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# Squishy constructions

A critical study on the 'client'  
in the client-consultant relationship

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## Abstract

**Title:** Squishy constructions. A critical study on the 'client' in the client-consultant relationship

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**Purpose:** To gain a deeper understanding of consultancy by 1) emphasising the role of the client and 2) highlighting the paradoxical and dynamic nature of the client, as a discursive construction process made by consultants.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research is based on a performative approach to language and in depth interviews with 16 consultants serve as an empirical illustration of consultants' discursive client constructions. Additionally, a review of existing literature gives further supports for the need to emphasise the importance and the ambiguous nature of client.

**Findings:** The paper argues that 1) consultants construct clients using paradoxical accounts 2) paradoxes can be seen as a resource which enables the client-consultant relationship 3) the client-consultant relationship is better understood as viewing the client as a construction process the construction process reveals more about than the client construction itself does.

**Research limitations/implications:** Understanding the client as a construction process made by the consultants will further the understanding of the client-consultant relationship and thereby consultancy as a phenomenon.

**Practical implications:** Practitioners are able to deeper their understanding of their own work and accept paradoxical client constructions as a resource and not a constraint.

**Originality/value:** Proposes a hitherto neglected way of viewing the client as multifaceted, dynamic and discursive construction process, and thus contributing to balancing out the current power disequilibrium in critical management literature favouring studies on consultants.

**Key words:** Consultancy, client-consultant relationship, performative approach to language, client construction, paradoxes

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## Prologue

Consultancy can be seen as a room, an intricate room filled with hidden doors, secret passages, mirrors and optical illusions. It can be seen almost like a fun house at a carnival. The room appears pitch black, as there are no sources of light in it and therefore no ways to illuminate what is in the room. However, because of its elusive and esoteric nature, outside spectators and researchers have attempted to understand what is in it.

Historically, the first to attempt to shed light on the room have in retrospect been labelled functionalists. If we continue with the metaphor, they can be seen as having lifted off the roof of the room and from an aerial view tried to draw some sort of map of it. Little torches were lit from up above, which shed light onto parts of the room. In doing so, researchers found out that much of what was in the room, was in fact simply the client and the consultant. Some even concluded that there was nothing but the client and the consultant. All the complex structures and hidden doors were made by the consultant and the client in cooperation. This is when research concluded that consultancy is nothing but relational work.

Looking at the room from only one direction, the aerial view, however did not allow for a complete understanding of the room. There were still nooks and corners that remained dark. As a response to these limitations, critical researchers began studying it from all different directions, not just from above. They realised that in order to truly understand what went on in the room, they had to look at what the beings in the room themselves reveal about the room. An outsider can never see the room in the same way as an insider. Metaphorically speaking, they asked the consultant and the client themselves to light more torches. That way they could reach into small nooks that an outsider could not. As a consequence, a much more multidimensional image of the room was revealed.

The most interesting thing that then happened was that the room changed as they lit one more torch. It had been concluded that the room was filled to the brim with nothing but the client and the consultant; that all that the room consisted of was the relationship between them. This meant that everything that was in the room was simply a construction made by either the client or the consultant. When a torch was

lit, it revealed not an objective fact, but a construction made by the one holding the torch.

For some reason, most of the torches faced the consultant. They revealed a multifaceted and almost jellylike consultant, made up of thousand of soft, squishy and flexible components. As one little torch was lit and showed a little more of the consultant, another one was lit right next to it, showing an even more wobbly and supple component.

Meanwhile, the client was left in the dark. Only a few tiny torches lit up some parts of the client. This is the situation that our research aims to rectify. Firstly, we want to highlight the client, we want there to be equal amounts of torches shining on the client as on the consultant. Secondly, we want to understand the client, in the same way as the consultant has been understood. The only way to really understand the client is to ask someone on the inside to light a torch. This is what we have done. We asked the consultant to light a little torch in the direction of the client. Through the consultants, we illuminate the client. More specifically, our research reveals twelve more components of what seems to be a multifaceted, dynamic and squishy client. Our contribution to the field of understanding consultancy is therefore a ray of light into the consultancy room.

# 1. Introduction

'Tell me... what is a typical client like?' At first glance, the subject might seem trivial. However, answering this question has proven to be easier said than done. Although researchers have emphasised and re-emphasised the relational nature of consulting (Fincham 1999), focus has been on the ambiguous and multifaceted role of the consultant. The client has received little attention (Alvesson et al. 2009, Sturdy et al. 2009). In this paper, we therefore want to emphasise the nature and role of the client within consultancy. We argue that the client represents something more complex than just a buyer or receiver of consultancy services. We offer an alternative way of approaching the client, that is, to view it as discursive construction made by consultants. Based on 16 interviews, we demonstrate how consultants construct the clients using contradictory accounts. We suggest, however, that the paradoxes that these contradictory accounts give rise to are natural and essential elements of the client-consultant relationship. Furthermore, we argue that paradoxical constructions of the client are worth embracing as they enable consultants and clients to strategically manage their relationship. Finally, we propose that the relationship is best understood by viewing the client as an ongoing construction process.

## 1.1. Background

Since its emergence during the past century, the phenomenon of consultancy has fascinated researchers and laymen alike (see for example Kubr 1996, Schein 1969, O'Mahoney 2010, Alvesson 2001, Czarniawska 2001, Sturdy 1997a, Fincham 1999, Clark & Fincham 2002, Berglund & Werr 2000). Despite their influential roles in modern society (Alvesson 2004, Berglund & Werr 2000), consultants and their work is still feebly understood (Clark & Fincham 2002). Why has such a mundane service, such as giving advice, grown to be one of the most lucrative businesses on the planet (Clark & Fincham 2002)? What makes companies willing to pay colossal amounts of money for such an intangible, immeasurable and insecure service (Alvesson 2004, Fincham 1999)? And perhaps the most interesting question of them all: What is it that consultants really do? These are questions that have occupied management researchers during the past decades.

The general image of consultancy can be said to be provocative at the same time as it is appealing (Clark & Fincham 2002). A number of researchers claim that consulting is a knowledge intensive profession (Alvesson 2004) and that consultants are experts at rationally achieving organisational change (see for example Kubr 1996, Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Others bring ambiguity to the forefront of the academic debate, questioning consultancy's actual value (Fincham 1999, Sturdy 1997, Alvesson & Johansson 2002). These multiple and contradictory opinions on what consulting is all about, are perhaps indicators of its multifaceted nature. The absence of a clear picture of 'what goes on' in the consultancy business in terms of effectiveness, knowledge and power structures, has triggered researchers to further examine the field from a critical perspective (Clark & Fincham 2003). The main purpose of the critical researchers is not to improve consultancy, but to gain a deeper understanding of consultancy and to contribute to wider debates in the area of management (ibid). Within this critical tradition, researchers do not consider the world to be objective or rational. Instead, a so-called social constructionist perspective is adopted, recognising the inexplicable and ambiguous nature of consultancy and the parties involved (Sandberg & Targama 2007).

Regardless of perspective, consultancy work has been proven to largely consist of relational work (Sturdy 1997a, Alvesson 2004) and the client-consultant relationship has consequently been a popular research topic. However, while the client-consultant relationship has received much attention, the majority of the research has been conducted on the consultant (Alvesson et al. 2009, Sturdy et al. 2009). Not nearly as much research has been made on the client.

The existing literature represents two distinct paradigms. First, pro-consultancy literature, which we will refer to as 'functionalist' literature, consists of the texts written by and for consultants themselves. Functionalist literature allows for a slightly more nuanced and dynamic view of the client (see for example Kubr 1996, Schein 1999) than the second strand of literature, the critical approach, does. Advocates of critical research recognise reality as multifaceted and ambiguous and argue that it is best understood as socially constructed. Nonetheless, the role of client has not been explored as socially constructed and is often referred to merely as the 'client'. Alvesson et al. highlight this neglect:

Whilst important, consultants are only one element in a dynamic relationship involving both consultants and their client. In much of the literature, the client is neglected, or is assumed to represent a distinct, immutable entity. (2009:253)

More precisely, while the consultant has been given a myriad of roles and attributed with a toolbox consisting of magic tricks (Clark & Salaman 1996), political manipulation (Alvesson and Johansson 2002, Muhr & Whittle 2010) and rhetorical devices (Berglund & Werr 2000, Whittle 2006), the client has remained in the backwater of the critical literature. This predominance of the role of the consultant in existing critical consultancy literature is what we take as our point of departure. Inspired by increasingly advocated integrative perspective on consultancy (see for example Fincham 1999, Werr & Styhre 2003) and given the relation-based nature of consultancy (Sturdy 1997a), there is a clear need for academia to investigate the other party of the relationship: the client. By viewing the client as a phenomenon, discursively constructed by its counterpart, the consultant, our ambition is to highlight the role of the client and to bring counterweight to the consultant centric research.

