increased productivity, improved efficiency, better quality, better profitability etc. As consultants they do, however, identify as different from the stereotype of the detached expert adviser because they focus on implementing and creating change. They are what Czerniawska (2002) describes as '*doers'* rather than just advisers (ibid. 100). Nevertheless, management knowledge and ideas, concepts, tools and techniques are no less important for their identity. They are involved experts who engage in an implementing consulting practice and use expertise in action. In interaction with internal actors they thus position themselves, to varying degrees, as agents who advise, teach and transfer their knowledge.

'The Lean people'

This expert positioning is strongest in the hospital context where the consultants are hired to implement Lean Manufacturing principles in a surgical unit. In interaction with internal actors the consultants position themselves as experts, proponents, representatives and teachers of Lean. And naturally so, because Lean is the occasion for their presence and it is what they are supposed to be all about seen from the perspective of internal actors as we shall see. It is first and foremost Lean expertise the client is buying. This is illustrated for instance in the following interview extract where the commissioning top manager in the hospital is describing how the project came about:

> *"So last autumn [...] I was actually already conscious of Lean and I had of course also followed the cases there had been, you know [x] etc. etc. and I had in my normal newspaper reading paid attention to Lean. [...] Now I can hardly remember... but Verner [a functional manager] had already spoken with [the consulting firm] at that time and he had also spoken with some others, but he had had an information meeting with [the consulting firm]. And now I can't remember if it was they who approached me because he had said that now there is someone in top management who is interested in this. Or if it was me because I had heard about [Lean project in another hospital], but I said that I would like to hear some more about this. So I set up a meeting with them, first a narrow meeting just with the board of directors. As it turned out a couple of us had heard about it and we had a discussion about whether something like this could be used in the hospital sector and where you could do it etc. etc. And I became convinced that fundamentally we ought to integrate this as part of our entire operational basis, you know in our organisation and implement it all over the hospital." (Top manager).*

It is clear from this description that the driver for hiring the consultants is Lean as concept and the particular consulting firm is chosen because they are known for their Lean expertise:

> *They [the consulting firm] have been coming up a lot you could say, right, and they have gathered some experiences from their Lean project in [x hospital] and we had in the preliminary phases a very constructive dialogue about what this is all about and how and so on." (Top manager).*

The project is on a daily basis called 'the Lean project' and the goal is to use Lean thinking, methods and tools to increase productivity in a surgical unit. At the same time the idea is also to build up the competence internally to carry out more Lean projects in other areas of the hospital. In the following statements by two actors in central hospital management and administration, it is similarly evident that the consultants are perceived as agents that should employ and pass on their Lean expertise:

> *"They teach us some new things. Even though we will hopefully be able to hire some people and run it [the Lean implementation] ourselves going forward, we are dependent on them for a while to teach the new people and then they shouldn't be here anymore." (Functional manager).*

> *"They have some knowledge that no internal consultants have here, or that any of us have at this point. So just professionally we would not be able to do what they do. You know, because we don't know that way of thinking and things like that, so we have to have someone with the expertise, right." (Employee).*

Thus the nature of the expertise the consultants are perceived to have is constructed as external and differentiated from what insiders know and can do at this point. Again the position of the consultants is connected with an ability 'they' have in contrast to 'us'. What distinguishes this aspect from what we have seen in the previous chapters is that it is about the content consultants should bring from the outside. It is content that is perceived as somehow lacking internally, but often the implication is that it ought to be there. The knowledge of consultants is meant to be left behind so to speak and transferred to client actors. This content should in a sense change status from external to internal in the course of a consulting engagement.

This resonates with the way consultants position themselves, as teachers and mentors and they differentiate their outsider expertise by emphasising the necessity of insider learning. As it is stated in the contract with the hospital:

"[X-consulting firm] commit to support knowledge transfer in every context, build up Lean competence and generally further the Lean-culture in the organisation."

As we see it here, Lean is not just a concept or method about which consultants have knowledge and expertise; it is a 'culture'. In this way Lean is constructed as external content that its 'carriers' commit themselves to pass on to the client organisation so it can become internal content in the sense of knowledge, competence and culture.

In the hospital context the consultants are thus strongly identified with Lean through the dialectic of the way internal actors position them and through their own positioning. They are identified with their Lean expertise and positioned as agents that bring Lean to the hospital from the business world regardless of whether that is seen as something positive or negative by different internal actors. Their status as experts of Lean is in other words an important source of differentiation. To a certain extent Lean defines who the consultants are and internal actors often refer to them as 'the Lean people'. Here is a range of examples randomly cut out from different interviews with clinical management and staff in the hospital:

"[...] you can't blame the Lean people for that [...] made some decisions together with the Lean people [...] now where the Lean people are out again [...] they have been sitting down there in reality the Lean people [...] it wasn't until the Lean people came then all of a sudden it was possible [...] I had some kind of expectation that the Lean people would [...] and the Lean people think we do the right thing [...] but you know, with the Lean people I would say [...] and that wasn't possible while the Lean people were here [...] it was mostly something that the Lean people thought had to be done [...] there I would say that the Lean people didn't [...] I don't know exactly what the right thing is but the Lean people say that [...] but besides, that is something else the Lean people said to us [...]" (Extracts from interviews with internal actors).

The consultants are in a sense constructed as belonging to a Lean tribe - 'the Lean people'. They come to embody the concept as it also appears in the following where a middle manager simply refers to them as 'Lean'. He is describing different aspects of the project at length and as he does so, he keeps repeating that he finds it difficult to say if this, that or the other is down to Lean or management:

"There it is also difficult to say what is Lean and what is management. But I think it is both. At any rate, Lean have not pointed out that there is a possibility here. And that must be something they are used to." (Middle manager).

The way the word 'Lean' is used here it refers to specific social actors, the consultants. They are social actors that embody Lean just like other social actors embody management. The consultants *are* Lean and they have no choice but to be intimately identified with whatever associations and interpretations different internal actors create in relation to it. Their position in social space is fixed and bound up with Lean. They can never step away from this identity and positioning. They always have to defend Lean, always have to teach and demonstrate how it is to be lived, thought and practised in every situation and they always have to defend their monopoly on the correct interpretation of Lean. The need for such a strong positioning is intensified in a self perpetuating process, because the consultants are identified with a concept whose meaning has a life of its own independently of the consultants and what they say and do.

Lean is the focus of extensive media attention and debate at the time of the project in the hospital and that comes to play a role in the project. One day as I arrive in the unit where the consultants work, I run into a couple of employees in the hallway. They are asking excitedly if I have seen the article about Lean in the newspaper this morning. In case I haven't; here is copy. "This proves that it doesn't work" as one of them says.

Articles like this one is cut out of newspapers, brought to work, copied, distributed and discussed. Sometimes with comments written on them, one for instance quoting the title of a Danish song that is often on the radio: 'Work, work work'… Lean is discussed at the dinner table at home, as some internal actors tells me in the interviews, and it is discussed and talked about in all corners of the hospital amongst actors who have never met the consultants. Rumours, meanings and interpretations are created in abundance around the concept. Some positive, some negative and some more in line with the consultants' interpretation of Lean than others.

The consultants influence only a part of the meaning-making around the concept that in a sense turns it into an agent in and of itself. The content consultants are thought to bring to the client organisation becomes fused with and confused with interpretations created by internal actors as they negotiate what the consultants are occasioning by their mere presence as 'Lean people'. It is these interpretations the consultants become associated with even if they might not be able to recognise these meanings as their own 'Lean-thinking'.

Positioned as experts

In the manufacturing context the identification of consultants with particular management ideas and techniques is less pronounced and thus does not function as a source of differentiation in the same way as in the hospital. Nevertheless it is still an aspect of what defines them as consultants. The difference in comparison with the hospital context is, firstly, that the knowledge of consultants is perceived as more similar to that of particular insiders, especially managers. Secondly, in the manufacturing company it is not a management concept as such that occasions the presence of the consultants. Instead it is strategy development and change implementation as part of a company-wide turn-around process. The driver for hiring them is thus not a concept, but it is the need to create change for survival and solve problems to make the company profitable. Solutions are developed in the process using a combination of different ideas and elements of techniques and concepts according to what is relevant.

The definition of the consultants as provider of management ideas and expertise is nevertheless still an aspect of how they are positioned by internal actors. The consultants position themselves accordingly, but not as strongly as the consultants in the hospital context. Internal actors on the other hand clearly position them as experts as the consultants themselves experience it:

> *"[…] down here there is really a need for our… you know, it is almost as if we almost have to tell them the solution. Where our approach is more that we are happy to provide expert advice, but the more we can get them involved and get them to take responsibility for the solution the better. Where there is a kind of an attitude down here that we should come as experts and tell them what to do" (Consultant).*

> *"[…] in general, [the company] likes that. They like consultants that are a bit expert-like and say here is the solution. We pull them a bit in the other direction, because we say to them that if we do that, then we will have more difficulty implementing it […] so we try to pull in the other direction, give birth to the idea with them and get them to fight for it. […] We should not do this as an expert project. It is not me and a few of your people who should sit and think fine thoughts and come up with the big solution and say this is what we do from now on. Because we will never get through with it". (Consultant).*

As we see from how the consultants experience it, internal actors construct and position them as experts even when they try to 'pull a bit in the other direction'. The consultants are thus very much aware of the expert positioning they are given and the perception of the content they are expected to deliver. This is also evident for instance in preparation meetings etc.

where the consultants talk amongst themselves. The following extracts from my field notes are examples from the manufacturing context:

> They [the consultants] talk about improvement initiatives. The plan is to have a gross list in reserve, but to not present them from the beginning - get them [internal actors] to say it themselves and if they don't, then introduce the suggestions when it is relevant. Steen comments that: "We should have the coordinating role, but we also should not misunderstand the implementation role, because I think some of them expect us to provide input." (Field notes).

> John: "We have to be careful not just to repeat the things they have been going around saying for the last 10 years themselves. Even if they have not done anything about it. We have to work structured with the system - how should they manage it? What should prevent the imbalance? etc."
> Bo: "I think we already have a lot that is new." (Field notes).

> Henning: "The dialogue at the meeting today should be centred around - this is our picture, is that also yours? And these are our recommendations. And finally where do we go from here?"
> Per: "And our suggestions to what we do, because he is the type… he doesn't solve problems for us." (Field notes).

The position they have as agents, who are expected to provide input, new ideas, advice and solve problems, is reflected in the way the consultants plan and discuss future interactions with internal actors as we see it here.

That internal actors define and position the consultants this way is evident in the interviews with internal actors. The top manager the consultants are referring to in the latter exchange expresses precisely the expectation they are talking about:

> *"I think that the consultants generally… they should dare to go beyond, you know, walk the plank and say: 'now do this and do that'. Instead of just presenting the results. But in spite of that I do think that they are… they do take actively part in it, actually." (Top manager).*

And as the following statement illustrates it is not just top management who expects the consultants to provide the solutions:

> *"Everybody here knew that that was a problem, we have known that for many years. Then they hired someone to do something about it. But no solutions have really been brought to the table yet, as far as I can see" (Employee).*

In interaction, internal actors actively position the consultants as experts, sometimes explicitly and other times more indirectly by letting the consultants take the lead in development of ideas and solutions and maybe evade involvement in the process. Here are first of all examples of the former from my field notes where the consultants are explicitly challenged to provide the answers:

> "If you as consultants could say… tell us what it is going to take for it to really make a difference." (Field notes).

> "You consultants should learn to skip all the many power points where you show how smart you are and just say what we should do." (Field notes).

An example of the more indirect way can be drawn from a situation where one of the consultants is working on developing improvement initiatives and trying to involve the middle manager whose area of responsibility it is and thus also area of expertise. Simon, the consultant, is sitting at a desk directly facing Jens, the middle manager. They are both working on their computers each on their own thing it seems. There is only the odd exchange of words now and then, mainly initiated by Simon asking Jens questions or trying to involve him in what he is working on. Like for instance in this little extract:

> Simon: "What I'm thinking is that the [x]… it has to be able to move between… how the hell do we do that?
> Jens: hmm (thinking)… yeah that will…
> Simon: can we do [x]?
> Jens: No I have to pull it out
> Simon: Ok
> Simon: Those numbers we would actually be able to get. Shouldn't I write that it is [x]?
> Jens: Yes
> Silence again. (Field notes).

Jens mostly responds with yes and no without engaging in a dialogue with Simon. Simon tries different things, like going around on the other side to stand next to Jens at his desk to ask questions. After lunch Simon needs to look at some records. Jens pulls them out and they are standing by the shelves where Jens has his folders. Jens now gets more involved in explaining, recounting and describing, but he never goes beyond just telling Simon about the way things are now and what happens in this or that situation etc. The division of roles is clear between them. Simon asks questions and Jens gives him information about the current state of affairs, but he does not contribute with ideas or what he thinks could be possible

solutions to the problems. It is important to note that this situation is not a situation of data collection. They are working on the development of solutions. Problems have to be solved and improvements and other change initiatives implemented.

There is probably a mix of reasons why Jens let the consultant take the lead in the development work. The obvious one is precisely about their respective positions. Jens is busy with *his* work, doing his job and making sure he gets done what needs to be done today. His first and primary concern is the immediate and daily operations that his role involves. In that sense it is also about the particular position consultants have in contrast to that. They are not the agents of daily practice. By definition they are the agents of discontinuity from daily practice and therefore also the new, the change.