## **1.2. Studying discursive constructions**

The study of discourse has shown to offer promising ways of understanding organisational phenomena (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a, Berglund and Werr, 2000, Bäcklund & Werr 2008, Clark, 1995, Clark and Fincham, 2002, Legge, 2002, Whittle, 2006, Whittle et al. 2008). Although not unproblematic (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a), taking this so-called 'linguistic turn' is becoming increasingly popular (Whittle 2006). By paying rigorous attention to language and language-use in consulting, researchers have shown how story-telling and other rhetorical devices are efficient means of persuasion (Berglund & Werr 2006, Whittle 2006). For instance, critical research argues that in order to legitimise their activities and perform change, consultants draw upon seemingly paradoxical discourses (Werr & Styhre 2003) and take multiple roles (Whittle 2006, Alvesson & Johansson 2002). To view language, discourse and paradoxes this way – as achieving rather than reflecting reality – allows researchers to gain a better understanding of seemingly inexplicable and complex phenomena. Based on this logic, this paper argues for the value of studying consulting 'talk'. Furthermore, we argue that paradoxes are not problems to be

solved, but opportunities constituting the 'client'. Language and paradoxes, we will suggest, can be seen as resources that, when embraced, may provide researchers with valuable insights into the client-consultant relationship. In the end, this will lead to an increased understanding of the ambiguous consultancy industry.

### **1.3. Research question**

Our research is based on the premises discussed above, which naturally unfold the research question that this paper aims to answer.

- How do consultants discursively construct the client?

### **1.4. Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to 1) explore and emphasise the role of the client and 2) emphasise the paradoxical and dynamic nature of the client, as a discursive construction process made by consultants.

### **1.5. Structure**

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we will go through some of the underlying assumptions that presuppose this research and how they relate to the chosen research methods. Central to our research is the assumption that language constructs rather than mirrors reality. It is according to this assumption that the research was designed and executed.

Secondly, we will provide the reader with an overview of how existing literature has depicted the client-consultant relationship. More specifically, we will focus on how functionalist and critical literature discuss and describe the consultant and the client. In doing this we will bring forward the inability of literature, primarily the critical literature, to take the complexity of the client into account.

In the third section we will present our empirical findings. The interview material shows that consultants construct the client according to twelve sets of attributes. Each set will be explained and exemplified.

The fourth section includes a discussion of the empirical material, relating it back to the existing literature. We will primarily discuss the tendency for paradoxes to emerge as a result of contradictory client constructions and argue that they can be seen as a resource. Furthermore, we will suggest that studying the client as an ongoing construction process can provide researchers with insights into the client-consultant relationship.

Finally, we will conclude this paper by summing up our major arguments. Additionally, we will discuss what implications our research findings will have on theory and practice.

## **1.6. Limitations**

As the subject of our study is the client as a discursive construction process, it would of course be interesting to study client constructions made *both* by the consultants and by the clients themselves. However, due to the scope of this thesis, we have chosen to focus on the consultants' client constructions. Following Fincham's reasoning, we suggest that 'interviews as a particular type of research conversation provide a window into the consultancy discourse that can be used to explore an issue like the client relationship' (2002:75).

We also want to emphasise that a separation between client and consultant mainly serves an analytical purpose. By focusing our time and energy on one of the parties' client constructions, we achieve a depth in the study that would otherwise be impossible to attain, within the given scope of this paper.

Additionally, when we in Chapter 4 present our empirical findings and account for how the consultants discursively construct the client, we do not claim that these constructions reflect an objective client (Alvesson Kärreman 2000). All statements made by the participants are seen as their constructions of reality. However, for linguistic and economic reasons, we use the verb 'to be'.

Similarly, while writing, we are aware that using terms such as 'client' or 'client-consultant relationship' fuels the very homogenisation and simplification of the complex phenomena behind the terms that this paper argues against. Due to practical reasons however, we find that there is no other terms that better describe

the phenomena. Nevertheless, we urge readers to keep in mind that the terms 'client' and 'client-consultant relationship' do not refer to unitary entities, but rather a complex and dynamic system.

## **2. Methodology & Methods**

The interview-based research methods that we used reflect the critical, and more precisely linguistic, turn of management research (see for example Alvesson & Deetz 2000; Alvesson & Kärreman 2000; Whittle 2006). Approaching the field with criticality means questioning social phenomena and de-familiarisation of the taken-for-granted, with the ambition of stirring things up and challenging the reproduction of pre-structured orders (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, Easterby-Smith et al. 2002, Alvesson and Wilmot 1992, Thomas, 1993). In order to gain an insight into how consultants discursively construct the clients, we follow the social constructionist tradition, according to which people and reality may be viewed as discursively constructed (see for example Alvesson & Deetz 2000, Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, Whittle 2006, Werr & Styhre 2003).

Our interview-based method illustrates the linguistic turn of management research in several ways. First of all, our research question emerged from the lack of critical research on how the client is discursively constructed. Second, and inspired by Whittle (2006), we shift the focus away from what language reflects, towards what it achieves. We thereby consider language, metaphors and paradoxes as shaping reality rather than simply mirroring it (Whittle 2006, Whittle et al. 2008, Alvesson 2003, Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, Potter & Wetherell 1987). Third, we conducted 16 interviews where consultants were given the possibility to discursively construct the client. Finally, we analyse the accounts produced by the consultants relying on the performative characteristics of discourse, as suggested by Whittle (2006).

### **2.1. Research design**

While language at first glance might seem like the perfect way in which to study organisational phenomena and dynamics, it is far from unproblematically done. Alvesson explains:

Language use means the construction of the world. Even if few people doubt that there are "objective" things going on "out there" or in the minds of people, any account of these means the construction of a particular version of how things hang together and how they can be represented (Alvesson 2003:22).

According to Alvesson and Kärreman 'the great majority of empirical studies treat language in a simplistic, uncritical, and misleading way' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a:153). This is something we have taken into consideration when designing and conducting our research, by bringing opportunities as well as complexities associated with language and language use into the centre of our research. Methodologically, our ambition is thus to take this linguistic turn of management research seriously by:

- a. considering our research subject, the 'client', as a discursively constructed phenomenon,
- b. treating interviews, metaphorically, as 'arenas for construction work' (Alvesson 2003:22) and letting 16 consultants out on this arena and use their language for 'crafting accounts' about the client  
and
- c. adopting a micro-discourse/performative approach when analysing the interviews (see for example Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a; 2000b, Potter and Wetherell 1987, Whittle 2006, Whittle et al. 2008).

Already from the methodological considerations indicated above, it becomes apparent that we do not seek nor do we claim unambiguous truths (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000, Denzin & Lincoln 2005). However, in order to stimulate the complex interplay between producing our interpretations and continuously challenge them, we let reflexive sensitivity (Alvesson 2003, Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000) permeate our research process. By adopting a reflexive approach, we continuously challenge each others' assumptions and we take different lines of interpretation of the material into consideration. Thereby, we 1) avoid falling into the trap of believing that the accounts produced by the interviewees simply reveal reality and 2) open up for creativity as we acknowledge variances as well as paradoxes of the accounts (Alvesson 2003). Variances and paradoxes may in turn constitute a major resource for understanding how the consultants construct the client and what implications that may have on the client-consultant relationship (Whittle 2006).

As we conduct a critical study, it is particularly important for us to avoid seeing the world as self-evident (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). In our case, we look upon the

conventional concept of the 'client' as something strange and unfamiliar. This is, however, not done without difficulties. There is a risk of becoming hypercritical, especially as we conduct a one-sided study (Alvesson & Deetz 2000) when not taking the clients' constructions of themselves into consideration. Throughout our research we therefore emphasise the importance of not only self-criticism and reflection, but also for a well-developed spectrum of relevant theoretical aspects of the research issue – an interpretative repertoire (IR) (ibid). The IR is a framework made out of both professional and amateurish elements, such as theories, basic assumptions, vocabularies and metaphors associated with the theme of the study (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, Whittle 2006). Our preunderstanding of consultancy and the client-consultant relationship constitutes the main professional elements of our IR, and it serves as theoretical, empirical and interpretive guidance. Our IR, which is partly outlined in '3. Literature Review', also helped us to stay within the given scope of the study. Although our intensive preunderstanding of the consultancy field is crucial in order for us to efficiently conduct our research and achieve results, we bear in mind that it could sometimes lead us into predictable rather than alternative directions (ibid).

## **2.2. Research process**

The reason for deciding to explore the area of consultancy can be related to a statement made by Alvesson and Johansson (2002). According to them, few other occupations generate such strong yet contrasting reactions. Against this background, we were interested in investigating more on why this is, and started looking for aspects of the client-consultant relationship not yet explored. At the same time, a Swedish medium-sized management and IT consultancy firm announced their interest in guiding a master's thesis on the theme of the value creation process of consultancy in operational excellence. The firm wanted to 'academically evaluate' their value proposition, and we saw how this might correspond to our interest in critically investigating the client-consultant relationship. However, after having mutually agreed on conducting twenty in-depth interviews with consultants and managers of their major clients, the consultancy firm suddenly changed its mind and asked us to perform a market survey among potential clients. We then decided to end the collaboration with the firm, in order to further

investigate the constructed nature of the 'client', in which we had become interested from reading a paper by Alvesson, Kärreman, Sturdy and Handley (2009).

We got in contact with the eleven consultants through our personal network and by contacting individual consultants asking for the possibility of one-hour talks on a topic that we decided to label as 'value creation'. Additionally, an announcement about the need for interviewees was made on the social media site Twitter by a prominent university professor within our personal network, whereupon five of the respondents showed interest in participating. One to three representatives from each consulting company, ranging from one-man firms to the largest of the multi-national consultancy firms, were contacted and interviewed. In total, we conducted 16 in-depth interviews with Swedish, Danish and Finnish consultants with relevant consulting experience from the management- or IT consulting industry. In order to get an as nuanced picture as possible, three of the participants were juniors, four were medium level consultants and nine were seniors, self-employed or former consultants. Twelve interviews were conducted face to face, inside and outside the consultants' own working environments. Three were held using Skype video call technology and one was done over the phone. Our ambition was to have as many interviews as possible in real life, in order to establish a better connection with the interviewee, but for practical reasons it was impossible to meet four of the participants face to face. A semi-structured interview method was considered appropriate since the aim of the field study was to understand how the consultants, through language, construct the client using narratives, metaphors and sometimes even contradictory accounts. We asked questions about both successful and unsuccessful client projects and asked the consultants to describe clients with both preferable and less preferable characteristics. Particular attention was paid to the consultants' concrete examples, stories and statements about clients, and to affirmations and/or contradictions that allowed us to question, analyse and interpret the consultants' client constructions. The interviews were held during a period of three weeks, and they lasted between 60 and 150 minutes each. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. All participants are given anonymity. The names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

When constructing the 'data' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000), in our case when interviewing the consultants, we paid special attention to the feeling of discomfort.

Using Popperian logic, whenever we felt that what was being said contradicted our basic assumptions and expectations, we investigated that particular area further and in that sense applied a falsification approach to the material (Easterby-Smith et al. 2002). Initially we had the suspicion that many consultants would be likely to generalise and describe only a handful different types of clients. We pursued that idea but sought to constantly question this initial assumption.

Additionally, we made serious attempts to explore various sides of the client-consultant relationship. For example, we did not only ask questions about what the client is like, but also questions about how the consultants think the clients want be perceived and what the clients' expectations of the consultants usually are. Furthermore, we asked the interviewees to complement most of their general statements with concrete examples of clients and use images and metaphors to illustrate their opinions.

In line with the critical nature of our research design, during the interviews we made conscious attempts to de-familiarise the familiar (Alvesson & Deetz 2000) and question the taken-for-granted in order to allow ourselves to be surprised and therein get the most out of the empirical material. The questions asked were very open, such as 'Can you tell me about how you put together a team?' allowing the interviewee to speak freely about a specific topic. We avoided talking directly about the values that consultants attach to clients and instead talk around it. By asking for examples and responses to hypothetical situations we encouraged the participants to talk about and contrast the client. Recognising the difficulty for researchers in social sciences to remain independent from the subject researched, during the interviews we did not try to avoid personal involvement, we rather accepted ourselves as actively participating in constructing the data. Geertz neatly summarises the relation between data and the involved researcher:

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. (Geertz 1973:73)

Before attempting to generate any conclusions we made sure to carry out an initial analysis of all of the empirical data. This was done in order to make sure that we had an overview of the entire empirical material before drawing any decisive conclusions (White 2000).

## 2.2.1 Discourse analysis

It is often difficult to make sense of what people mean by discourse.  
(Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b:1126)

Although it has become increasingly popular to focus on language and discourse when conducting research, the notion of discourse easily leads to confusion as there is no unambiguous definition of the concept (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b). In this paper, what we mean by discourse includes the participants' stories, narratives and metaphors – in other words: what the consultants say about their 'clients'.

In order to make sense of the interview material, we made an analysis based on what Whittle (2006) refers to as a performative approach to language, assuming that discourse may be viewed as constructing rather than reflecting reality. In addition, we were inspired by a micro-discourse analysis method (Potter and Wetherell 1987), more specifically treating the texts from a close-range/autonomous perspective (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b). Thereby, we did not have an ambition of relating our empirical material to wider social or psychological consequences (ibid). Instead, we emphasised the local and situational context of the consultants and their constructions of the client.

In line with the general principle of discursivism (Potter & Wetherell 1987), the interview accounts were treated as empirical situations and were studied as such. This required of course a detailed and focused analysis of the consultants' utterances. However, with some inspiration from discursive pragmatism (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000a), we were given more room for creativity, and we were enabled to reflect on the consultants' language-use, accept contradictions and focus on analysing meanings and the achieved effects of their language and language-use. The advantage of adopting a method inspired by discursive pragmatism is, according to Alvesson and Kärreman, that a 'wide spectrum of organisational phenomena may be reconstructed to narrow the gap between a specific area of interest and what is possible to say about it, given an appreciation of the nature and dynamics of language use'. (2000a:154)

Practically, we began our analysis by reading through the 16 transcripts, in order to

get an overview of how to code the material. After a second and more thorough study of the texts, we identified various potential themes to focus on, out of which six continuums of client constructions were selected and constructed into a framework (see 4. Empirics: The Squish Ball). We then, manually, coded the texts according to the six continuums. In line with the discursivism approach (Potter and Wetherell 1987), the process of coding the interviews was followed by an analysis phase, focusing on getting closer to the language of the categorised text passages. Our guiding questions when studying and interpreting the selected material were 'how the consultants construct their clients' and 'how these constructions relate to the continuums identified'. While this type of categorisation process is generally considered useful for analytical purposes, it could be argued that there is a certain risk of suppressing variation and nuances as the 'data' is matched to a pre-structured framework (Potter & Wetherell 1987).

### **2.2.2 Generalisability & Applicability**

Finally, in line with the interpretive and constructionist approach applied, we are aware of the fact that just as the consultants' descriptions of the clients do not mirror the client, but rather construct it, our research findings do not provide an objective image of this process. Instead, reality is constructed through our research. Therefore, we highlight that our research cannot provide generalisable or universally applicable truths. With this in mind, the aim of this research is to increase the existing understanding and shed new light on aspects of the client-consultant relationship.

### 3. Literature review

In the following section we will provide the reader with an overview of the existing literature on consultancy. The basis for our literature is the same as the reasoning behind our research question, as Figure 3.1 illustrates.