Furthermore one might also wonder whether there is an element of passive resistance and feelings of being invaded on his own area of responsibility and expertise. During fieldwork I often wondered how it feels for internal actors to have consultants come in and work so hands on with areas they themselves work with on a daily basis. In the interview I ask Jens about this:

> *I: how does it feel when Simon sometimes works… what can you say… also very close to your own work and your own area and things like that. You know, sometimes I have been here and observed meetings etc. where you are sitting together and dealing with things that you normally do. How is that?*
> *J: Well yeah, but that is… you know, once in a while you do feel that it is kind of: What? don't they think that you can do your job properly and do it the right way. But on the other hand it is also ok to get some… it is good to get some new impulses to… it might be that you are not completely updated on everything, so it is good to get some input from them I think. So I don't find that irritating, even though once in a while… we have actually talked about that… well we have done that before, really. And this here, we have decided to do it that way, right, and now he comes and says: 'should we just try'… well actually doing the same thing once more, as we have done before, right. (Middle manager).*

This gives us a glimpse of the ambiguity of the position as outsider expert and idea provider. Jens wants the new input and the new impulses and he expects the consultants to provide it. But at the same time it can be easily undermined, i.e. we have done that before or it will never work here etc. The insiders will always see themselves as the 'real' experts. As I have often heard it expressed: "Consultants can never be experts on our business". Internal actors and only they really *know* because they are the agents who define and perform everyday practice. As we shall see later in this chapter the construction of consultants as experts and providers of

ideas and solutions is extremely ambiguous and it seems to be the aspect of the outsider position that represents the greatest paradoxes at the same time as it is also the aspect that is generally given the most importance in the dominant discourse about consulting. It is in some ways a matter of being in a position as both novice/learner and expert/teacher at the same time.

Consultants are expected to possess, provide and transfer clearly differentiated, exclusive and delimited outsider knowledge and expertise. The risks in connection with this aspect of the outsider position relates to content becoming interpreted as either too similar, i.e. not new and superior enough as we shall see in the following section, or too different and therefore also irrelevant and useless. The latter is explored later in the chapter, here first the importance of enough differentiation.

NEWNESS AND SUPERIORITY

As described above, internal actors in the manufacturing company do not talk about the content that defines the consultants with reference to a particular management concept as they do in the hospital context. Instead the focus is on talking about the consultants as suppliers of *new* impulses, input, ideas, thinking and means and ways of doing things:

> *"They also come up with some new thinking for us. And new ways to organise, new ways… and then you can agree or disagree, but they come up with some new suggestions [...] that is where they have really provided many good inputs. Because we of course think we are world champions in running a [x] department, right, but really we have actually learned many things [...] that's also the positive experience, that they bring something. They say: here you can improve." (Top manager).*

> *"I think I have got, especially from Otto, some inputs that are good, also… you know the actual way of going about [x]. If we could try to do it another way, right. And we might not be able to use it a 100%, but I have got some ideas at least." (Employee).*

> *"So it is not so much that they just say to someone that now you have to make sure that this [employee] gets better. No, they say he has to get better and now I'm going to tell you why he should be better and by what means he can get better. So I have been happy with that." (Top manager).*

The consultants are constructed as agents who should 'bring something' and that something should be new and different from what 'we' already know or how 'we' already do things. This

is part of how consultants are differentiated from insiders. In that sense the consultants are also in this context positioned as teachers and the insiders as learners. The consultants are differentiated by way of the content they are expected to possess, bring and teach insiders as we similarly saw it in the hospital context. 'They come up with new thinking for us' as one of the top managers here puts it. This seems to be very much in line with the dominant perception of consultants as experts who transfer knowledge to clients. However, the same top manager also talks about that in his experience few consultants actually do this:

> *"I have to admit that I have actually not had many positive experiences with consulting firms, because often it is like this that we have to provide everything ourselves and yes, you know, they can be a bit devil's advocate, but they rarely add anything positive. That was my experience"* (Top manager).

With the present consultants he generally feels differently as he puts it in the previous statement presented above. The consultants have in his experience provided ideas; brought something to the table and the insiders have 'actually learned many things'. However, despite the fact that he describes the present consultants as better than other consultants he has experienced, there are also situations where they fail to come up with the magic solution he hopes for:

> *"The only area where I so far feel… […] I don't think there has been enough input that can contribute to move this. The inputs that have come, well that is actually what we have worked with ourselves […]. It is an old well-known problem for the company, right, and over the years we have tried lots of different things that have not worked optimally and that's why I feel a bit checkmate on this […] but there is not really any good solutions […] And that also proves somehow that it is not an easy process, right. […] but that is probably an area where I had hoped that the five-legged lamb [snaps his fingers] had come, right. YES!! We can try that, right. […] And there I don't think they have supplied very much. There has been many good ideas, but no single individual thing we can kind of chase and I had hoped for that. I was maybe naive, but I had hoped it, right. […] Like completely new - we could try that, it is completely new, right."* (Top manager).

It is interesting to see how the top manager talks about his disappointment; knowing full well that what he wants the consultants to supply is as unlikely as a 'five-legged lamb'. He is in other words hoping for a miracle although he knows that the problem, that has him feeling 'checkmate' after years of trying, is not just solved with the snap of a finger. But the consultants represent hope because they are perceived to possess ideas that are new and different and thus by implication almost magical. In a sense the consultants are seen as

possessing something that is not unlike the "impressive foreign technique" and "powerful medicines" of the alien diviners as opposed to the local diviners, as Colson describes it in the context of the Tonga of Zambia (1966/2006: 222). This is similarly described in the context of consulting by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003):

> *"Observe that in both cases the foreignness of the expertise is an important part of that expertise; the special powers, in van Gennep's terms, have to do with experiences in distant places (other worlds)." (ibid. 280).*

Although I am using a different theoretical framework from Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) it is clear that what they are asking us to observe in this quote is very similar to what I am showing here. Such perceptions of the value of external knowledge as opposed to internal knowledge also represent a more general phenomenon in the context of organisations as Menon and Pfeffer (2003) argue. They explain the preference for outsiders with fundamental features of organisational life and argue that the perceived scarcity of external knowledge and the effort required to obtain it in comparison with internal knowledge enhances its value (ibid.).

My argument is similar in the sense that perceived scarcity for instance can be one way to construct and differentiate 'external knowledge' as something valuable in relation to 'internal knowledge'. This differentiation can be achieved in many different ways while the mechanism is the same. What is interpreted as valuable about outsider knowledge is always in some way related to perceptions of that which it negates.

The above statements by client actors from my study show that consultants are expected to bring something to the table that is far and beyond what any internal manager can come up with. 'New' is the attribute of ideas and solutions of outsiders that functions as the dichotomy of the old ways of insiders; what we have tried before etc. Another top manager comments on a suggestion from a consultant in a very similar way:

> *"[...] we have said that many times before, there is nothing new in that. And I don't believe in a solution that doesn't contain something new to solve the same problem" (Top manager).*

A suggestion fails to be interpreted as 'new' because it is seen as too similar to something that has been said 'many times before'. In the manufacturing context where consulting ideas generally seem to have the greatest difficulty with attaining the status as new, different and

unknown, it is not least do to with the fact that managers often know about the same management concepts, methods and techniques from education, training, books, previous consultants, experience etc. They are part of the same management and business world as the consultants. As a functional manager for instance describes it:

> *"I think they are very competent in the things they do. Well, I can only compare with the way we did it in [x] company [...] but it is the same ideas. It is the same goals that you go for." (Functional manager).*

This particular manager does not seem to mind that it is the same ideas, because he agrees with them and he believes that they represent the right way to do it. I will return to the issue of agreeing or disagreeing with ideas in the last section of this chapter. The point here is that in relation to the issues this particular manager is preoccupied with, his focus is not so much on the need for new ideas because he does not feel at a loss for answers. He believes he already knows what the solution is and so he is of course happy with the competence of the consultants in those correct approaches.

The examples used so far in this section are all from the manufacturing company, but the same is also sometimes evident in the hospital. This is interesting because the expertise of the consultants is initially clearly differentiated in the hospital, i.e. Lean expertise from a distant world. Nevertheless, there are examples of the same way of interpreting the value of the expertise according to perceived newness:

> *"But I don't think they have come up with something that I didn't... because it is kind of like we have filled them with the ideas. Or you can say those ideas or those things we could also experience in our daily life, so I don't think they have come up with anything new that way around, but they have as I see it at any rate got me to think about that it is not enough that you do things, you also have to get it written down and get it systematised, as I say, into boxes" (Employee).*

As we see in this example, some of the ideas the consultants have provided are not interpreted as new. Just like it is also sometimes the case in the manufacturing company; ideas are not new and therefore also not special if they are too similar. What this employee experiences as unique and different, and therefore by implication also most valuable, refers instead to reification as explored in the previous chapter. The following is another example from the hospital of how the ideas in themselves are not interpreted as new and therefore also less

valuable. Instead it is again other aspects of what can be provided from an outsider position that is drawn out and emphasised:

> *"It is not really anything that is so wonderfully fantastically new, smart, interesting. Other than that... well I think that really really many of us have that way of thinking in us already, but you can use it to get something started and you can use it to get things changed that you would like to change, because you can't just come as yourself and say - now I would like to change this. But when you have someone behind you with that competence and say well because it is called a Lean-project then we can change it, in reality. [...] and then you can say that it might be that its not so many new things they have come with, but they have at any rate helped us to get something done that we wanted to get done anyway, right." (Middle manager).*

We see here how ideas fail to attain the status as 'new'. The Lean thinking, that is generally portrayed as radically different from how internal actors think, is in relation to concrete issues interpreted as something that is actually not that different. It is something that many people have in them already as expressed here. Thus it is not so 'wonderfully fantastically new, smart, interesting'. Or in other words, it is not so magical because it is interpreted as too similar. What is magical instead relates to the political aspects as explored in chapter 5. It is not the ideas as such but the legitimacy associated with something called a Lean-project carried out by Lean experts. Here we see how the expertise of consultants play a symbolic role that is part of their potential sources of influence. This illustrates again that the different aspects of the outsider magic are implicated in each other in practice and that the different abilities consultants are attributed with can and should function to sustain each other in numerous ways. Another example relates to the issue of actually getting consulting ideas and solutions implemented. As it is for instance expressed in different ways by two internal actors in the manufacturing company:

> *"That is what the consulting firm is good at, to get some action behind it, because I think that has been lacking." (Employee).*

> *"They can easily provide the instruments etc., but going from there and getting it... what can you say... out in the system, there is a hell of a long way. Because they might be eminently good ideas for us, but until they are really out there..." (Top manager).*

Ideas, instruments, methods, concepts and techniques, regardless of whether they are interpreted as new or not, are of course worthless unless they actually make a difference in the organisation. The extent to which consultants have opportunities for taking part

in influencing the system, as this top manager calls it, relates essentially to all aspects of the outsider position.

Content attributed with superiority

If the ideas, knowledge and solutions consultants provide cannot be interpreted as new or different from what 'we' know, it will at the very least have to be interpreted as superior or advanced in order to attain status as valuable. As a top manager in the manufacturing company describes one of the consultants:

> *"Frederik is an extremely skilled expert within production and logistics and flows and stock and optimisation on distribution and Lean and all that. There he really outperforms everyone here in the company, right. Because that is what he has worked with [...] in all kinds of companies, so he does of course have a template way of thinking that is sharp of course. We don't have that." (Top manager).*

Again it is the differentiation that makes the content of what the consultant provides valuable. The outsider who applies his expertise in many different contexts outperforms 'everyone here' and he has something 'we don't have'. As we also saw it in the way the functional manager talks about it, the high level of competence in the right approaches is emphasised. Thus, the construction of consultants as the agents with expertise, answers, tools, ideas and solutions to problems is always there in one way or another. Matching the dominant perception that consultants have specialist knowledge that should be transferred to clients and that client organisations should learn something from consultants and become better at doing it themselves when the consultants are gone as we also saw it in the hospital context.

The consultants are the agents who are supposed to bring ideas and solutions that are new or at least superior and advanced, i.e. different, unknown to us or beyond our competence and therefore also valuable. When the suggestions and ideas of consultants fail to be interpreted as new and different from what we ourselves have already come up with or done before, then they lose legitimacy and they are deprived of their perceived magic and thus also their value. The knowledge of consultants is thus not inherently new or superior; it has to be interpreted that way. It has to acquire that status in interaction and that is possible by way of differentiation from existing internal knowledge. However, it is equally problematic if the knowledge and ideas of consultants are too different as we shall see in the following. One of the surest ways for consultants to become marginalised is to be perceived as theoretical,

'damned know-it-all', out of touch with local realities or come with fixed preconceived solutions.

DOWN TO EARTH AND IN TOUCH WITH REALITY

As much as the perception of special outsider knowledge is part of the magical outsider status and more than anything the definition of what consultants deliver, it is also at the same time something of a two-edged sword. It comes with expectations of radical newness and differentiation in relation to what 'we' already know thereby creating the hope of miracles and other such extraordinary and fantastic effects as explored in the previous section. This is very difficult to supply, not just because knowledge and ideas are never exclusive and delimited, but also because if the differentiation is achieved it easily creates the perception that the knowledge and ideas are irrelevant and useless because they are too general and distant from experienced reality as I will show in this section.

Relevant and useful knowledge and good ideas and solutions that will work in practice are not simply 'brought in from the outside', but are rather the result of a mutual production where internal actors are active co-creators. Knowledge and ideas can not simply be transferred, only mutually transformed. The above consultant working in the manufacturing company touches on this when he says that the ideas have to be born with internal actors. And the consultants in the hospital should probably take it as an indicator of success when the above employee feels that the ideas really stem from her daily working life. Too much differentiation is just as problematic, if not more so, as too little differentiation.

A middle manager in the manufacturing company talks about a consultant who particularly in the beginning fitted the image of "one of those consultants again, they are so damned know-it-all, right" as she puts it. She goes on to explain:

> *"He could be a bit… that theoretical one who didn't listen to what we said but kept having his thoughts in here [in his head].'But try to listen' [he would say] - yes but also try to listen to what we are saying"* (Middle manager).

A top manager in the manufacturing company also talks about how he thinks two of the consultants are too 'theoretical'. Here with reference to a particular situation in a meeting:

"It was a waste of time, things took twice as long, because Sebastian had to philosophise about all kinds of things. And with Tom I just think it is so flighty the whole thing, so I just couldn't be bothered listening to it. [...] So this thing, that they have to go into all kinds of theoretical reflections, like this and like that, on and on, you just can't be bothered. Not for very long at a time anyway. Of course there can be something of value in it, but that constantly has to be weighed up - how theoretical should you be?" (Top manager)

He continues by describing very precisely the ambiguity of the outsider position:

But of course that is not to say that they shouldn't bring something new in from the outside. Because they also have to do that. Obviously that is also, amongst other things, what you buy. Someone who has tried something similar somewhere else you could say. They have to have that as well, but they really must make themselves quite well acquainted with things" (Top manager).

Clearly being 'theoretical' and 'flighty' has everything to do with not being enough acquainted and in touch with the practicalities and details of local circumstances. As he says it when talking about another consultant that seems better able to walk the fine line:

"And Claus he is actually also quite theoretical you could say, but he is it in a very down-to-earth kind of way still. Somehow he gets away with it. Really I have never experienced anyone that is so theoretical and gets away with it as Claus. Of course because he is still also relatively pragmatic when it comes down to it, so that if it is closed off there well then we can talk our way around it. And he is good at that" (Top manager).

The way this manager ponders on how the consultant manages to 'get away with' being theoretical clearly illustrates how tricky the balancing act is. But as we see it here, it is possible. A middle manager similarly praises the consultants he is working with for being different from other consultants. As it appears being theoretical and failing to listen is an outsider crime consultants often commit:

"I have experienced many different consultants. Some are so theoretical and don't really listen to what the client says but more… well they have already… they have almost already made the plan and the solution, right. Where I think [the consultants] have listened to us and been a really good sparring partner, also when we made the strategy." (Middle manager).

Expertise seems to come with the risk of being perceived as not listening. This is similarly evident in the hospital context. Here is for instance how a middle manager talks about the

benefits of the knowledge of the consultants on the one hand, but links it with lack of listening:

"Many of the ideas and the discussions I have had with them… they have been able to say some things that they think we should do differently with regards to how we manage and I think I have had great benefits from discussing those things with them. Their knowledge about production has also been beneficial to me, and how you organise in other companies, that I think has been very useful for us. They should have just listened a bit more to the things we said to them" *(Middle manager).*

The potentials of outsider expertise is conditioned by the ability to listen, understand and enter into the spirit of things just like we also saw it in chapter 4 in relation to the position as challenger. As an employee in the hospital expresses it:

You know, I think it is a lot more complex some of the things. And it gives rise to many other little things when you go in and change something that you think is just a small thing, but that you have to spend time on and that time it is… it is not easy to measure because it is little unimportant things in other people's eyes. But it is something that comes with it all the time because we are communicating with humans and they have some questions that we would not have had the imagination to think that they had, but they do. And that's how it is. (Employee).

Between the lines there is an element of not feeling understood. Processes are experienced as more complex in practice than what they appear to be through the lens of consultants. The employee is referring to things that are hard to measure and therefore perceived as unimportant in the eyes of 'other people', i.e. outsiders to this particular practice. It is the stuff of everyday practice - the knowing of the daily practioners - that it is difficult for outsiders to gain access to, but that nevertheless conditions their outsider potential. The *knowing* grounded in the activities, relations and experience of everyday life (Borofsky 1994). As argued in chapter 4, this everyday knowing is a key source of differentiation between insiders and outsiders and thus also a potential source of distance that risks rendering any outsider perspective illegitimate and irrelevant. What can potentially serve to negatively differentiate and marginalise the consultants is thus a combination of the content they are associated with, in this case Lean, as well as the insider knowing and understanding they are perceived to lack.

In touch and adaptable

It is, however, not only about the ability to listen and understand the organisation and its people, culture, processes and products. It is also about being able to adapt to it and incorporate it when developing solutions. Another top manager in the manufacturing context talks about why they are generally happy with the present consultants:

> *I think that is what does it - that they can do it. That they simply have the combination of the two characteristics: high intellect and good sympathetic insight. The quality is high and in touch with reality. Those are the things that do it, that is simply the reason, as I see it, that the collaboration has been so long and good as it has" (Top manager).*

It is the combination of knowledge at a high level, ability to listen and understand, as well as being 'in touch with reality'. Being in touch with reality refers to working with what is practically possible and realistic and adapt concepts and solutions accordingly. As the middle manager above puts it, many consultants seem to have made the plan and the solution beforehand and that is a sure way for consultants to marginalise their contribution.

In the following a functional manager in the manufacturing company describes how the consultants have progressed from too theoretical and 'textbook-like' in the beginning to understanding that 'the reality is different':

> *"I think they have… well in the beginning it was very theoretical I think. It was kind of like: Now listen, we have this folder here and that is simply the answers - how it is going to work a 100%, right. […] and that… I think they have understood that the reality is different […] And I think they have realised that now, because in the course of the process I think it has seemed like that when they have done things for us or been part of a process then it hasn't seemed that way with the textbook - that they say now listen you have to do it like this and like that. It has been more a dialogue and where they have been sparring partners for us. […] I would say that the negative that was in the beginning where it was this textbook-like thing and where we sometimes like… no come on, that will never work in reality, right" (Functional manager).*

Now the consultants have learned and adapted their deliveries to the context. They have "done their homework well" as he also puts it in the interview and then "spiced it with their knowledge". This expression is interesting, because it hints at how to achieve the balancing act. It is all about acquiring insider knowing and adequate understanding of the context as we similarly saw it in chapter 4. Then develop ideas and solutions in dialogue with internal actors but add the essential spice; outsider knowledge and expertise that are magical by way of being clearly differentiated from the knowledge of insiders.

In the hospital context the consultants are also criticised if they are experienced as 'rigid' and unwilling to compromise and modify:

> *"And that is where you shouldn't be so rigid and I think the consultants have been that a lot. They have been really really rigid and it has been difficult to constantly have to explain why you want to do it that way. Because as I have said twenty million times - there are differences between humans and red nuts and you have to accept that. That you can't within health care make it a 100% Lean, you can't. You always have to go in and modify some things. You can have the mindset and the ideas, but you really have to sometimes compromise with some things. [...] you just sometimes have to make the consultants aware that it just is not as black and white as they often like to see it" (Middle manager).*

The consultants become accused of seeing things as more 'black and white' than they are. Interestingly this is precisely the same expression used by a top manager in the manufacturing company in relation to a challenge as described in chapter 4. Being interpreted this way is something of an occupational hazard for consultants it would seem.

A middle manager in the manufacturing company tells a story that hints at how valuable the contribution of consultants can become when the adaptation to and incorporation of local knowledge and context is mastered sufficiently. The story is about a group of employees who are not too happy with the prospects of having consultants come along to teach them anything:

> *"And there the [employees] said to me, 'come on really'... and 'bloody hell, now we have been here for 25 years'... or you know how they are, right [laughing] - 'they are not going to come here and teach me anything, these damn consultants', right. But it was funny because on the Friday when they were going home some of them actually called and some of them... also later when I have talked with them... they had to admit: 'they were actually good' and 'I'll be damned if they hadn't...' - it was the first consulting firm that had got to know their stuff, what they do in the real world and things like that. You know, they were very positive" (Middle manager).*

It is clear that these employees do not initially think consultants can teach them anything because they expect their knowledge to be purely theoretical, irrelevant and thus also trivial seen from the perspective of experienced employees. But the consultants surprise them and get to them because they 'have done their homework' and are able to serve up a cocktail of reconstituted and reified local knowledge 'spiced' with outsider knowledge.

This importance of being close to and in touch with practice and what is experienced as local reality cannot be understated. Internal actors talk extensively about this. One of the top

managers in the manufacturing company who is very happy with the consultants explains why by comparing them to other consultants he has worked with before:

> *"You know, I have worked quite a bit with Andersen consulting and McKinsey in my former companies and it is not a matter of them being bad actually, McKinsey and the others. But the fact is that they just don't have the nose down in the groove like [the present consultants] have. They have... how can you say it, they tackle the dunghill. McKinsey and the others they would rather just show up in their white shirts everyday in the office and sit and write some slides, right. We don't do that here. Here we talk to people, right. We are out there in the field and we simply have a radically different process. And that process is important to have, because if we don't have a process where we get down in the dung then we will never find either the problem and therefore also not the solution. And there has been a good dialogue [...] There has been great openness in the organisation and they [the consultants] can contact who they want, right. Whereas McKinsey they go in from above and then down to just the upper layers, right, and then they don't do any more than that. This here is really saturated with the consultants [...] and the process has been, as I said, that they have been down in... down there where the problem is in reality" (Top manager).*

It is quite interesting the way the manager here uses McKinsey as the background up against which to describe the consultants he likes. McKinsey functions as the stereotype of experts consultants that just sit in the office in their white shirts and don't get out there and down there to tackle the 'dunghill'. All the metaphors he uses suggest that the stuff that really matters in the organisation does not happen in the offices of top management. They happen out in the field, amongst people on all levels. This is the reality the consultants need to be in touch with - it is the groove they need to get their noses into if they are to find both the problems and the solutions. Again the dialogue is emphasised and it is clear that solutions are not something consultants should bring with them in their briefcase. Instead they should be created through a process where the consultants are out there in the field, talking and interacting with people in the organisation and getting their hands dirty.

A similar thing is evident in the hospital context where a functional manager describes the present project as 'down-to-earth' and 'sensible' in comparison with all former experiences of consultants as we also saw in the previous chapter. To recap:

> *"It was process-wise a sound project, because everybody was involved from the beginning and could follow it and comment. So in comparison to all those consulting inquiries etc. I have been part of through my life as a doctor in different departments, then this is by far the most interesting and the most down-to-earth and the most sensible and transparent. Where a lot of the rest has been nothing but hot air I have experienced, you know, waste of money simply." (Functional manager).*

The project is basically sound because the people of the organisation are involved and can comment. They are in other words co-creators and that is what makes the difference between 'down-to-earth' and 'sensible' as opposed to 'hot air'. Nevertheless, despite this clear indication that the consultants in the hospital context engage in a dialogue and work closer with people and practice than other consultants before them, there is at the same time a tendency to interpret it as still not enough amongst a majority of actors. As we saw it expressed above, the consultants should listen more, compromise more and involve more. Throughout the project the consultants are consistently criticised for not involving people enough, especially amongst employees.

Regardless of the fact that they actually involve a number of employees, for instance in work groups, they are still interpreted as not involving enough because they are positioned as agents of a concept that by its very nature as concept is easily interpreted as fixed and inflexible in form. This critique thus relates not least to Lean and the fixed positioning of the consultants as experts and teachers of Lean as we have seen. They are in a sense suffering the consequences of the two-edged sword that their outsider expertise constitutes. The consultants are positioned as the embodiment of a concept that is perceived as a fixed and finished package. Furthermore, it is not just a fixed package; it also represents particular values that are contested in the hospital context and perceived as too different from 'our' world.

The ideas and concepts of consultants can be undermined with reference to lack of newness and superiority, or being too theoretical and out of touch with reality as we have seen so far in this chapter. But they can also be contested simply because internal actors disagree with them, do not believe in them or feel they are wrong. Internal actors thus sometimes treat the knowledge and ideas of consultants as relative, as a matter of belief, values and opinion, rather than absolute knowledge and expertise. In the final section I will show how consulting ideas are sometimes both contested and appropriated with reference to how well they fit internal beliefs and values.

CONTESTING AND APPROPRIATING IDEAS

The most obvious example of how internal actors contest the content consultants are identified with, is Lean in the hospital context. Lean is perceived as a concept originating in

an entirely different world from the hospital. It comes from the business world, the private sector and the world of production of non-human objects, i.e. manufacturing. Furthermore, Lean is constructed, not just as a set of management tools and methods, but as a 'culture' and a 'way of thinking' as we saw earlier. Sometimes it seems almost to be perceived not only as a way of thinking but as a way of life, at least in organisational contexts. To the consultants it is the only right way. To most internal actors, namely clinical management and staff, it is the way of the business world and as such it represents the values they associate with that world. Therefore by implication it is not necessarily seen as the right way in 'our' world. Lean functions, in the operational parts of the hospital, as a source of differentiation that often serves to increase the experienced distance as shown earlier. This differentiation is also used to contest the content consultants are associated with. Knowledge, ideas and expertise can in other words be rendered illegitimate with reference to cultural values. An extract from my field notes where two employees talk about the consultants and Lean will illustrate:

> F: "They are just totally too much. I feel like telling them 'no come on… really… come down already'. It is a culture-clash - we are just not like that here. It is a totally different culture here."
> T: "You can't transfer these things from the private sector." (Field notes).

The construction of stereotypical foreignness is obvious – 'it is a totally different culture here'. 'These things', i.e. the ideas, that the consultants bring to us from the private sector do not fit in our world. 'We are just not like that here'. You can almost hear the moral aversion. The mere presence of the agents that embody this foreign way of thinking produces a 'culture clash'. It does not seem far-fetched to compare this with negative reactions towards people of different religious belief and foreign culture perceived as completely incompatible with 'our' culture and belief.

Interestingly, however, one of the employees quoted here actually changes her views significantly as time goes on. She becomes interested and engaged in the work with implementing Lean and on one occasion she tells me how she can relate to the consultants' way of thinking and that it actually evokes some kind of resonance in her as she describes it. She seems almost a bit surprised by this and she continues to talk about the "clash between cultures" and says that most of her colleagues have not, contrary to herself, been "converted to think the way the consultants do", as she puts it. Lean, and the way of thinking it is perceived to imply, is constructed as a different culture and an ideology you have to be converted to.