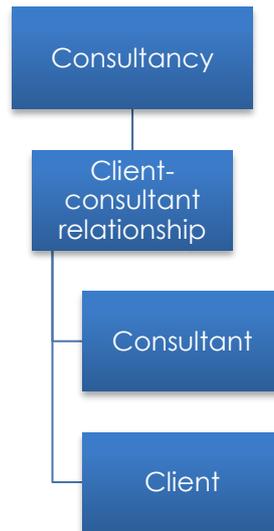


Figure 3.1 Structure of the literature review

First, we will account for how the view on consultancy has evolved from an early functionalist approach and towards a more critical approach. Second, we will emphasise the fact that the relationship between client and consultant plays a pivotal role in consultancy work. Third, we will account for how the client and the consultant have been depicted, both according to the functionalist and the critical approach.

It is worth noting that a division of the literature into two major fields, a functionalist and a critical camp, mainly serves an analytical purpose. The two fields are to be considered as theoretical extremes. In reality, research is seldom black or white and elements of different paradigms can be found in most management research (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). In fact, due to the limitations in such a dualistic thinking, the most recent evolution among management scholars has been an increasing support

for an integrative approach to management consultancy (see Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Fincham 1999, Whittle 2006, Werr & Styhre 2003).

### **3.1. The evolution of consultancy**

When talking about the evolution of management consultancy, it is not purely historical events that have shaped the face of consultancy today. The perception of management consultancy has also undergone a drastic metamorphosis during the past few decades (see for example Fincham & Clark 2002). Furthermore, as management consultancy is an occupation that provokes both strong positive and negative reactions, research conducted on it is seldom done from a neutral position (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Most of early normative literature adopts a pro-consultancy attitude whereas research from the 1990's and onwards is often critical. Below follows a short introduction to these two major strands of literature, the traditional functionalist approach and the more recent critical approach.

#### **3.1.1. Functionalist approach**

The functionalist approach can be traced back to the early days of consultancy, when factory owners needed advice on how to improve productivity rates (O'Mahoney 2010). During the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, management consultancy was primarily concerned with improving the efficiency of companies through standardisation (O'Mahoney, 2010). In prescriptive documents such as manuals, handbooks and other normative literature, authors such as Schein (1969), Geriner and Metzger (1983) and Kubr (1996) present an idealistic and often self-promoting view of consultancy as a highly professional occupation.

According to the functionalist approach, the consultant is regarded as an expert who is brought in to solve a well-defined task (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002). The client-consultant relationship is said to be knowledge-based (Werr & Styhre 2003) and rational (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). The consultant's claim to professionalism is high. Werr and Styhre (2003) describe the relationship as time-limited and contractually bound, where trust is extremely important as the consultant is dependent on the client's cooperation. The client is therefore seen as the controlling party (Werr & Styhre, 2003).

Much of this early, pro-consulting literature has been criticised for being written by consultants and mainly for consultants (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002). The limitations of the functionalist approach are according to Clark and Salaman (1996) threefold. Firstly, it assumes an objective, accepted and authoritative body of knowledge, something that does not exist as consultancy is not a clear-cut profession (O'Mahoney 2010, Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Secondly, it is based on and confined by the notion of rationality. This has proved problematic, as much of consultancy work is highly irrational (Alvesson 2004). Thirdly, focus lies on metaphors such as 'expert' or 'scientist' (Whittle 2006) and not on what the metaphors try to describe, that is the interaction between the consultant and client (Clark & Salaman 1996). Similarly, Clark and Salaman (1996) argue that traditional views ignore the aspect of imagination and transformed consciousness and therefore hinder the understanding of the relationship. Finally, the fallacy of any purely functionalist texts is that to a large extent they are based on experiences before research (Alvesson & Johansson 2002).

### **3.1.2. Critical approach**

As a result of the aforementioned limitations of the functionalist approach, and as a reaction to the self-celebratory pro-consultancy literature, a more critical perspective has emerged. The critical texts question the consultant's role as a knowledgeable expert and take the ambiguous and politically complex nature of the client-consultant relationship into consideration (Alvesson 2001). The professionalism of the consultancy occupation is seen as questionable (Alvesson & Johansson 2002), as it is the consultants that in many ways create the need for the services they offer (Sturdy 1997). Consultancy has been described as a political game of persuasion (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Muhr & Whittle 2010) and an irrational emotionally involving performance (Clark & Salaman 1996). The client is, according to the critical approach, vulnerable to the consultants' use of rhetoric, persuasion and manipulation of symbols (Alvesson 1993b, Fincham 1999).

### **3.1.3. Integrative approach**

Despite the critical approach gaining terrain within academia, the view of consultant as a provider of expert services is not to be completely discarded.

Alvesson & Johansson (2002) for example argue that consultants are not locked in one role, but rather negotiate their approach on a continuous basis. In fact, an increasing number of researchers argue that consultancy is to a large extent about combining seemingly contradictory roles (Whittle 2006), discourses (Werr & Styhre 2003) and approaches (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Uncertainty and ambiguity are said to be at the heart of consultancy (Fincham 2003, Alvesson 2004) and focusing on paradoxes in organisational studies is becoming more and more popular (Whittle 2006). The emerging attitude seems to be that paradoxes are no longer problems that need to be rectified or questions to be answered, but a result and medium of irony and humour (Hatch, 1997), opportunities for creating theories (Van de Ven & Poole, 1998) or a natural part of the discourses available within management consultancy (Whittle 2006, Werr & Styhre 2003). Researchers (see for example Whittle 2006, Calás & Smircich 1999, Alvesson 2003) call this emerging tendency to accept and incorporate themes such as ambiguity, tension and irony the 'post-modern turn'.

### **3.2. Why the client-consultant relationship matters**

As previously mentioned, consultancy is said to be 'relational work' (Fincham, 2003:67) and most scholars agree that the relationship between the consultant and the client is crucial for consultancy (see for example Alvesson & Johansson, 2002, Buono & Poulfelt 2009, Werr & Styhre, 2003, O'Mahoney, 2010). This is confirmed on both an international level and a Swedish level. Lou and Liberatore (2009) for example showed that the success of consultancy projects is highly dependent on whether or not the client's objectives are achieved. Their comprehensive study of international consultant-assisted projects indicates that coordination between the consultant and client affected both the client and consultant objectives positively. In Sweden, Edvardsson (1990) comes to similar conclusions arguing that the interplay between buyers and sellers of management consultancy services is best described as a long-term interactive relationship.

Additionally, image work and reputation is proven to be a crucial element of consulting (Alvesson 2004, Clark 1995) and achieving credibility is to a large extent done by referring to large well-known clients. Losing such a reference client might have devastating impacts on the reputation of the entire consultancy house. Many

of the big consultancies are therefore dependent on big clients as a key to future business and must therefore pay particular attention to nurturing and cultivating the relationship (Løwendahl et al. 2001).

According to the functionalist approach, the client-consultant relationship is well-defined, knowledge-based and rational (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Werr & Styhre 2003). Within the critical approach, on the other hand, the relationship is not seen as static, rather as ambiguous, dynamic and complex (Alvesson, 2001). While the two approaches at first glance might seem incommensurable, an increasing number of scholars have moved away from a dualist thinking and embraced the idea of a multifaceted client-consultant relationship (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Berglund & Werr 2000, Werr & Styhre 2003, Whittle 2006). Fincham (1999) underline the importance of not depicting the client-consultant relationship as a set of permanent dependencies but rather a contingent exchange that assumes a variety of forms. This implies that there is no fixed power asymmetry between client and consultant and that the outcome of consulting projects does not necessarily imply a zero-sum game (Fincham 1999).

Due to the ambiguous nature of consultancy work and the problems related to outcome measurements (Alvesson 2001) it has been suggested that the true value of consulting work lies, not in the tangible work itself, but in the relationship between the client and consultant (Werr & Styhre 2003). However, despite its apparent importance, the relationship itself is not as easily understood. In order to gain a deeper understanding the following section will elaborate on the constituents of the relationship; the consultant and the client themselves.

### **3.3. The consultant**

Because of the exponential growth of the management consultancy industry, the work and the characteristics of the consultant have fascinated researchers for decades (O'Mahoney 2010). There is no shortage of scholarly articles trying to depict and explain what lies behind the success of the much debated occupation (see for example Clark & Fincham 2002).