However, this employee might not be altogether as unique as she thinks in finding at least certain elements of Lean attractive. There is in this context a distinct pattern of both interpreting Lean as a problematic and foreign ideology with reference to the values of the business world where they just care about quantifiable productivity, efficiency and profit. And at the same time creating positive meaning around certain aspects of what the consultants have actually done:

> *"There have been some really good things about it, and that is that you have got a lot of things structured, you know, that were maybe a bit slack before. But… and that is fine. So the things that you can put structure on and put in a fixed framework you should of course do so and say well this is how we do it and now we have done these processes and it is this process that the patient goes through and we stick to that […] But the areas where you can see beforehand… or where you can see when you do it that with this, it is just not working out to make rigid boxes for it. There you have to say that that is an area where it is not possible, but everything where it is in any way possible to make standards and instructions and follow them, then you should do it, definitely." (Middle manager).*

Many different internal actors talk about these aspects related to structuring, standardising, systematising and ordering in very positive ways. I ask this middle manager if she can give me some examples of what she likes about Lean:

> *"Yes, well I like that it becomes more streamlined and I like that there is a bit more focus on doing things the same way every time. Also in order to be sure that you actually maintain your quality, that the patients all get the same quality. And you will actually at some point be able to measure that. So I like that. I like that things are in order, there is nothing more irritating than if something is missing or that things are not in order. And this - all the time looking for the best way to do things, I like that. And if that then can give something somewhere else at the same time then… so in that way I can easily relate to it and am fine with the Lean idea. I am." (Middle manager).*

It is interesting to observe the specific elements that are appropriated by internal actors in the hospital. They all relate to making sure that the process the patient goes through is safe, correct every time and smooth. It is quality and order they care about. They want to have 'a good day' everyday. As they describe it, 'a good day' is a day where things go smoothly, patients feel they are in good hands and operations are successfully performed without problems. A big hit for instance, that all the nurses mention in the interviews, is a new routine the consultants have initiated where the nurses prepare the next day's operations by getting utensils etc. ready on carts. Here is how one of them describes it:

"We don't have that frustration that we had a lot - that we were not prepared for the next day. Because now we pack the carts and because we are a bit more prepared for what is going to happen, what patients we have the next day. And that means that our morning becomes a lot more calm because you go into the operating room and then you only have about 10 minutes work, then you are ready for the patient. So I think it is a lot steadier in that process. So I certainly think that that is considerably better." (Employee)

This is a good example of the application of an idea that is perfectly relevant for daily practice and in line with the values in this context. The disagreement with the overall concept, and the culture and ideology it is perceived to imply, loses its importance when concrete initiatives prove to be indeed very compatible with internal values and not so foreign after all. In this sense we see again the importance of similarity and nearness.

Nevertheless, even when internal actors talk about the elements of Lean and the project they have appropriated, they also at the same time maintain the association with values that 'we' do not agree with here in 'our' world:

"Generally I think that Lean is a really good thing, definitely, and it is also my way of thinking to a great extent. But I get to a point in my world where I think that I can't use it anymore. You know, that is where my ethics and morals and professionalisms come up in me. And I think that should also come with the production-thinking that they [the consultants] have. And I don't really think that it does in the long run. You know, if it was only this that I should look at then I wouldn't like it. I also think it should be connected with other things in my everyday life, because it is not about machines and nuts. So I am absolutely sure that it is really really good, but these are patients, right. And it is humans and they are not as square as it was sometimes said, as they [the consultants] set it up." (Employee).

As this employee perceives it, the way of thinking of the consultants imply a different set of ethics and morals that might be perfectly ok when you are dealing with 'machines and nuts', but not when you are dealing with humans.

Actors in top- and central management of the hospital do not generally have the same perceptions of cultural difference as internal actors in the operational parts of the organisation as described in chapter 4. Top management believe in similar ideas and approaches as the consultants and there is throughout the project a high level of agreement with the consultants. As the functional manager I quoted in chapter 4 expresses it, there are more cultural differences in relation to clinical management and staff than there are in relation to the consultants. But when top- and central management talk about Lean the usefulness of Lean in clinical contexts in the hospital they also emphasise some of the same aspects as the above internal actors:

"I think that they [clinical managers] see more and more the need for working with logistics [...] There is a lot to be gained and they are frustrated themselves that there is too much waiting time and that they can't get enough patients through and they do want help to get some more... to get some better processes for the patients" (Functional manager).

"You know for instance when Lean insists on procedures for the things that are being done, well then those procedures we had to do anyway because we have to get accredited, and there has to be procedures [...] So to turn all the structural, the organisational upside down, that was something we had to do anyway, and here is all of sudden a collecting tool that people can see the usefulness of." (Top manager).

In another part of the interview the top manager expresses how important it is, when working with Lean, to focus on the aspects that people can relate to in this context:

"So I think it is important to say that an essential criteria of success for this, here in a hospital organisation, is that you get all the magic peeled off. You know, all that religious... that has to go, because if you use that then they close their ears right away, they can't be bothered listening to that. You know if it gets this, what can you say, religious sect-like feel to it, right." (Top manager).

No matter what he precisely means by 'religious feel', it indicates that implementing Lean should not create unnecessary differentiation and be about trying to get people to 'convert' and adopt a whole new way of thinking. He knows that any set of ideas that become interpreted as too different will be contested.

Expertise as insider attribute

Outsider ideas are not only contested with reference to 'culture difference' or moral and ethical questionability in the hospital context. They are also contested with reference to insider expertise and professionalism.

"It is really... you have to remember that in the operating rooms we have highly educated surgeons doing a piece of work and then to have a non-specialist come from the outside and say that you have to do that faster and things like that, that is really an illusion. They have no idea what we are doing [...] it is done with the careful forethought that is practical. It is the practical applicability in the given situation. It has indeed been thought through by so many, so no non-specialists can come and tell us that we are standing incorrectly" (Functional manager).

Seen from the perspective of this internal actor and his fellow surgeons it is perceived as quite unlikely that outsiders could possibly contribute with anything. The insiders themselves know best how to organise their work. The very definition of consultants as experts and teachers is undermined. Instead the insiders are the experts and the consultants the novices, especially in relation to doctors and surgeons as it is similarly clear in the following:

> *"They have to learn to be more attentive to the people that sit there already. They really have an expertise that is high and possibly… in relation to what they [the consultants] are used to on a production line you can say that it is… here it is those who are closest to the production line who have the longest education. You know, they have an education that is at least double of what the consultants have." (Middle manager).*

As we saw in chapter 6, objectivity is a hard earned one for consultants in the hospital context, especially in relation to the surgeons, because it is seen as an insider attribute. This is to some extent similarly the case with expertise as it is clearly illustrated here in the way this surgeon emphasises the superiority of insiders measured by level of education. It is, however, not just about the level of education, it is about superiority in the very areas where consultants claim their expertise, namely management. As the surgeon continues:

> *Those who sit at that level are also used to manage and there I would say that they [the consultants] have shown a surprising lack of understanding for the fact that they are dealing with people who know what that is all about. So… I could also see that when they have tried to tell our management, you know my unit management, how things ought to be. You won't get far with that really. They are people who know what they are doing and who are fundamentally better educated in management than consultants. (Middle manager).*

The consultants are contested on their own turf so to speak. This also means that clinical managers in the hospital have a tendency to quickly form opinions about how Lean should be applied even if they did not know much about Lean before the consultants arrived. In this sense they often stake the claim of knowing best and use their interpretation of Lean to contest and critique what the consultants do in the implementation. As for instance in the following example:

> *There are lots of things that have gone wrong that you could have avoided and that is where I think that… well generally I'm of the opinion that there is not a lot of Lean in what they have done. As I have understood it. You know, as I see it Lean is about optimising processes, removing wasted time. And some of what they have done that is […]. In that way they have created extra capacity, but I would say that it is actually work*

harder, not smarter. [...] So in that way you can't say that they have optimised a process. They have just moved some resources. (Functional manager).

As we see it expressed here, there is nothing wrong with Lean as such, the consultants have just not done it the correct way. The legitimacy of the consultants as experts, even in the concept they are intimately identified with, is challenged and undermined. The concept of knowledge refers to ideas that have come to count in the struggle with other ideas (Hastrup 1992/1996). Thus, the absoluteness of the knowledge of consultants can not be taken for granted. The knowledge and expertise of consultants has to be legitimatised and made to count as such in interaction in particular contexts and situations.

Agreement and disagreement in the company context

The expertise of consultants is generally relativised and contested much less in the manufacturing company than in the hospital context. In the manufacturing company internal actors already work with many of the same ideas and approaches as the consultants and they are thus largely legitimate from the outset. Even though they can of course be undermined with reference to not being new enough or too theoretical as we have seen. But there is no sense of discrepancy of values and the consultants are not seen as belonging to a different world in any comparable way to the hospital. In this context agreement and appropriation is the general tendency:

> *"[The consulting firm] has been good at pulling in the right direction - where the company in my opinion should be going [...] They know what they are dealing with and they know what changes are needed in order for us to get better at... making money, to put it straight " (Functional manager).*

> *"Well, you can say... I was by and large completely in agreement with what was going on, I was, even though it wasn't me who ordered it [the consulting service]". (Middle manager).*

> *"It was really good, you know, also because we were very much in agreement. That has been the same with [the present consulting firm] as well. You know, if you are not fundamentally in agreement about what it is going to take, then it is a nightmare having consultants, right." (Top manager).*

On the face of it, consultants and internal managers believe in much the same things. However, ideas are also sometimes contested in this context and although there is no

comparable differentiation with references to culture and values as in the hospital, there are still different approaches and opinions. As another top manager describes it:

> *"There have also been some things where I very much disagreed with them and there are also things were I still disagree and also some of the things where I am completely in opposition to them, but that does not mean that I think they are poor. That is a question of opinion. I have one opinion, they have another. And there have been times where I have said that I simply will not go along with that. You know within my own area I can do that. [...] But you can in any case respect their opinion and when they can explain the reasoning for why they think like that, then I also think it is positive. [...] They listen, you know as I say we do not necessarily agree, but there is a lot of dialogue around things, right"* (Top manager).

As we see it here, internal actors and consultants might disagree on certain issues, but as long as the consultants listen and there is a good dialogue it does not evolve as negative differentiation. Yet another top manager talks a lot about beliefs and he also has his issues with some of approaches and models the consultants use, but he is also at the same time quite pragmatic. I will quote him at length to illustrate how disagreements with the consultants exist within an overall frame of agreement:

> *"I strongly believe that the means the individual manager chooses has to be in accordance with what he himself really believes are the right means. And there I have to say… maybe a bit 'holier-than-thou'… that there are a hell of a lot of roads that lead to Rome. The only thing that is crucial of course is the framework, that cannot be discussed and what the overall targets are. And if you then choose that one or the other… well there can be some very dictatorial ways, there can be some ways of communicating and some ways of following up very detailed and that's where… some of those measuring mechanisms that some of the [consulting firm]'s people use, that are very much in fashion… you know very quantitative measurements that you hear about again and again, right. And that's were I get off and say come on!! [...] There is also another thing where I say… [laughs], that I really don't believe in deep down, that they put a lot of emphasis on, but where I say that it is no use going into it. It is some of things they are running now, it is for instance the [x] models - I don't believe in that at all [lowers his voice]. Because whatever they get it is fine, everybody wants to do it, so I don't care. It doesn't matter that much, it can't do any harm. And if they now all want to do that, both our own engineers and our own salespeople, our board, our chairman, and our consultants they say this and that, so what the hell, let them have it. It doesn't matter. They believe that that will do it. And I'll be happy to get up and say that we do the [x] model [...]. Because I believe it is more important that you actually work with those means that you really believe in yourself. And then you just have to do it consistently, right. The framework however, that has to all hang together [...]. I have said that I don't agree and I have also said it to Karl [the consultant] and he also knows it [...] Here we are touching on some theories, right and some fundamental beliefs where I gradually realise that I am probably just a bit immovable [laughs], but I haven't changed my views on it."* (Top manager).

It is interesting to see how this top manager talks about management approaches, theories and models as a matter of belief and fashion. To him they are all just different means or roads you can choose to take. It is not a matter of right or wrong as long as it fits within the overall framework of where they want to be. The proposed means will do no harm and at the end of the day most of them probably leads to Rome as he puts it. The important thing is that managers in the organisation have tools to work with that they believe in themselves. This illustrates that contesting can also be done without undermining and rendering the input of consultants illegitimate. It is part of how internal actors actively negotiate and co-create ideas and solutions.

OUTSIDER KNOWLEDGE AS THE VITAL SPICE

To summarise, I have in this chapter explored the aspect of the outsider magic related to the content that client actors use to define consultants as management experts and consultants use to identify as such. Content, i.e. knowledge and ideas, is in this way a source of differentiation by which consultants are attributed with the ability to provide new ideas and solutions. Outsider knowledge as source of differentiation is, however, highly ambiguous.

Firstly, it can contribute to a differentiation that potentially marginalises the consultants in several ways. The content can function as a marker of problematic cultural difference and incompatible values. And even when there are no such perceptions of cultural difference the consultants risk becoming interpreted as too theoretical, flighty, know-it-all, out of touch with reality, rigid, black and white etc. This can relate both to the content itself, but also to how it is communicated and how consultants position themselves and come across as experts, teachers and advisors. Furthermore, internal actors might construct themselves as the management experts instead of the consultants or render the consultant ideas and solutions relative, i.e. as a matter of belief and approach rather than absolute expertise. In these ways, content can potentially come to function as a source of negative differentiation and fail to be interpreted as useful, relevant and legitimate.

Secondly, there is also the opposite risk where the knowledge and ideas of consultants are simply interpreted as too similar to what 'we' already know, i.e. not new, not superior etc. The result is the client interpretation that the consultants are not really contributing with

content at all or 'bringing anything to the table'. In order for ideas and knowledge to be experienced as valuable there has to be differentiation, by whatever means. Without differentiation the knowledge and ideas of consultants are not valuable in their own right. The magic is in the boundary. Nevertheless, in situations where the content is perceived as similar, i.e. internal actors and consultants have the same knowledge, it still functions as a prerequisite for sustaining other aspects of the outsider magic as well as the general legitimacy of consultants as equal peers in the world of management.

The management knowledge, expertise and experience of consultants that both client and consultants attribute with such high importance are extremely ambiguous as we have seen. Internal actors want outsider knowledge that is somehow magical because it is clearly distinguishable and different from internal knowledge, but at the same time they don't want that knowledge to be different. Clients want outsider experts at the same time as they say that it is impossible for an outsider to be just that. Consultants are expected to provide revolutionary ideas and solutions that can solve problems insiders can't solve themselves and transform the organisation in profound ways. But at the same time those ideas and solutions are no good because they are incompatible with internal culture, values, knowledge, how things are done and how things work 'here'. The content should in other words be different, but also at the same time similar.

The knowledge and ideas of consultants are in this sense under constant risk of being undermined and rendered illegitimate, irrelevant or useless if interpreted as either too different or too similar. This relates again to the synthesis of nearness and distance necessary for the realisation of the outsider magic as we have also seen it in the previous chapters. The potential of outsider knowledge is realised when the synthesis of nearness and distance is achieved. I like the metaphor of the 'spice' that one of my interviewees gave me to illustrate. It is a matter of 'spicing' with outsider knowledge; mixing that cocktail of reconstituted and reified local content 'spiced' with outsider content to become something third. Something else; new, superior or in other ways different while at the same time recognisable and relevant. Outsider knowledge is the spice that can make all the difference in the right measure. Not too much, not too little. The 'measuring out and mixing' is a mutual accomplishment that can of course not be done by consultants in isolation.

Can we do away with the ambiguity?

Before we leave the theme of this chapter behind I want to make a final observation that relates to my experience of presenting the argument of this chapter to consultants. What often happens is that they interpret it as an argument for process consultation a la Schein. Maybe because it seems logical to suggest doing away with the ambiguity by doing away with the expertise. My point instead is that we can not and should not do away with the expertise. But first, let me quote Schein (1988) on why he believes the expertise model does not work and process consultation (PC) is the better approach:

> *"The consultant can seldom learn enough about any given organization to really know what a better course of action would be or even what information would really help them most, because the members of the organization perceive, think about, and react to information in terms of their traditions, values, and assumptions, that is, their organizational culture [...] It is a crucial assumption of the PC philosophy that problems will stay solved longer and be solved more effectively if the organization solves those problems itself". (Schein 1988: 7).*

Thus in Schein's view the consultant should not attempt to be "an expert on the actual management problems that the organization is trying to solve" (1988: 173). I strongly disagree and want to add that operating with the expertise vs. process categorisation at all in the context of my study is to create a false distinction. Schein is right as far as to say that "remedies have to be worked out jointly" (1988: 10). This does, however, not change the fact that the management expertise of consultants is imperative for the role they play in client organisations.

In fact, the expert positioning is extensively difficult to avoid because client actors define and position consultants that way. Schein's (1988) own descriptions of the 'wrong' client expectations he encounters and has to correct often relates precisely to this aspect. Such collective definitions constitute a strong social force especially in the context of the type of engagements I focus on where consultants interact with a broad range of internal actors to implement change. Being the expert/advisor/teacher is part of the social position available to the kind of social actors consultants are defined as being in the context of organisations and it is therefore also an aspect of how value can potentially be created in organisations through consulting.

Schein (1988) neglects the potential value of performing the role of expert that attempts to solve actual management problems in client organisations, because the focus is on the

barriers and limitations connected with the outsider expert position that we have also seen examples of in this chapter. Schein's (1988) PC model seeks in a sense to solve or do away with the ambiguity. In attempting to reduce the expertise ambiguity, Schein (1988) instead focuses more on other aspects of the potential of the outsider position, such as for instance the challenging; confrontive intervention (ibid.) as he calls it. However as we have seen in chapter 4 this aspect is also ambiguous and comes with a similar set of limitations. Besides, as I have shown in this and the previous chapters there are several aspects to the potential of consulting as it is created in client organisations. These aspects are implicated in each other in different ways and they are all part of how the outsider position is dialectically constituted. Together they represent both opportunities and limitations for taking part in creating change in client organisations.

My point is that the ambiguity can not be solved or done away with. Not in relation to the aspect of the outsider position explored in this chapter or any of the other aspects explored in the previous chapters. When management consultants are on assignment in client organisations they are living in and negotiating a field of tension between nearness and distance and they are, as a category of social actors, the product of the social potential of that tension. Do away with the tension and we do away with the potential of consulting.

The boundary constructed between insiders and outsiders creates opportunities for particular relations, performances and actions that can serve particular purposes in organisations. The catch of course is that this potential is not always realised and never in all situations of client-consultant interaction. The boundary is as potentially marginalising as it is potentially magical and the measure between nearness and distance, in any given situation, is a complex matter influenced by both consultants and a range of different internal actors. This is why consulting is essentially a tricky and risky business, so to speak, and realisation of the magic potential in specific contexts and situations can never be guaranteed or predicted. But the potential is always there in every single situation of client-consultant interaction.

When I get to this point consultants inevitably ask: how is this realised then? How do we as consultants navigate the tension? There are of course no easy answers, but the first step is to increase the understanding of the social dynamics of client-consultant relations as I aim to do with this thesis. Management consulting is a social phenomenon; a relational, situational practice and the nature of such social phenomenon implies that precise prescriptions guaranteeing the successful realisation would be an illusion. It is, however, possible to point

further to how the potential might be realised by conceptualising a theoretically ideal measure of nearness and distance as I will do in the following chapter.

Management Consulting as Participation

This chapter will pull together what we have learned throughout this thesis by suggesting a way of conceptualising an ideal consulting position that is constituted by a synthesis of both nearness and distance, to use Simmel's (1950) way of characterising the position of the useful stranger. As Simmel argues, the social position of the stranger is created through a particular proportion and reciprocal tension between nearness and distance. It is such strangeness, as a function of both similarity and difference, which is useful for client organisations. An interesting question for consultants and clients alike would thus be whether we can say something more about this proportion between nearness and distance and how to achieve it.

The role of the consultant in relation to the client organisation has traditionally been associated with externality and non-involvement, both in the literature as explored in chapter 3 as well as more generally in the discourse on consulting. Consultants analyse, advice, prescribe or facilitate from a position perceived as external and characterised by distance. As we have seen it throughout the previous chapters this picture is far more complex in the context of change implementation assignments where consultants interact extensively with a broad range of client actors and get involved in the client organisation on different levels.

One might argue that consultants become so involved, not least in management activities, that it makes no sense to talk about distance and externality. Indeed, this is precisely what has been argued in recent literature on consulting. Kitay and Wright (2003) for instance, state that the boundaries between consultant and client are becoming increasingly blurred in the context of implementation assignments and that consultants become a new kind of insider in the client organisation. Sturdy et al. (2006) similarly argue that consultants are sometimes better seen as insiders in relation to their clients.

Werr and Styhre (2003) show how clients value close and long-term partnerships with consultants and for instance describe their 'house consultants' as the 'organisational memory' (2003: 55). The boundaries between client and consultant thus appear as blurred and flexible in client accounts (ibid.). At the same time, however, these same clients also talk about the

need for distance in relations with consultants in order to manage them and stay in control. Werr and Styhre conclude that the client-consultant relationship is ambiguous:

> "While clients valued consultants for their knowledge of and close relationship with the client organization, client managers simultaneously argued that consultants had to be tightly managed and kept at arm's length" (Werr and Styhre 2003: 63).

As we have seen in the previous four chapters, the client actors in my study similarly talk about the importance of both closeness and distance in seemingly contradictory ways. However, distance is about much more than control and it is not just potentially counterproductive as Werr and Styhre (2003) suggest. As I have shown, the outsider status of consultants remains a crucial part of what creates their value as client actors experience it in the context of change implementation, but that value is at the same time conditioned by the extent to which the consultants become, in effect, a part of the organisation in a particular way. The ambivalence and tension that I have shown in my analysis is in other words not something that can or should be resolved.

THE POTENTIALS OF PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

An important aspect of Simmel's conceptualisation of strangeness is that it is a formal relation characterised by participation rather than non-participation. The position of the stranger, as a part of the group, involves being positioned outside it while at the same time participating in its activities and relations. Without participation a social actor does not exist for the group at all and is therefore irrelevant. That would indicate a non-relation and not a stranger-relation.

In the context of the consulting assignments I followed it is clear that consultants come to exist for a whole range of actors in the client organisations, even sometimes for people they have had little or no face-to-face interaction with, and they are constructed and positioned in different ways as we have seen in the previous chapters. Consultants participate in some way and to some extent in the activities of the client organisation and particular groups within it. An example is participation in management activities such as talking about, discussing and reflecting on tasks, competencies, personalities and roles of lower level managers and employees as well as coordinating, planning and making decisions about their activities.

However, consultant participation is not of the same kind as insider participation because they are social actors positioned as outsiders. Simmel (1950) does not further qualify this specific form of participation of the stranger, apart from stating that the stranger has a specific character of mobility and that the position is composed of certain measures of nearness and distance.

Another way of conceptualising different forms of participation is to use Lave and Wenger's social practice framework (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). Wenger (1998) defines participation as the process of taking part in or sharing with others in activity as well as the relations and interaction that taking part in activity with others involves (1998: 55). As I use the term here, participation refers to this taking part in both activities and associated relations (Wenger, 1998: 56). Wenger further defines various forms and degrees of participation, using the concepts of full, peripheral and marginal participation. While peripheral and marginal participation both refer to forms of limited participation that indicate outsider positions, full participation is used to indicate insider positions characterised by membership, competence, sense of belonging, insider identity and shared meanings and understandings (Wenger, 1998).

There is of course no dividing line to indicate when participation is full or not. There can be multiple and more or less full forms of participation. Nevertheless, the term is useful to indicate a form of belonging and being at the core of the activities and relations in a particular context. Full participants are the practitioners, the members and the insiders. They have relations, identity and ways of engaging with each other and carrying out their activities which outsiders have difficulty entering and that often lack transparency. They have a detailed and complex understanding of their practice and they have developed a repertoire that outsiders do not necessarily have shared references to (Wenger, 1998).

Using this framework, consultants can thus be seen as limited participants in different practices in client organisations. A position that in some ways resembles that of 'newcomers' in Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, but is at the same time significantly different from it. Consultants face inherent newcomer challenges of gaining access to and learning to understand other people's practices, but contrary to newcomers they are not there to become absorbed as insiders and gradually lose their outsider status. On the contrary, their outsider status needs to be retained. They are not participating with the aim of learning how to perform specific tasks and activities of particular insiders to become one of them. Instead they

are there to change the old and established ways of insiders as outsiders. They are there to influence activities, to introduce new ideas and ways of doing things and ultimately create change. Furthermore, they have to gain access to and participate in the activities and relations of a much wider range of different groups of actors within the client organisation than newcomers.

Peripheral participation as an ideal consulting situation

In Lave and Wenger's book on situated learning (1991), the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' is used to describe the ideal learning situation for newcomers. Peripherality implies limited participation in some kind of everyday activities. It can involve observation, but the key to peripherality is actual engagement in ongoing everyday activities, information flows and associated relations. These activities, however, do not have to be central or core activities. Partial or apparently trivial activities are often the activities that peripheral participants take part in. The important point is that peripherality is more than just an "observational lookout post" as Lave and Wenger (1991) puts it; it is about both "absorbing and being absorbed" in everyday practice (1991: 95). Peripheral participation is thus conditioned by legitimacy and access to some kind of ongoing everyday work activities. Through peripheral participation, newcomers can gradually become members of a community of practice and gain increasing access to participating roles in insider activities (Lave and Wenger 1991).

In Wenger's (1998) book on "Communities of Practice", peripherality is used in a much broader sense and it is emphasised that a community of practice can open its peripheries and connect with the rest of the world by giving outsiders, who are not aiming to become full members, access to more or less peripheral forms of participation (Wenger, 1998: 117). This also means that the activities such peripheral participants take part in are not so much partial and trivial as they are in some way defined as different or set apart from what insiders usually do. It is in this modified sense that I will use the concept here as a way of indicating an ideal consulting situation, both for learning and knowing in practice as argued in chapter 4, but also for influencing client practices.

Peripheral participants, in this modified sense, are not only in an ideal position to understand and learn about insider practices, but they can also potentially introduce outside elements and create new possibilities for meaning as Wenger (1998) argues. Peripheral participants can do

this because they are enough insiders to have legitimacy and access to take part in negotiations over meaning, but at the same time, they are not enough insiders to be committed to and invested in existing practices and meanings and they are not positioned as insiders. The periphery is thus neither fully inside, nor fully outside (Wenger, 1998: 117) and Wenger argues that because of that it is the most fertile area for change and learning opportunities (ibid. 118).

The potential of peripherality, as I am using the concept here in its modified sense, is clearly interesting to explore in the context of consultants working as change agents in client organisations, because it indicates that consultants can, under conditions of peripherality, act as agents of change and learning in client organisations. As Hanks argues in the foreword to "Situated learning" (1991); limited peripheral engagements can create the potential for change whenever one party to an activity is more skilled or expert in some relevant way (Hanks, 1991: 18-19). Or in other words, this potential for change is present whenever consultants perform functions that are in some way both different from what insiders are in a position to do *and* also at the same time relevant, useful and legitimate in a given context or situation. This relates to the abilities I have explored in the previous four chapters, i.e. the ability to challenge, negotiate, reify and provide ideas, tools and methods for how to manage and organise activities and people. What conditions this potential for change is the extent to which what the consultants actually do and say in any given situation is perceived and experienced as legitimate, relevant and useful in concrete situations by internal actors as I shall get back to. Such legitimacy, relevance and usefulness of consultants, their position and what they do in a *concrete situation of interaction* is an indication of peripherality.

Peripheral participation or collaboration?

A contemporary trend in the discourse on client-consultant relations is the emphasis on collaboration as a key factor for creating value (Carucci and Tetenbaum 2000; Czerniawska and May 2004) as described in the introduction. What has long been argued in the context of process consulting now seems to be common sense for most consulting firms, namely that relationship building and working together is crucial for ensuring client ownership of problems and solutions (Schein 1988, 1999). 'Collaboration', 'working together', 'working as a team', 'involvement' and 'relationship building' have become persuasive buzz-words.

It is important to emphasise that this idea of harmonious, positive and rewarding collaboration and involvement of client actors is not the same as what I mean by peripheral participation. Participation in everyday organisational life also implies participation in for instance political activities and the conflicts and power games they entail as we saw in chapter 5. As Wenger points out, participation does not necessarily imply equality, respect, trust or chemistry and the relations it involves can be both conflictual, harmonious, political, competitive and cooperative (Wenger 1998: 56).

The peripheral participation of consultants will sometimes involve collaborative and harmonious interaction, but fierce discussions and tough negotiations over change can also be a powerful and influential form of peripheral participation. It is not about whether internal actors like or agree with consultants and consultants might meet plenty of resistance to the change they advocate as peripheral participants. What potentially makes the position of consultants peripheral, regardless of whether a concrete situation is experienced as collaborative or conflictual, is the extent to which consultants are perceived as *legitimate* participants and thus also given access to participate as such while simultaneously maintaining their outsider status. Participation from an outsider position is, however, highly complex and it poses significant challenges and risks for consultants as we have seen it in the previous chapters.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES IN PARTICIPATION

So far I have argued that a modified concept of peripherality as an ideal form of limited participation can be used to conceptualise the potential of consulting engagements in the context of change implementation. As such, peripherality points to an ideal balance between enough differentiation to maintain the status and attributes of an outsider combined with enough legitimacy and access to learn and influence the development of practice and be listened to. In this sense it refers to that specific proportion of nearness and distance that creates the *positive* stranger relation in Simmel's (1950) terms. The way I use the concept of the peripheral participant in this chapter thus corresponds with the way I used Simmel's concept of the stranger in chapter 3 and the associated term of 'magical outsiders'.