### **3.3.1. How does the functionalist literature depict the consultant?**

In pro-consultancy text a clear functionalist perspective is adopted with the aim of securing and improving the effectiveness of consulting (Kubr 1996). Here the consultant is unquestionably assumed to be an objective advisor possessing superior knowledge about various types of issues closely related to the agenda of top management. Consultants are conventionally viewed as professional helpers (Clark & Salaman 1996) as they are assumed to provide a delimited expert advice or resource (Werr & Perner 2005). The consultant is also seen as highly professional and able to follow rational step by step guidelines in order to achieve success (Kubr 1996). The consultant is subordinate to the client as functionalists argue that without the client's need for the service, there is no reason for consultancy to exist (Werr & Styhre 2003).

### **3.3.2. How does the critical literature depict the consultant?**

Along with the success of the consultancy industry, the notion of consultants as powerful, important and influential grew stronger (Sturdy et al. 2009). A shift in focus from the client to the consultant and a tendency to question the superiority of the client could be observed. According to critical scholars, consultants are seen as skilful impression managers (Clark 1995), accomplished rhetoricians (Alvesson 2004) and manipulators of symbols (Jackson 1996, Fincham 1999). Consultants are depicted as experts helping needy clients or abstract thinkers with solutions to complex organisation problems (Sturdy et al. 2009). Some researchers even go as far as drawing parallels between consultants and witchdoctors (Clark & Salaman 1996). Critical literature argues that the power lies with the consultants, as it is they who through rhetoric and persuasion create the need for the services they offer (Sturdy 1997).

While the majority of critical texts emphasise the superiority and power of the consultant, defining one clear-cut role for consultants has proved to be problematic. More recent critical researchers have revealed a multitude of attitudes towards consultants, including more subordinate consultancy roles such as legitimisers of managerial decisions (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Metaphors such as 'scapegoats' (Whittle 2006) or even 'whores in pinstripes' (Jackall 1988) indicate that consultants in some situations take a much more subordinate role in relation to the client. In an

attempt to explain the complexity of the role of the consultant, consultants are described as agents of agent (Shapiro et al. 1999, Fincham 2002, Salaman 2002). The consultants are given the role of an agent to the client (principal), who in turn is also an agent of capital or shareholders (principal). According to Fincham (2002), structural power and knowledge asymmetry are inherent with consultancy.

Furthermore, critical literature has also brought attention to the notion of identity constructions as major part of consultancy. In the highly ambiguous and uncertain world in which the consultants operate, securing a sense of self becomes an important existential issue (Alvesson 2004). In this context, consultants are often depicted as being 'the best and the brightest' (Alvesson & Robertson 2006, Meriläinen et al. 2004), powerful, well paid and as having great status (Sturdy et al. 2009). Simultaneously however, they are also described as being over-worked, stressed, and fragile and in constant need of confirmation (Meriläinen et al. 2004, Alvesson 2002, Sturdy et al. 2009). Therefore, much consultancy work becomes identity work with the aim of creating a stable identity in an increasingly chaotic and fast-paced world (Alvesson 2002, Alvesson 2004, Buono & Poulfelt 2009).

As proved by the variety of consultancy, the ways in which critical literature depicts the consultant involve seemingly contradictory roles. In an article from 2002, Alvesson and Johansson paint a multidimensional image of the management consultant, taking into consideration the seemingly paradoxical roles that consultants might play. The first one is referred to as an 'esoteric expert', indicating that the consultant possesses expert skills or knowledge. The second image is named 'broker of meaning' and implies that consultancy is less based on factual knowledge and more on manipulation and management of meanings. The 'trader in trouble' metaphor is a construction of the consultant as somebody with whom managers can wash their hands clean. The fourth role is a two-dimensional construction according to which the consultant acts as both an 'agent of anxiety' and a 'provider of security'. Managerial anxiety as a *raison d'être* is also highlighted by Sturdy (1997).

Adding to this picture, Whittle (2006) neatly summarises what previous critical literature has suggested when accounting for the paradoxical discourses in consultants' roles. Consultants can adopt paradoxical roles such as advocate and advisor, interested and independent, scientist and storyteller, bespoke and standardised, ally and enemy or facilitator and leader. Whittle stresses the fact that

although contradictory at first glance, these paradoxical roles should not be seen as problematic and should instead be embraced and regarded as a window into a deeper understanding of consultancy work. In other words, Whittle establishes a highly nuanced and dynamic view of the consultant.

### **3.4. The client**

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter and as indicated by the above text, much of recent management research has emphasised the role and perspective of the consultant (Alvesson et al. 2009, Sturdy et al. 2009, Clark 1995). Even though the consultant obviously plays an important role in the two-way client-consultant relationship, the client is not to be simplified to a passive recipient of consultants' rhetoric (Sturdy et al. 2009). The problem, as highlighted by Alvesson et al. (2009), is not simply that the role of the client to some degree has been neglected by scholars (Hislop 2002) but also that in many texts on management consultancy, the 'client' is treated as a single heterogeneous immutable unit.

#### **3.4.1. How does the functionalist literature depict the client?**

The descriptive literature has to some extent been more attentive to the diversity of the client. One example is Schein (1999) who from a pluralist/stakeholder perspective presents six types of client positions: an 'intermediate' client who works with direct contact with the consultants; a 'contact' client; a 'primary' owner of the problem; an 'unwitting'/'indirect' client who is unaware/aware of the effects of the consultancy; and the most distanced 'ultimate' client which might include the client's customers. Categorising in this way is a healthy 'correction' to a large part of the more academic literature on consultancy. It is a beginning; however it is still not problem-free. Due to the fact that it is static, it overlooks the role of power and politics and it is based on a consultant perspective (Alvesson et al. 2009). With regards to these aspects, the academic literature is stronger.

### **3.4.2. How does the academic/critical literature depict the client?**

Considering the critical literature's ambition to incorporate themes such as ambiguity and multiplicity in social constructions (Alvesson & Deetz 2002), surprisingly little attention has been given to the possible diversity and importance of the client (Alvesson et al. 2009, Hislop 2002). While consultants have been the object of interest of much recent studies, the client seems to have been given a passive back-seat role (Sturdy et al. 2009).

In most of the critical literature, clients are treated as vulnerable to the consultants' use of rhetoric, persuasion and manipulation of symbols (Alvesson 1993b, Fincham 1999, Jackson 1996). The notion of the client as a gullible victim is based on either a lack of knowledge and experience of consultancy service, or an assumed ignorance (Clark, 1995). Clients are depicted as needy and not competent enough to solve their own organisational problems (Sturdy et al. 2009). Studies on management gurus have further emphasised the subordinate role of clients (Gill & Whittle 1993) according to which clients are seen as weak and existentially insecure audience members (Clark & Salaman 1996).

An exception to the general tendency to downplay the role and power of clients is the role in which the clients take advantage of consultants to legitimise their own managerial or personal objectives (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Hellgren et al. 2004). Clients can use consultants as scapegoats for failed projects (Whittle 2006), as someone to point the finger at when it is time to blame (Alvesson & Johansson 2002) or to rubber-stamp managers' own preferred courses of action (Sturdy et al. 2009).

Some indications of an increasing client focus can be found in Sturdy's (2002) article where he highlights the interactive nature of the consultancy process. He argues that consultancy is not just an act of persuasion but more an interaction between the parties. The author argues that clients should be regarded as more than mere recipients of the message. Although stressing the collaborative nature of the consultancy and therein the role of the client, little attention is given to the possible diversity of the client.

Evidence of the existence of different client individuals can be found when accounting for the extent to which clients serve as consultant's allies (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003). This indicated that different client individuals might be useful for different things, for example acquiring knowledge from the client firm (Fosstenløyken et al. 2003) or securing deals (Sturdy, Schwarz & Spicer 2006). Legge (2002) argues that the success behind selling Total Quality Management (TQM) can be related to consultants ability adapt their rhetorical material in order to fit potentially competing actors within the client organisation. For example, she suggests that narratives such as 'conformance to specification' attract line managers and statements such as 'quality is free' appeal to accountants. Human resource specialists on the other hand might be seduced by statements such as 'quality is excellence'. In pointing out these different rhetorical techniques she gives attention to the fact that the 'client' might in fact consist of different 'clients', each with individual needs and characteristics. Legge brings attention to an important idea, the diversity of the client, an area that hitherto has been largely neglected.