Peripherality is a way of further qualifying the characteristics of strangeness, i.e. that particular synthesis between nearness and distance that Simmel talks about.

What I want to focus on in this section is the inherent ambiguity of peripherality that entails risks and challenges for consultants. This means that as much as peripherality entails opportunities for influencing insider practices and create change, it is not a position easy to negotiate and maintain. As Karakayali (2006) also shows, the stranger (i.e. the magical outsider or peripheral participant) is useful and valued for performing tasks insiders are unable or unwilling to perform, but the position of the stranger is also at the same time a vulnerable position to occupy in practice. This is similarly the point Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) want to highlight when they argue that consulting can be a painful experience for consultants, where weaknesses rather than strengths dominate. As Karakayali (2006) also argues:

> *"In essence, strangeness is an unstable relation since the possibility of expulsion or assimilation always remains intact. But even when relations with strangers do not dissolve into these extremes, strangeness involves, to use Simmel's (1971a) words, "dangerous possibilities" (Karakayali 2006: 328).*

Peripherality is inherently unstable, because the possibility of expulsion or assimilation is its constant companion. When consultants participate in activities and relations in client organisations they are constantly at risk of being 'pushed out', so to speak, and rejected as illegitimate intruders or on the other hand becoming 'pulled in' towards more extensive forms of participation. The latter risk is especially relevant in relation to top management as I shall get back to.

Here I will focus first on the risk of expulsion or marginalisation. This means that participation becomes marginal rather than peripheral and it refers to the vulnerabilities of the outsider position that I have shown in the previous chapters in relation to each of the four aspects of the function that makes consultants useful and valuable. The outsider is only potentially magical as we saw. The risk of marginalisation is closely connected with lack of legitimacy and access that any outsider status potentially comes with. Regardless of whether we are talking about newcomers, as originally defined within situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991), or consultants as I do here.

Marginal vs. peripheral participation

As ideal types both marginal and peripheral participation refer to forms of outsider participation. Wenger (1998) argues that the line between peripherality and marginality is subtle, but nevertheless qualitatively important (Wenger, 1998: 166). In the case of peripherality, participation is enabled whereas in marginality participation is restricted (Wenger 1998). As opposed to peripherality, marginality is dominated by the characteristics of the outsider position, i.e. distance and differentiation. Where peripherality pulls in, marginality pushes out so to speak. It represents the possibility of expulsion to use Karakayali's (2006) wording. Peripherality is in a sense an integration process and marginality an exclusion process. Marginality is where the boundary is enacted and closed with the consequence that outsiders are negatively defined, undermined and marginalised.

When what consultants do or say in a given situation is *not* experienced and interpreted as legitimate, relevant and useful by insiders, it is an indication that participation is most likely marginal rather than peripheral in relation to the particular actors in question. Peripherality and marginality are not labels we can use to describe the success or failure of a consulting assignment as such or a particular client relationship. The position of consultants can potentially shift from situation to situation. Consultants can participate in ways that are in one situation legitimate, useful and relevant to particular actors, only to find themselves marginalised in another situation involving the very same actors. What characterises such situations of marginality is lack of legitimacy and access.

Legitimacy

A potential source of general legitimacy for consultants is their status as valuable outsiders, magical outsiders as I have called it, who have certain abilities in contrast to insiders. As we have seen in this thesis 'it is always good to get someone in from the outside'. Some internal actors will perceive consultants as highly legitimate participants from the outset, but it is equally possible that certain actors hold negative stereotypes of consultants, view them as the hired hands of top management etc. and thus do not perceive them as legitimate participants. As we for instance saw in chapter 7, knowledge and experience with a particular management concept such as Lean make the consultants legitimate participants seen from the perspective of top and central management in the hospital. That expertise is indeed the main reason for

hiring them. For other parts of the organisation that very association with Lean can potentially be a source of illegitimacy.

Despite the fact that there are a range of myths and negative stereotypes about consultants and you hear about the odd top manager who publicly states that his company will never use them, consultants are generally speaking seen as legitimate participants especially of course amongst higher level managers who hire them. Consultants are widely used and they can charge high fees for their services just like Colson's (1966/2006) alien diviners - a good indication of their general legitimacy based on the professional status as consultants and management experts. At the same time they share knowledge and frames of reference with managers and there is often a high degree of similarity of experience, education, knowledge and profession that supports the initial legitimacy of consultants in relation to management at least.

Nevertheless, even when consultants enjoy general legitimacy from the outset, this is not enough to maintain peripherality. No matter whether consultants are generally viewed as legitimate participants or not, legitimacy has to be continuously gained and maintained in interaction. Not the least in interaction with the internal actors that did not have anything to do with the decision to hire them. Legitimacy has to be based, not just on outsider status, but also on insider knowing and understanding, as we have seen in the previous chapters, and that can only be gained through peripheral participation.

The issue of legitimacy is thus tricky for consultants, because they have to have it in order to gain it, so to speak. They can gain legitimacy through peripheral participation, but peripheral participation is itself conditioned by legitimacy. Hence the emphasis in situated learning theory on the full term 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991). This makes sources of general and initial legitimacy that can function as enablers of participation critical. In the following, I deal with the problem of gaining access to enough and the right kind of participation that in addition to legitimacy conditions peripherality.

The problem of access

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that access is crucial for peripherality, but it is always problematic (1991: 100). In their context, referring specifically to newcomers, this is so regardless of the fact that reproduction, and thus survival of practices, depends on securing that newcomers can participate in peripheral ways to move towards full participation, i.e.

become insiders and members. Lave and Wenger (1991) state, that the problem of access to practice and understanding is so central that, "in a sense, all that we have said so far is about access" (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 101). Together different factors influence the complex structuring of access to practice.

Firstly, practice is embodied and there might be no way to adequately explain or describe to outsiders what a practice is all about (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 85). Whether access is restricted or enabled is also a matter of power and control. It can for instance be in the interest of certain internal actors to keep consultants in the dark in different ways and restrict their access to information or people. This poses potential problems for consultants, because they often rely extensively on asking people in client organisation to describe their activities and processes in for instance 'fact-finding' meetings, interviews and 'value stream mapping' exercises. The kind of 'hanging out', chatting, participating in and observing daily activities, that for instance anthropologists seek out, is both time-consuming and does not fit the goal-oriented and rational 'gathering data/finding facts'-focus of consultants. Consultants are furthermore dependent on internal actors to supply them with for instance numerical data material and other such information.

Secondly, there might be structural constraints; i.e. the way work processes are organised and the division of labour can restrict access to participation (ibid.: 86). This is similarly an issue for anthropologists as I for instance described it in chapter in relation to my fieldwork. Activities and their meanings can in other words be more or less transparent and accessible for outsiders depending on how they are structured. I will give an example of this below.

Thirdly, knowledge of practice is unequally distributed amongst insiders. They have different perspectives and ways of doing things and people who are considered members and insiders can be more or less peripheral or even marginal in relation to their practice. This is for instance a potential issue when consultants work closely with 'ambassadors' in organisations, i.e. internal actors who are champions and proponents of the change they attempt to implement and see things in similar ways to the consultants. Such internal actors could very well be in a marginal position themselves.

As consultants have told me, they sometimes experience that the people they worked closest with and had the best collaboration with on an assignment find a new job shortly after the consultants have finished. Such actors might already have been marginal and/or they

became so in the process. The positive version of course is that they 'grew out of their job' because they learned a lot from working with the consultants. This might very well be the case, but seen from the perspective of the organisation and the creation of sustainable change such actors are at least no longer in a position to influence practice. If they ever were in such a position of course depends, but it is worth emphasising that it is often the actors at the core of practices, i.e. the expert practioners, that put up the most resistance to change. Access to these actors and their activities and relations is crucial for peripheral participation to be achieved. This means that where participation is easiest, it might not be the most beneficial seen from the perspective of the aim to create change.

Just as newcomers, and anthropologists for that matter, consultants thus have the problem of gaining access to everyday activities, expert performances, information flows, meaning negotiations and relations. Especially in relation to the practices the consultants are there to change, they continuously battle more or less severe limitations and challenges in the form of lack of access that along with lack of legitimacy implies the risk of marginality. These issues related to access to participation is important in relation to consulting, because it focuses our attention less on individual competences of consultants and more on the context of the client organisation and different parts of the client organisation. It thus highlights the importance of client contexts for how consulting assignments evolve and what they produce.

An example from the hospital will illustrate how insider identities and the structuring of work processes and space, can restrict access and create problems with lack of legitimacy. In the context of surgery and nursing, participation is not readily enabled for lean consultants with a background in industrial production and no medical training. As we saw earlier they are perceived as coming from another world radically different from the health care world. In this context, the consultants are regularly accused of not understanding what surgery or nursing is all about. They do a lot of research, talk with people and collect all the data they can get their hands on, but although their increasing understanding of surgery and nursing gains them increasing legitimacy as time goes on, it is still not perceived as leading to an understanding of "what it is really like" working as and being a nurse or a surgeon. These strong insider identities create problems with legitimacy for outsiders that are not working towards becoming one of them, as for instance nurse and doctor trainees. Insiders define their practice as special and unique in ways that automatically excludes such outsiders in the health

care world and defines them as unable to understand. Insiders draw boundaries in ways that marginalises, closes and restricts access for outsiders.

The nature and structuring of work processes and space are also sources of inherent problems of access to the activities that take up most of the time and attention of nurses and surgeons and define their practice and identities. The consultants cannot and do not participate in activities related to patients and operating theatres and they thus have to rely mainly on asking people to tell them *about* their practice. Except for the glimpses they catch of partial elements of activities in the hallways as practioners exchange information and stories and move themselves and their patients in and out of operating theatres. The consultants work mainly in a project office on their computers. Their way of working, the nature or their activities, their way of being placed in space in the surgery unit - everything signals and emphasises an outsider position and restricts access to participation. In relation to nurses and surgeons, the consultants thus battle a significant risk of marginality related to lack of both access and legitimacy.

Access is potentially easier in contexts as for instance the manufacturing company where most of the internal actors who consultants are in contact with spend their working days either in meetings or in front of the computer in an open office space. Here the consultants do not work in a project office; they just find an available desk or book a meeting room when meetings are on the agenda. Often there is no visible difference between the activity of consultants working on their computers and internal actors working on their computers. When consultants need to talk to someone they go to their desk just like colleagues do. The table is raised and two actors focus their common attention on the screen in front of them while they discuss the issues at hand.

Handley et al. (2007) also employ the framework of situated learning in the context of client-consultant relations. Their point, however, mainly relates to consultants as marginal as also mentioned in chapter 4. Based on observations and interviews, they describe a project where consultants for the most part declined opportunities to participate in the way the client wanted and when a senior partner did try to participate, he did so in a context and in a way that was perceived as inappropriate by the client. They conclude that "the cultural distance for the clients was too great, and they responded by rejecting the validity of the challenge" (Handley et al., 2007: 187). As an outsider, the consultant lacked understanding of the norms, values and appropriate behaviour of the community of practice he was attempting to

participate in and he was rejected and thus not recognised as a legitimate participant (ibid. 25). Handley et al. (2007) conclude that gaining this understanding is necessary, but also difficult and problematic to achieve. They are thus critical of prevalent assumptions in the consulting literature and in client expectations, that consultants can create change in client organisations by challenging existing practices and meanings (ibid.).

Handley et al. (2007) do not seem to explicitly consider the possibility of consultants as peripheral participants. Consequently, consultants seem to be confined as marginal participants per definition. If that is indeed their assumption, I disagree, as it should be evident from my argument so far. If we interpret Handley et al.'s (2007) example through the lens of the inherent problem of access, one could argue that access was restricted by client actors. The consultant thus might not have been given access to a form of peripheral participation that could potentially have yielded his challenge more effective. Regardless of what efforts the consultant might or might not have made to learn to understand his client's practice, access to that learning in the first place has to be somehow enabled by insiders.

Consulting activities as potential sources of marginalisation

That said, it is important to emphasise that consultants also contribute to the risk of marginality by the very nature of their consulting activities. Consultants who work with change implementation are not talking about or thinking about their practice in terms of a form of participation in the activities of client actors. Implementation and execution in the context of consulting are terms used to indicate that consultants take action, 'walk the talk', initiate activities and make things happen in client organisations. It is thus relevant to ask whether consultants are actually attempting to participate in the activities of people in the client organisation or whether they are mainly initiating separate consulting activities in which they attempt to involve client actors.

Based on my fieldwork experience, it can be argued that a good deal of the action of hands-on consulting assignments is performed within the framework of traditional consulting activities. The consultants create project descriptions, write up plans, set up meetings, collect data, create slide presentations, report findings, arrange workshops and instruct, teach and coach client managers and employees in the art of project management. What all this amounts to is an inherent risk of marginality by the very nature of an approach of carrying out

activities around or alongside, but separate from, ongoing everyday activities in the organisation.

This is not to say that for instance workshops and meetings arranged by consultants are not valuable simply because they are not part of normal everyday activities. The crucial condition here is *relevance, usefulness and legitimacy* as perceived by the client actors in the workshop. What makes the difference is whether insiders are participating in an activity they can relate to and make sense of as part of their own practice, i.e. an activity of reflecting, talking about their practice with each other and negotiating meaning in relevant ways. Or whether they are participating in a consulting activity experienced as removed from and more or less irrelevant to everyday practice. Most of the time, consulting activities produce a mix of both.

The rare and best of them almost cease to exist as distinct consulting activities and transform to merge in some way or another with practice to become the perfect opportunity for consultant peripheral participation in relations and negotiations of meaning in the client organisation. An example of this is for instance the meeting 'where it was definitively proven' that I described in chapter 6. As such it is more than facilitation, it is an opportunity for the consultants to introduce new meanings and different perspectives, it is an opportunity to use their reifications and knowledge in a relevant way to enhance the learning of internal actors and most importantly it is an opportunity to influence the negotiation and development of their practice. However, such consulting activities that transform in the process are extremely difficult to achieve without access to some degree of peripheral participation in everyday situations. Relations and shared references need to be formed in order for consultants to be able to set up a meeting or a workshop that will transform into a client activity, rather than purely a consulting activity.

In this context it is important to highlight a point that has been implicit to the argument throughout this thesis. The client organisation cannot be treated as a uniform entity. Consulting activities are carried out in relation to many different parts of the organisation at different levels and thus also with very different consequences. The same can be said about the form and extent of consultant participation. Within the same organisation there can be a pronounced lack of access and legitimacy in relation to some actors and the opposite in relation to others. Sometimes consulting workshops or meetings represent an exercise in bringing people together from different interrelated departments. In these situations it is

always evident in relation to whom the consultants have had access to the most peripheral participation. Sometimes the consultants have been pulled in towards more extensive forms of participation and become too much insiders with insiders. This risk of being 'pulled in' is especially apparent in relation to top management.

The risk of assimilation

In my empirical contexts, the majority of the client activities that consultants have most readily access to and participate most extensively in, are management activities. The position of peripheral participant is thus most often achieved precisely in relation to management. Especially top or higher level management in situations when they and their practice is not the direct and explicit object of change. It is clear that hiring consultants and working with them to solve problems and create change in the organisation creates an opening of the periphery of the practice of the relevant managers and make different degrees of peripheral participation in management activities possible. In some cases, this also happens at the same time at lower levels when the relevant functional -and middle managers charged with the responsibility of making the change happen give the consultants access to take part in some of their management activities, sometimes more by choice than not.

Generally, consultants and top managers have a great deal of shared references, shared concepts and shared ways of thinking that function as a source of legitimacy and enabler of participation along with their shared aim of changing the practices of other actors in the organisation. This is most apparent in relation to the managers who hire the consultants and/or act as project sponsors and close collaborators throughout the assignments.

The peripherality of the consultants in relation to management is often achieved through participation in the kind of management activities that take place in meetings and involve talking about, discussing and reflecting on the activities, competences and roles of subordinates, making decisions and coordination and planning of other people's activities as mentioned earlier. As we for instance saw in chapter 4 with the top manager who talked about the outside-in-view of the consultant he used as a sparring partner on precisely such issues. As the consultants participate in different management activities as peripheral participants they influence management practice and they do also sometimes take on the role of a kind of manager in relation to other managers and employees in concrete situations.

This is indeed what implementation work is really all about – it is management activities and decision-making performed together with managers. However, this participation in management activities implies a risk of being pulled in toward more extensive forms of participation. Peripheral participation in management activities can in this sense represent a slow and almost seamless process of becoming one with top management in shared ideas, approaches and ways of interpreting the rest of the organisation. This pull in towards full participation is in many ways problematic, because the consultants become invested in existing practices and meanings of top management and lose the ability to address alignment between conflicting interests across and within different groups of actors in the client organisation. In addition, it potentially makes access to other parts of the organisation more difficult, because access is also often restricted for political reasons. If consultants are simply seen as an extension of top management it might not be in the interest of certain other actors in the organisation to open up to them and give them access to participation.

POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS OF CONSULTING

In this chapter, I have argued that a framework that focuses on different forms of participation in client practices can help us further towards an understanding of the potentials and limitations of consulting in the context of change implementation. The modified concept of peripheral participation, as it has been employed here, represents a way of indicating situations where consultants engage in everyday activities in client organisations and thus absorb and become absorbed in client practices to a certain extent. Through peripheral participation, consultants can understand and engage with these practices beyond the scope of an outsider position as traditionally understood with reference to distance, non-involvement and externality.

Peripherality thus represents a theoretically ideal position, not only for learning to understand client practices, but also for influencing them. Ideally, peripheral participants have enough legitimacy, understanding and relations to be listened to and can thus influence decision-making, negotiations and interpretations. But their distance to practice also creates opportunities for offering a different perspective and other ideas. They are not invested in

existing beliefs, interests, relations and politics to the degree that full participants are, affording opportunities to introduce new ideas that foster change and learning.

This argument for the potential of peripherality, however, should not be taken to suggest that hands-on and involved consulting is unambiguously effective or a sure-fire value-creating approach to consulting that secures results, learning and change in client organisations. Getting involved is a complex affair full of challenges and risks and there is no simple recipe for negotiating its troubled waters. When consultants participate in limited ways in activities in client organisations it does not mean that their participation is always peripheral. On assignments, consultants continuously negotiate a fine line between marginality, peripherality and more extensive forms of participation in relation to different parts of the same organisation.

Negotiating peripheral participation, with its inherent risks of being pushed out or pulled in, puts high demands on consultants. Access can be denied or restricted by clients actors resulting in marginal rather than peripheral participation. This situation produces the kind of problems that Morris (2000) focuses on when he argues that consultants are rarely effective as implementers, because they do not have access to the resources necessary to implement change. As he argues, they may for instance lack internal knowledge and access to the networks and relationships through which managerial work gets done (Morris, 2000: 134). Kipping and Armbrüster (2002) make a similar argument with reference to 'the burden of otherness' of consultants and conclude that otherness is helpful to a certain point in the consulting process, but when it comes to change implementation "there seems to be little consultants can do" (Kipping and Armbrüster 2002: 220).

Consultants and their traditional ways of working and seeing themselves, their expertise and their activities, also create potential barriers to peripheral participation that may result in marginality. Thus consultants do often effectively restrict or deny opportunities for participation, as Handley et al. (2007) argue. Consultants might for instance resist participation in order to preserve a coherent identity of 'analyst' or 'expert', whose actions and recommendations are based on rational argument and objective evidence (ibid.). Other barriers take the form of consulting activities that are not tailored to foster consultant participation in client activities, but the other way around. Rather than involving themselves in client activities they focus on involving client actors in consulting activities.

When peripheral participation is achieved the risk of moving in the direction of too extensive participation arises. Maintaining distance is an extremely delicate and difficult balancing act influenced by both the consultants themselves and client actors. By its very nature, peripheral participation is a process of getting closer, more involved, more invested in existing beliefs, relations, interests and political games. It represents a potential trajectory to full participation (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Finally, consultants face the challenge of attempting to participate in multiple practices across hierarchical, professional and functional boundaries in the organisation. Some might readily provide access and open up the peripheries, while other practices can be extremely difficult to gain access to for consultants. Furthermore, too extensive participation in relation to particular groups risks restricting access in relation to other groups within the organisation. Too close association with management and managerial activities for instance easily creates significant problems with access to non-managerial practices.

Some consulting firms work with a sharp hierarchical division of labour between senior and junior consultants that engage with the organisation in different ways and at different levels. Such an approach overlooks the unique opportunities for brokering through peripheral participation in *multiple* practices within the organisation. Peripheral participation across hierarchical, professional and functional boundaries is rare and difficult for internal actors that in most cases 'belong to', and identify with, particular parts of the organisation. With external consultants this opportunity can be created and leveraged along with other learning and change potentials as we have seen in this thesis.

Conclusion

We have come full circle on this journey of exploring how management consulting, and its potential value, is relationally constituted in client-consultant relations. Management consulting is in this sense fundamentally a collective endeavor. The potential for creation of value and thus also change is present in the relation whenever consultants perform functions that are in some way defined as different from what particular insiders are in a position to do *and* also at the same time experienced as relevant, useful and legitimate by those insiders.

The client actors I interviewed as part of my fieldwork talked about the consultants they had worked with as outsiders who can bring new ideas and external perspectives, see things we can't see, ask the questions nobody (i.e. no insider) thinks to ask, challenge us, play devil's advocate, convince other people, provide proof and document the truth etc. This is how the magical outsider is constructed as I have shown in the four central chapters of this thesis.

At the same time it was also clearly evident that when the same client actors talked about particular consultants, their specific way of working and whether they perceived what the consultants did as useful, relevant and legitimate or not, they expressed it in terms of insider attributes. Consultants they perceived as good to work with and making a useful contribution were described with words like just like a colleague, deeply involved, part of the company, understands the culture, someone you chat with at the coffee machine, physically present, knows a lot of people, knows the details, close to reality, pragmatic, down-to-earth etc. In the following I summarise the analysis of the thesis that explored this ambiguity of the position of consultants and how it is both undermined and sustained.

THE MAGIC AND AMBIGUITY OF THE OUTSIDER POSTION

As the analysis evolved over four main chapters in the thesis I explored how internal actors differentiate consultants in ways that attribute them with special abilities and how that position is also at the same time ambiguous implying risks of marginalisation. In each of the chapters I focused on one aspect of the outsider magic, an ability consultants are attributed with by way of differentiation.

The challenger

The theme of chapter 4 was the ability to challenge and question. From the perspective of internal actors we saw how everyday absence and ignorance is constructed as an advantage; outsiders are able to see what we can't see. Consultants can ask 'stupid questions' and 'open eyes'. Organisational members are perceived as somehow caught in and blinded by their daily practice and collective habits; i.e. what is usually done. Outsiders are not and can therefore be agents of change. However the value of the outsider position is conditioned by nearness. A valuable 'stupid question' is not really a stupid question, but a relevant one posted from an outsider position. To be positioned as an outsider is not just an advantage because differentiation is as potentially marginalising as it is potentially magical.

A key source of differentiation between insiders and outsiders is everyday working life and daily managerial and operational activities in the organisation. At least initially, consultants and internal actors never share the knowing grounded in activities, relations and experience of everyday life. This implies risks of being undermined and accused of lack of understanding of what is going on 'here'. Displaying such lack of knowing and understanding or being too 'black and white' in their challenging represents a risk of marginalisation.

Professional identity is another potential source of differentiation. The hospital context is different from the company context in this respect. Boundary drawing functions differently in different contexts and that has consequences for what it means to be an outsider in any given context or situation. In the hospital consultants risk marginalisation with reference to perceptions of wider cultural 'otherness'. Their perceived lack of understanding for the healthcare world represents a barrier for the consultants and puts their challenging at risk of being interpreted as illegitimate and irrelevant.

In order for the outsider challenge to be experienced as useful, relevant and legitimate in practice it has to be a function of both difference and similarity. Shared understanding and knowing are important conditions for how and when consultants are able to interact across the boundary in ways that create opportunities for taking part in creating change in client organisations. The potential lies in interacting across the boundary but the boundary itself has to be continuously maintained in interaction. The magic is in the boundary because it can serve the function of separating actors and organising their interaction in a way that potentially creates new opportunities. The next chapters built further on these basic elements of the argument by exploring other aspects of the outsider position.

The convincer and negotiator

Chapter 5 focused on the political aspects of the outsider position. Here the theme was the political ability to influence and convince insiders and negotiate conflicting interests. By way of differentiation consultants are endowed with a particular kind of outsider power in the client organisation. They are seen as impartial and neutral in contrast to insiders, but the position is at the same time also politically vulnerable and ambiguous. It is potentially a position of both power and powerlessness. The political aspects of the outsider magic ads to the complexity and ambiguity of the position. We can not simply conclude that a certain measure of nearness combined with outsider status secures the realisation of the value of consulting. Politically nearness becomes more problematic and raises the question of nearness in relation to what actors within the organisation. Too close an association between consultants and specific insiders can also be potentially undermining.

In the chapter we saw how consultants get involved as political agents who attempt to influence people, events and outcomes in a particular direction that is in accordance with the interest of specific internal actors. The very involvement in political negotiations puts the outsider magic at risk because it is dependent on ascribed impartiality and neutrality. Politically the biggest risk thus lies in losing the outsider attributes. The balancing act is highly complex because the synthesis of distance and nearness has to be achieved and maintained equally in relation to different internal actors.

In addition, consultants do not have access to a formal position of power in the organisation. In the context of change efforts, that is perceived by consultants as a disadvantage, and they therefore focus on securing maximum top management backing. This

is however also a potential risk for the maintenance of the attributes of impartiality and neutrality. Consultants risk becoming in effect political insiders and as the chapter also showed such authority-by-extension is not necessarily always effective. It is by maintaining and sustaining the outsider position and living the ambiguity that consultants have the greatest opportunities for political influence.

The truth-teller and reifyer

In chapter 6 I explored a third aspect of the outsider magic related to key consulting activities associated with the position and the concrete pieces of documentation consultants are valued for producing and using as 'proof-artefacts' in interaction. The outsider position is not only potentially influential because of attributed impartiality. The position also rests on the attribute of objectivity and using reification as a particular form of politics.

In this chapter I thus explored how consultants are attributed with the ability to provide 'proof' and document what the problem is as well as what is going on in the organisation more generally. The consultants are positioned as 'truth-tellers' and 'pen-holders' who can reconstitute and render meaning visible and real. If the attribute of objectivity is sustained consultants can create the kind of reifications that are important in the context of change because it focuses meaning making and negotiation in new directions and provide an agreed upon version of reality that can be acted on.

However, the outsider position is no less vulnerable and ambiguous when it comes to performing the activities of documenting and proving. The legitimacy of these activities has to be sustained and the acceptability of the facts produced cannot be taken for granted. The risk that insiders will undermine the claims of outsiders is always present, because neither facts nor their producers are inherently objective. This was particularly acute in the hospital context where objectivity is an insider attribute and therefore not as readily attributed to outsiders. Both the consultants and their reifications have to be accepted and affirmed as objective by internal actors in order to serve their purpose. Finally, the reifying magic is also conditioned by the degree to which internal actors feel that consultants know and understand local circumstances, processes and practices.

The provider of new ideas and solutions

In the last of the empirical chapters I focused on the ability to come up with ideas and solutions to the problems that have been documented and reified as we saw in chapter 6. Consultants are also expected to have special knowledge and expertise that can be used in order to solve those problems and suggest new ways of organising. An important aspect of the outsider status of consultants is the perception that they bring management ideas, knowledge and experience 'from the outside'. Consultants are defined as a particular kind of outsider, namely a management expert. They are expected to possess management expertise in the form of management theory, ideas, concepts and techniques as well as experience from work in other organisations. This is also the aspect of their identity that consultants themselves attribute with the greatest importance. Paradoxically it is also the most ambiguous as we saw.