While tendencies to allow for a more diverse client image can be detected, most of the existing consulting literature still treats clients as unitary. (Alvesson et al. 2009; Sturdy et al. 2009). Client organisations are regarded as super-persons (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), often personified by the management team. Czarniawska-Joerges' brings the problem to its peak when stating that behind most client conceptualisations 'the assumption of *Homo collectivus*, the Organization Man, can be seen lurking' (1994:42). As suggested by researchers (Alvesson et al. 2009, Werr Sturdy & Buono 2009) and as advocated for in this paper, the solution to this unrepresentative understanding of the client is viewing the client as a multidimensional and complex construction.

## 4. Empirics: The squish ball

In our field work study, the 16 interviews were conducted with the aim of gaining an understanding of how consultants discursively construct the client. In this section we want to give account for the nature of these client constructions. We have chosen to call the stories, narratives and statements made by the participants for 'accounts'. A more detailed discussion of what these accounts mean and achieve will be carried out in the next chapter, Discussion.

During the interviews, we found that the ways in which consultants construct their clients are highly contingent, contextually dependent and dynamic. The attitude towards clients constantly shifted and the consultants discursively constructed seemingly contradictory client roles and attributes. Participants frequently stated one thing and then, later in the same interview or even in the same answer, they stated the exact opposite. For example, on the one side the customer is constructed as being a controlling, knowledgeable party that places high demands on the consultant. On the other side, the consultant constructs the client as less knowledgeable with opinions but not really the experience or expertise to justify the opinions. Frequently, the participants showed evidence of both sides and repeatedly contradicted their own statements. The following statement exemplifies this ambiguity :

Because it's the client that decides. We never decide anything. Or... of course we can decide over the client. Or... they are the ones that make the decisions. (Harriet)

### 4.1. A framework for understanding the multidimensional client

Because of the ambiguous and multifaceted answers, the discursive client constructions cannot be summarised or reduced into a static model or diagram. Instead, what we suggest is visualising the client constructions as a 12-dimensional squish ball in movement. A squish ball is soft, flexible and does not have a fixed position or shape. It is constantly in movement, taking different shapes and



forms. Its 'tentacles' protrude into different directions, in our case 12 different directions, and they can be stretched out or made shrink.

If we transfer the notion of a squish ball to our empirical material, the tentacles of the squish ball symbolise and integrate different sets of characteristics that clients use to describe their client. Figure 4.2. shows the most salient findings from our empirical material, presented as a squish ball. The point of each tentacle represents an extreme version of the client construction. As our empirical material shows, the consultants do not 'choose' one client construction; rather they constantly move along the dotted lines. They move between the different, sometimes even contrasting, constructions. In essence, the squish ball symbolises the dynamic and ambiguous nature of the client constructions produced by the interviewed consultants.

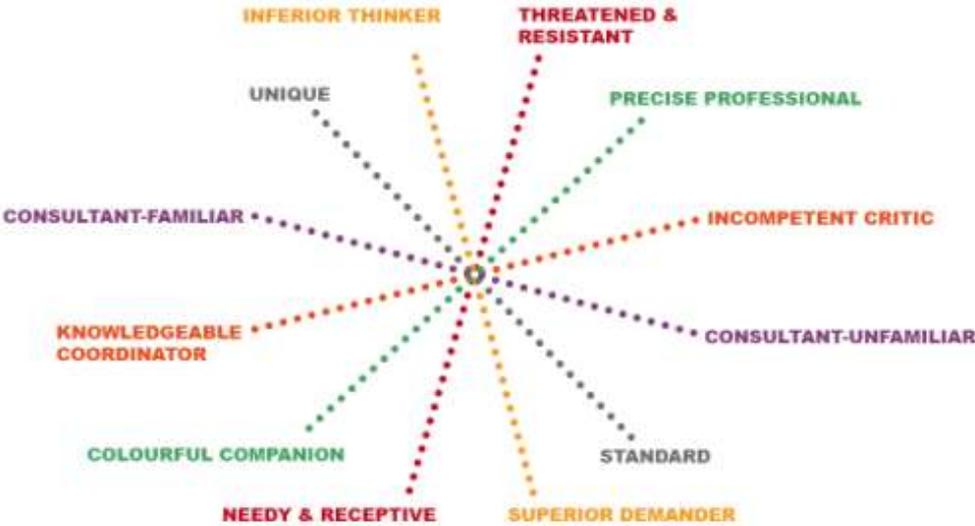


Figure 4.1 The squish ball presented two-dimensionally

As the squish ball is a multidimensional, dynamic and moving object, there are obvious limitations as to transferring the mental framework into a fixed image on a two-dimensional sheet of paper. In an attempt to graphically explain the squish ball, we have temporarily 'flattened' the ball into the image below. We however urge the

reader to keep in mind that it is not just a static model, but as mentioned a dynamic, heterogeneous and changing framework.

The different attributes and characteristics that consultants used to construct the clients during the interviews can be summarised along six different continuums, each with two extreme forms at each end of the continuum. These continuums have been given the labels as follows:

- Inferior thinker – Superior demander
- Threatened & resistant – Needy & receptive
- Precise Professional – Colourful Companion
- Incompetent critic – Knowledgeable coordinator
- Consultant-familiar – Consultant-unfamiliar
- Unique – Standard

At this stage, it is important to remind one's self that our empirical material does not in any way give a comprehensive view of how clients are constructed. Congruent with our methodological assumptions, the interview material does not provide objective facts about what a client is 'really' like (Alvesson Kärreman 2000b). What it does however, is that it serves as an excerpt of an ever changing and dynamic reality. Morgan (1980) argues that the value of metaphors lies in their ability to structure the world in meaningful ways. In conformity with Morgan, we urge the reader not to reduce the metaphor to a 'literary and descriptive device for embellishment' (Morgan 1980:610), but as a creating form which produces effects through a crossing of accounts produced by the consultants. In other words, the point of the metaphor is not to illustrate that clients are constructed one particular way or another, but that there exists a multitude of client constructions.

Below follows an account for each tentacle, as well as discursive examples for each one.

#### **4.2. Superior 'demander'**

Most interviewees construct the client, at least initially, as the controlling party and as the decision maker. This is done through stating that all work is derived from the client

and the client's wishes. The customer is said to be knowledgeable, to have authority and mandate to 'set the framework' for the consultant's work. 'There are some things that only [the clients] know' one consultant states. It becomes clear that in saying so, she acknowledges the client's knowledge superiority.

Almost all of the consultants are of the opinion that the main thing that clients expect from the consultant is 'that they deliver'. According to the interviewees, the clients expect the consultant to 'perform', to 'deliver', to 'solve the problem' and to 'find the solution'. Some consultants even express that when the client demands something to be done at once, they become really stressed and even work late hours to get it done. The following quote shows how the consultant constructs a very demanding client.

They have high expectations and they expect a good result. That's the most important, that it will work when we leave. That the change works. And they have high expectations on us, that we always perform. (Greta)

Often the consultants talk about the client's demands as something positive, something that helps them in their work. Many consultants express that clear demands from the client is even needed in order for them to do a good job. For example one consultant says that it is crucial that clients know what they want and know how to demand it. However, while the demands from the client can be of help, the client's power can sometimes be so strong that it forces the consultant to do things that he/she thinks are irrelevant or even annoying. Several consultants accounts for how clients have high expectations on the consultants managing the project, meaning not just focusing on the content of the project, but also doing the 'dirty work' such as organising meetings and finding dates that fit everyone's calendar. Nonetheless, the consultant feels forced to perform the 'annoying' or 'irrelevant' duties:

We were spending huge amounts of time on irrelevant things that don't get us to the objectives. ... The client thought that was relevant. We thought it wasn't. But he was the decision maker. (Mark)

The above quote is interesting because it shows how the consultant positions himself in a lower power position, and thus the client is in control. With a sigh, he declares that the client has the final say. It becomes clear that, although he does not like it, he accepts the client as being his superior.