Such knowledge and ideas are also a source a differentiation that potentially marginalises the consultants in several ways with the consequence that it fails to be interpreted as useful, relevant and legitimate. Firstly, expertise can function as a marker of problematic cultural difference and incompatible values. Secondly, consultants risk becoming interpreted as too theoretical, flighty, know-it-all, out of touch with reality, rigid etc. Thirdly, internal actors might see themselves, not the consultants, as the management experts. And finally there is always the possibility that insiders see knowledge and ideas simply as a matter of belief and approach instead of absolute expertise.

On the other hand there is also the opposite risk that the knowledge and ideas of consultants are interpreted as too similar to what 'we' already know. It is not new or superior enough. This potentially leads to the interpretation that the consultants are not really contributing with anything. In order for ideas and knowledge to be experienced as valuable there has to be differentiation. Without differentiation the knowledge and ideas of consultants are not valuable in their own right. Again the magic is in the boundary as we have seen throughout the analysis.

The management knowledge, expertise and experience of consultants that both client and consultants attribute with such high importance is, however, extremely ambiguous. Internal actors want outsider knowledge that is somehow magical because it is clearly distinguishable and different from internal knowledge, but at the same time they don't want that knowledge to be different. Consultants are expected to provide revolutionary ideas and

solutions but at the same time they are discarded if they become interpreted as incompatible with internal culture and how things are done and how things work 'here'. The knowledge and ideas of consultants are under constant risk of being undermined and rendered illegitimate, irrelevant or useless if interpreted as either too different or too similar. The potential of outsider knowledge is realised when the synthesis of nearness and distance is achieved. Outsider knowledge can make a difference when it is mutually transformed in interaction between insiders and outsider to become something third that is both new but also relevant, useful and legitimate in a given context.

The peripheral participant

In the four central chapters I showed, as summarised above, how the outsider position constructed by internal actors creates both opportunities and limitations, and how the magical potential might be sustained and realised. In chapter 8 I thus suggested a way of conceptualising a theoretically ideal consulting positioning from where the ambiguity might be most fruitfully negotiated. Here I used the concept of the peripherality as a way of further qualifying the measure of nearness and distance that characterises an outsider position that is potentially magical.

Peripherality indicates a positioning where the ambiguity is most constructive and beneficial for the potential creation of value. It is, however, also inherently unstable, because the possibility of expulsion or assimilation is its constant companion. When consultants participate in activities and relations in client organisations they are constantly at risk of being 'pushed out' and rejected as illegitimate intruders or on the other hand becoming 'pulled in' towards more extensive forms of participation. It is in the ambiguous insider/outsider position characterised by peripherality that consultants have the greatest opportunities for being part of creating learning and change in client organisations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSULTING PRACTICE

Throughout this thesis I have shown how management consulting and what it creates is fundamentally about a particular position made available to consultants by internal actors and invested with particular special abilities to act and interact in particular ways. To remind us again of Mauss's argument from chapter 3:

> *"These values do not depend, in fact, on the intrinsic qualities of a thing or a person, but on the status or rank attributed to them by all-powerful public opinion" (Mauss 1950/2001: 148).*

Taking the full consequence of this would seem to indicate that it matters less what consultants do or whether they do a good or a bad job. And it would seem to indicate that it does not require particular skills or competence and that anyone could in fact be a management consultant. This is of course an overstatement of the point. An overstatement that is also false, as I shall get back to.

Interestingly enough the industry does have certain features that resonate with this; it is an industry with low entry barriers and there are no formal qualifications or certifications that have become generally agreed upon. Anyone can call themselves a management consultant in principle. It will of course not necessarily be easy to get and keep clients and we might want to question to what extent value is created as a result of their engagements in organisations. Nevertheless, the *potential* for value is always there.

Management consulting is, as I have argued in this thesis, a social phenomenon deriving from the functioning of collective life, in this case specifically organisational life. That is probably part of the reason why the consulting industry has the characteristics it does. The way consulting works as a social phenomenon is deceptive, because it is not clear what the active ingredient really is. We can't quite put our fingers on it, explain or describe what it is all about and that produces common misunderstandings.

It leads both to the assumption that anyone can do it and create value as well as the opposite conclusion that it is like the emperor's new clothes[25], i.e. consultants 'borrow your watch to tell you the time' as the saying goes. Even consultants themselves do not always

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[25] Mauss (1950/2001) notes that only a simplistic theory of magic would question the intelligence of magicians, or the marvels they perform, and explain their profession as a hoax. This I would argue is equally true in the context of consulting.

seem to be quite sure how to make sense of it or describe it, except that they feel and experience it. They might not know *how* it works, but they know that it works, at least some of the time. They feel the powers they are endowed with and they experience the impact they can sometimes have; that they can move things and move people. One consultant described for instance that clients put consultants on a pedestal, as he called it. Another told me that it is a problem for management in consulting firms that when the consultants are with clients they are superheroes, back in the firm they have difficulty adjusting to being just another employee.

What I want to emphasise, however, is that just because any social actor positioned in this particular way in an organisation will potentially be endowed with special abilities, it *does not* equal concrete abilities to perform the tasks and fulfil the functions of the position. It is thus crucial to distinguish between attributed and acquired abilities. The magical abilities are attributed to consultants by internal actors and that is where the potential for value creation is to be found, but the potential is conditioned by the ability of the individual consultant to perform the role and that is based on acquired abilities and other individual qualities. Consulting is also the concrete activities carried out by consultants.

It is useful here to return to Mauss's (1950/2001) theory of magic. Keeping in mind, as I emphasised in chapter 3, that it is the principle of how magic works as a general social phenomenon that is relevant in the context of consulting, and not specific empirical manifestations we might commonly associate with magic. It refers to special abilities, values or powers that particular categories of social actors are collectively endowed with in society. Mauss (1950/2001) thus stresses the point that magicians do not possess magical powers through their individual peculiarities. However, magicians have concrete, practical skills and qualifications that they go through training to acquire. This relates to the non-magical elements of their practice we might say. Magicians are professionals and experts, often talented or otherwise exceptional and gifted individuals, seen from the perspective of the society they are part of.

Concrete skills and competences thus go hand in hand with magic and as such it is part of many different professions we do not normally consider as magic. Mauss himself mentions that scientists, doctors, barbers, blacksmiths, shephards, actors etc. are magicians (ibid. 36). The magical element of these practices refers to effects produced through something other than the concrete skills of those professionals. The magicians do not produce the magic. Just

as it is not mangement consultants as such who create the potential for value in organisations. It is collectively achieved.

The consultants take part in making it possible and they can under certain conditions and in some situations be instrumental in realising the potential. Skills, expertise and competence do however condition value creation, because the consultant has to be able to perform the role that is endowed with these powers in order to sustain and maintain it. The position open to consultants, i.e. the position made available to them in client organisations, is not a position that can be filled by just anyone in such a way that the position can be collectively endowed with special powers. It is a demanding position that requires high level skill, expertise, competence, talent and intelligence seen from the perspective of the relevant client context.

Consultants can of course also be useful simply as an extra pair of hands without needing to be endowed with special abilities. In that case they are just another employee, a temp, and they do not create any other kind of value than what any employee or manager with the same competences would do. But in order to achieve that special kind of effectiveness, impact and value, beyond that which can be achieved by organisational members, you need truly exceptional consultants. Their skill-set of course is radically different from the skill-set of the traditional magicians Mauss is mainly concerned with, but the principle is the same. This raises the question for both consulting firms and client buyers: what is a good consultant and what skills are needed to maintain and sustain the position?

The exceptional consultant

The following should not be read as an exhaustive list or the final answer to the question of what it takes to be a good consultant. It is also not meant to indicate that an individual consultant can or should live up to everything I mention. Instead I point to what it is consultants can do to achieve and sustain a consulting position that can be endowed with special abilities in the client organisation. This is related to that which conditions the magic as we have also seen it throughout the analysis. In that sense it is not about attributed abilities, but the acquired abilities needed in order to perform the functions of challenger, convincer, negotiator, truth-teller, reifier and provider of new ideas and solutions.

This ideal-typical skill-set, as we might call it, can be divided into generic and context-specific competence. The context-specific is related to what is required in the context of a

specific client organisation and that is to some extent different from organisation to organisation. It's about the understanding, knowledge and expertise that count internally; insider knowledge and everyday knowing in other words, as we saw it in chapter 4.

This is on the one hand about professions, functions and industries. A consultant can specialise along these lines and become more and more competent in relation to a particular profession, function and/or industry. One of the consultants working in the hospital for instance told me that his first assignment in a hospital had been much more difficult; taking into account that the present assignment wasn't particularly easy in this regard. But he had become significantly more competent in manoeuvring and gain legitimacy in a hospital context.

The other aspect is the need to acquire everyday knowing and understanding. That is the most context-specific because all organisations are different in some way and groups within them are different from each other. The consultant thus has to go through a process of learning through participation as argued in the previous chapter with each new client organisation or group. This is about the ability to 'put the organisation on' as some consultants put it; becoming a part of it to a certain extent and acquire certain insider attributes.

This ability to get to know the organisation, the culture etc. and learn how to act and interact in that context is, however, also related to more generic skills that are in essence qualitative research skills. In this regard consultants and anthropologists have much in common. It is about gaining access to participation, observing, talking to people, listening and asking systematically. Like a detective searching for and connecting clues.

Research skills in general are necessary for the activities of collecting data and analysing it. This is both about different types of numerical and statistical data collection and analysis and the related models, but also basic skills in qualitative research methods and sociological/organisation studies frameworks for analysing and understanding how organisations, and collectivities in general, work and the social processes at play.

Management and business expertise and experience are other important parts of the generic skills. These are of course difficult to specify, because it also depends on what kind of expertise is relevant seen from the perspective of the client organisation and different groups within the organisation. So again we see how generic and context-specific competence has to blend. But it is in most cases in some way related to being competent in theories, models, methods, techniques and approaches taught in business schools. More importantly, however,

it is about a basic understanding of business, management and organising. A consultant has to be able to match client managers at the relevant level, understand the language, know about the things they talk about and be able to have a qualified dialogue with them about it, at the very least.

I have often been asked if it is necessary to have management experience in order to be a good management consultant. I am tempted to answer yes, with the modification that there are also other ways to learn about business, management and organising. Experience with participating in management activities as a consultant in different organisations is another route. Which is in any case also part of the experience expected of consultants that they know what other organisations do, 'best practice' etc. It is, however, not necessarily enough to be seen as just as competent as internal managers, experience or not. As we saw in chapter 7 consultants should provide ideas that are new and expertise that is superior. That will always be a matter of interpretation, but it indicates that there are high expectations when it comes to expertise.

Other generic, but more personal characteristics, that sustain the position of consultants, are intelligence, professionalism, communication and presentation skills, politically savvy, listening skills, empathy, enthusiasm, passion, energy, charisma, self-driven, adaptable, goal-oriented, efficient, friendly, down-to-earth etc. These are all things mentioned by internal actors when they talk about fantastic consultants. Basically one could say that consultants should ideally possess all the qualities that are perceived as most desirable in society more generally and in professional work contexts specifically.

That is of course impossible, but it illustrates again how the position is all about setting apart and differentiating from insiders, the everyday normal people. But without being too different of course or different in a way that is interpreted negatively in a given context. It is about possessing qualities that are seen as positive and desirable in a specific context, but that insiders themselves do not necessarily live up to in daily life. The 'dark suit - white shirt - briefcase' is often not a good idea even though it can be so in some contexts.

To fill the shoes set aside for them, consultants have to be quite exceptional people in many different ways both personally, socially and professionally. Some people in organisations will meet them with prejudices and the negative expectation that there is no way they can fill the shoes. In that case consultants have to work even harder to prove their worth of the position endowed with potential. Often when people talk negatively about consultants,

or say that they do not believe in the value of using them, it has got something to do with beliefs, stereotypes, experiences or interpretations of consultants that somehow disqualifies them from such a position. The potential for marginalisation is ever-present and the ambiguity can not be solved or done away with as I have also emphasised earlier. Even the most exceptional consultants risk marginalisation.

This brings us to my final point of this section. There are no guarantees or recipes for success as it should be clear by now. The ambiguity comes with the territory. Consultants can however benefit their own practice by recognising, accepting and understanding these dynamics of the position, its attributes and ambiguities. Exceptional consultants have such an understanding of consulting as a social phenomenon; how it works, what it does, how to navigate in it and how to 'read' what the consulting position is more specifically being endowed with in any given context and with what consequences. For those consultants who are already exceptional I hope to have contributed with expressing in a different way what this is all about and for those who are still learning in practice, or just starting out, I hope to have contributed towards the achievement of that understanding.

Implications of client buyers, project sponsors and project managers
The above does not just have implications for consultants, but equally so for those actors in client organisations that hire them or are in other ways responsible for securing that the objectives for hiring them are realised. To start with the buyer, it is important to keep in mind the skills needed to sustain and maintain a consulting position in a given context. If the buyer wants the consultants to have an impact in the organisation beyond being an extra pair of hands, this is crucial. Again it requires having an understanding of how management consulting works as it is collectively achieved and what that means in the particular organisation. The buyer should thus think less about personal chemistry or the like as a criteria and more about how the consultants will potentially be received in the organisation and whether they have what it takes to perform the role in that particular context. Both buyer and consultants need to have a dialogue about this in the buying/selling process.

In the roles of project sponsor and project manager in the consulting process it is equally important to be continuously aware of how these social dynamics between consultants and internal actors develop. Their entrance into the organisation needs to be prepared and thought about. How do we introduce them in a way that best sustains their position? It is a

common misunderstanding that just because consultants are in most cases self-driven, intelligent and competent professionals, they can just be left to fend for themselves. Consultants of course do not need to be babysat, but they do need internal actors to do things their position does not permit them to do. Access to peripheral participation for instance has to be granted as argued in the previous chapter in relevant parts of the organisation. Consultants need internal actors who can help open doors and make it happen.

The neutrality and impartiality of consultants also need to be sustained and maintained by trying to avoid that they become too closely associated with top management for instance. The consultants need to be set free and let out in the organisation so to speak. Depending of course on the type of assignment, but generally consultants need to get out of the meeting rooms of top management, or other project sponsors, and into the everyday working life of relevant parts of the rest of the organisation. This is where they can potentially have an impact and take part in the mutual creation of value from a position of ambiguity.

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