Another example that frequently surfaced during the interviews is that according to the consultants, clients often use consultants, meaning that the clients do not collaborate with them on equal terms, but rather take advantage of them as temporary and expendable labour. Terms such as 'arms and legs', 'merchandise' and 'body shopping' were often mentioned as one way that clients look at consultants. One consultant even expressed how she felt subordinate to the client because the clients thought of consultants as slaves:

They came with some pretty nasty comments sometimes because we also work with off shore resources from Manila and they thought of them as slaves. And we thought 'No, we are actually people and have a life back home. We are not just slaves for you.' (Petronella)

This clearly shows how the consultant depicts the client as being in a superior position. By using a word such as 'slave' to describe herself, the consultant places the client in an extremely strong power position. It is as if she were completely powerless, serf even, in comparison to the client. However, being a victim is something that most interviewees see as a natural part of being a consultant, therein accepting the client as superior. Many of the consultants describe situations in which they are asked or expected to do things that they do not enjoy, but they do it without objections because it is simply 'part of being a consultant' or 'part of the job'.

It is not unusual that consultants are used to do a job that the client himself doesn't want to do... [The client] might be protecting his own skin. If the project doesn't go well he can always blame the consultant. And that is part of the consulting presumptions. I know it, I know that this is what [consultancy work] looks like. (Yannick)

As in the statement above, many participants describe how consultants can be used as 'scapegoats' or as means to achieve personal objectives. It is often said somewhat laconically, without much objection. It becomes evident that the consultant accepts this position as a 'scapegoat'. Several of the interviewed consultants tell stories about how project leaders from the client's side have used the company's projects to 'boost their own position' or make them 'look good' in front of the management team.

Less extreme, but nonetheless a symbol of the consultant's inferiority is the view of consultant as a facilitator. In doing so, the consultants construct the client as being more powerful and authoritarian. Most interviewees clearly say that it is the client that makes the final decisions:

The [client] company decides how they should be balanced. I am just facilitating. I am not the decision maker. I am the facilitator. (Petronella)

I am to be a facilitator, but the decisions and the work should be done by the organisation itself. (Brad)

Similar to a facilitator, one interviewee described himself as being a Sherpa, Himalayan locals often used by westerners as guides for mountaineering expeditions:

If you come to a Sherpa and say 'I want to climb Mt. Everest' than he will say 'It's OK! I'll carry your stuff for you. I'll walk behind you and prompt. I'll tell you where to go. I'll carry your equipment and make sure you make it to the top and that you come down again.' That's us! (Steve)

The interesting metaphor of consultants as Sherpas illustrates how the consultants position themselves in a more 'back office' and 'behind the scenes' role and therein construct the client as front office, or the 'star' of the show. Instead, the client is constructed as more important and more authoritarian than the consultant. The consultant is merely the exchangeable support function for a much more powerful actor. Once the show is over, they can 'get rid of' the consultant, as one consultant puts it:

It is not a fixed cost. It's a cost now, but you get rid of it later. (Jack)

In one way or another, all interviewees talk of how satisfied clients, in the end, equal revenue for the company. This seems to be why the consultant voluntarily 'gives' away the power to the client, or how they justify the superiority of the client's needs compared to their own. One consultant states that the reason why the name of the consultancy firm is never mentioned in the papers is that 'they do not need to be successful, but by making sure their clients are successful the consultancy becomes successful'. The following quotation is a good example of how the consultant puts the client's need before his own:

It must be more important for us to solve the client's problems, than solving our own problems. That is what makes us successful in the long run. (Björn)

In the end, however, this construction of the client as dominant serves to enhance the success or increase the revenues of the consultant and the consultancy company. Although the consultants, literally, might give direct superiority to the client, it is not always clear which party such a construction finally serves more.

### 4.3. Inferior Thinker

While many participants construct an image of the client as being dominant and demanding, the opposite view on clients as inferior occurs just as frequently. Sometimes, the consultants' view of themselves as superior is often derived from their vast experiences of similar situations. Many of the interviewed consultants referred to themselves and their consulting colleagues as 'experts'. Due to their vast previous experiences of similar situations, in comparison to their clients, they regard themselves as more knowledgeable and more capable. One consultant exemplifies that if a client asks for a asphalt road, but the consultant thinks a dirt road will do the trick, it is his obligation to tell them that the dirt road is better. He continues:

And if they ask 'how do you know that?' we answer 'You see, we've built billions of dirt roads everywhere'. (Steve)

Another consultant says:

Of course you might have a number of solutions you already know... And often when you start talking to the client, pretty early on you know what the problem is. The client just doesn't know it yet. And that is based on our experience of similar situations. (Jack)

Other times, the consultant does not even explain why he is superior. It is simply a fact. 'We simply know', he says as to how consultants can claim to know something about hospitals. A little later in the interview, the same consultant says:

As a consultant, it is our task, or I think our duty, to tell the client how things really are. (Jack)

But after a **short assessment** and talking with the right people, we find out that the problem is **in fact** in the way that they conduct their management or what their structure is. (Karl, bold added for emphasis)

The last quotation shows how the consultant sees himself as more knowledgeable as he only needs a short assessment to realise what the problem really is. In this reasoning he constructs a less competent client.

While the consultants do not always explicitly state it, it becomes evident that many participants regard the opinions of clients as less valuable than the opinions of the consultant. They are referred to as 'pundits', who only have opinions for the sake of saying something, not because they actually know something:

One client was really strict in everything we did. Very critical with all the deliverables, but usually the things that he took up were, at least from our perspective not relevant. They were not the real 'beef' of the project. It might be the look of the PowerPoint slides or words or sentences, these types of things. Because it's easy for him, because he's not competent enough in the substance. (Karl)

He probably thought that the strategy was ready, but one can always discuss how ready a strategy needs to be. Because, you know, you could basically write a strategy on a napkin, but you can also write a book. (Björn)

When looking at this statement it is evident that the consultant considers his own version of strategy as superior to the client's. He continues to discuss how he is able to break down the strategy into different parts, something the client is not:

That's how we work, as consultants, and it usually works. ... We are often better than the client at structuring things. (Björn)

When discussing failed projects, the power dimension becomes very evident. The majority of the interviewed consultants blame failures on the clients, or on external factors that are related to the clients. Many interviewees tell tales about how the project was delayed because of the client.

We are pretty severely behind schedule, but it has nothing to do with us. It is [the client's] own political organisational processes. (Jack)

One consultant admits that a certain project is lagging behind in time but explains that it is due to the fact the consultancy company is able to deliver quicker than the client can handle. He clarifies and says that they simply have more competencies than what the project and the client in fact require. In this case it is clear that the consultant constructs the client as slower and less capable than himself. When asked

about the client's general attitudes towards consultants, one common answer was that the client is grateful for finally having someone who can help them. The consultants often construct the client as someone who needs help and who is in a situation that they cannot manage on their own. For example:

They might be able to do it, but they don't have the time. That's where we come in and help them. (Björn)

It's not unusual that when they ask us for help, the situation has continued for many years. They already noted three years ago that they should do some kind of change, and they've tried it, once, twice or three times even, but they just didn't manage to do it. (Karl)

These statements clearly show how the consultants see themselves as superior and that the client needs their services. One consultant even takes it as far as drawing parallels with doctors that have to convince their patients that their own diagnosis on themselves is wrong, before he can do his real job.

Another topic that brings forward underlying condescending attitudes towards clients is questions on resale. The general attitude is that if you look close enough there is always something to fix, and that the consultant can trick the client into buying more and more services. In saying these things the consultant subconsciously or consciously constructs a needy and gullible client. The word 'sales trick' actually slips one consultant's tongue when talking about a new project:

So apparently, the client has fallen for that sales trick, I mean solution.  
(Walter)

He continues and tries to rectify his mistake by explaining what he means. However, what he does is that he constructs a client that a consultant is able to trick, in order to get a resale:

Consultancy companies all have very big sales organisations and are skilful sellers. If you cannot persuade the client... I think what you do is that you explain to the client, you convince the client that there is a value. And of course there is a value... hopefully, so that you don't lie. (Walter)

Another consultant is more open about the fact that consultancy work to a large extent is about selling and reselling solutions. One consultant explains that while you

work and try to create a good relationship with the client, you might also have a hidden agenda.

You might want to start by putting them down on the ground and making them a little scared of you 'Shit, we are not all good at this. We need more consultancy services.' or something like that that. (Erik)

A large part of the consultants describe aspects of their work as trying to convince the client about certain things. This can, according to the consultants be done for example by taking in an expert or a partner at the company. Whatever they are trying to convince, it shows that the consultant sometimes believes that their opinion is the correct one and that the client's opinion is not. When saying that, the consultants construct themselves as knowing 'the best solution' and that the consultants' solutions overwrite the clients. One participant takes pride in being what he calls 'a subjective facilitator', meaning that he openly gives criticism when he wants to. He regards this to be valuable because the end result will be better if he does.

The client isn't always right, in that sense. (Brad)

However, one participant admits that rhetoric does not always work. 'Sometimes you simply cannot persuade the client' he says. When faced with the situation that the client is not convinced, then one consultant simply says that they cannot work together. The client has to 'buy into' the consultant's solution and if they do not 'then there is no reason for them to hire us', Steve concludes.

#### **4.4. Unique**

At the beginning of most interviews the participants are asked what they like about their job or what they like about consultancy work. One common answer is that they enjoy the variation and the new challenges that every new day brings. Some participants state that it is the variation that keeps them from joining the 'other side', meaning working for a regular company and not a consultancy company.

Every time you get a new client it is like getting a new job. I think that's interesting. You don't sit and rot somewhere. There is always something new going on. ... You might as well work as a line manager, if you didn't

want to meet new clients or new businesses or new organisations all the time. (Harriet)

One consultant even recalls that the reason he quit his former employer was that he could not work according to a standardised predetermined way.

They had developed their model, which you had to follow. I found pretty quickly that depending on the client's maturity, I need to work differently. Sometimes the model worked well, but sometimes it didn't but then you were still supposed to work according to it. And that's when I wanted to leave. (Brad)

When asked about characteristics of a typical client, a large part of the interviewed consultants object to the term 'typical client' or wonder if there are any typical clients. A few consultants refuse to categorise, as it depends on the project, on the attitudes or on the culture at the client firm. By stating that 'it depends' or that 'it varies' the consultants construct the client as diverse and without a standard set of characteristics or problems. Some even say that there are no typical clients.

But it changes form case to case, there is no rule. (Karl)

Many consultants bring forward the importance of adapting one's self to the client. Being 'broad' and being 'flexible' are characteristics that most consultants say are required to do a good job as a consultant. By indirectly saying that standardised ways of doing business or communicating with the client does not work, they construct the clients as unique cases, each with their own individual needs and characteristics.

Ok, you have a certain understanding of the industry in which the client operates, but there is no magic button. You simply need to ask and listen. And then draw parallels with your own experiences and industry trends. (Jack)

As previously mentioned, and as the above quotations also exemplify, many consultants highlight the importance of having a good dialogue with their clients. One of the reasons they mention why this is important is that they can truly understand the needs of the client. Only by exploring and interviewing the client is the consultant able to really understand him. One consultant explains that a good dialogue enables the consultant to make fine tunings and adaptations to the client's needs, thus avoiding a 'desk product' which is not adapted to the client's needs.

When saying this, the consultant constructs a client that is unique, in the sense that one needs to take time and listen to each new customer in order to understand what they really want, as their needs and wants vary.

A second aspect that relates to having a good relationship is the personal dimension of the client. While some participants choose to focus on the title of the client representative, many also highlight the importance of seeing clients as individuals. An answer such as 'It depends on the person' shows that the consultant constructs a client that is highly individual and unique.

Another way in which the participants construct a very diverse client is when they take into account the different levels of people at the client firm. A large part of the interviewees also bring up these different types of people, or titles, when asked about the typical client. The most common mentioned categories are 'the one who pays' or a CEO, the project manager, the clerks or the people 'on the floor' and in some cases also the end users. Most of the consultants are of the opinion that they are all customers, and need to have their needs satisfied. When accounting for his client, Mads constructs a split between the management and the employees of the client firm:

To me, [the client] was the management [team]. But she was the day to day user. And I need to satisfy both because if she was not happy, my post go-live client relationship might not be happy. (Mads)

However, when asked whom they consider to be their primary customer, most of the participants refer to the purchaser of the service, the one who pays the bills. In many cases the CEO or the manager is therefore constructed as the primary client.

The difference in attitudes towards these different levels becomes evident in most of the interviews. Consultants construct a very different 'client' when they refer to a CEO from what they do when they talk about a person on the shop floor. The quotations below show this differentiation very clearly.

When you engage in a conversation with clerks, you need to be very detailed and very specific. You need to be very concrete. Clerks tend to be less able – I'm talking very generally here, you need to accept that! – Working as a clerk, most are not able to comprehend the abstract. If I show one screen of an application, that will be EXACTLY what they

expect. If the headings are in another field, they may not understand. They can close down completely. (Mads)

In a company, the leadership might go in a direction with which the normal employees on the floor might not agree with. (Petronella)

When asked if the perspectives are separate and might lead into different directions one consultant answers:

If they go in separate directions? They DO! The CEO is completely unable to understand why the bar code reader matters 'Why the hell does that matter? We have enormous problems here!'. Whereas the clerk says 'How the hell can he sit there and lead the company when the most basic things such as bar code reading doesn't work? Shouldn't we start with the fundamentals?' So they are separate. (Steve)

The above quotations indicate that the consultants distinguish between different organisational levels and construct different client images, depending on which position the persons have in the client organisations. However, with statements such as 'employees on the floor' the participant also treats all individuals as homogenous, giving them one label. This is a good example of the complex and multifaceted nature of client constructions.

'Complex' and 'complicated' are words that the participants often use to describe their clients. Many also bring up how the client consists of a myriad of different dependencies. This can be seen as an indication of the fact that many consultants construct a multifaceted and diverse client.

It is very complicated with lots of dependencies and lots of partners that are involved. (Harriet)

In many interviews the participants talk about problems or issues that arise unexpectedly. 'Things hardly ever go according to plan' one consultant concludes. In these cases the participant constructs a unique and unforeseeable client that requires a contingency approach. Another consultant admits that his timetables for meetings or workshops with clients are always preliminary and that he usually does not even show them to anyone. According to him there is no point in doing a strict timetable because 'it is impossible to foresee what is going to happen'. Instead, the need to 'tailor make' solutions for clients is frequently expressed during the interviews.

But if you want to create an organisation that really works, where people trust each other even afterwards, then you need a so called best fit change approach. (Jack)

A major difficulty of mine is to give a short description of what I do, because I do different things every time. We customise everything we make. (Brad)

Ok, you might have a repertoire of solutions ready, but you have to really tailor-make the solution for the client. (Jack)

#### **4.5. Standard**

On the other end of the continuum, client constructions appear much more uniform. While a large part of the participants are sceptical towards defining a typical client, a large part of them still end up describing the 'typical client' in one way or another. 'Large companies' and 'well-known brands with a high turnover' are common answers. This indicates that the consultants in one sense still construct an image of their clients as homogenous or as super-persons.

One common topic that most participants spontaneously bring up when talking about their daily work is the use of methodologies, meaning a standard way of doing work. By highlighting the importance and the applicability of methodologies, the consultants indirectly construct the client as a homogenous entity.

Ok, all organisations are identical. The fundamental elements in the organisation is relatively similar, it is 'laws of nature'. There you can use a certain methodology when you approach the problem. (Jack)

Much of what we do is pure project management, coming in and fixing things according to different methods and guidebooks. (Erik)

I have most probably done this before, or I have colleagues that have done it before. I have the whole consultancy firm methodology. I just take out my book and say these are the steps you need to go through and in 5-6 months time you'll have the system in place. (Mads)

From these statements it is obvious that consultants construct a very homogenous client that can be 'fixed' using standardised procedures. Then the consultants continue talking about what phases that methodology includes and what types of problems usually tend to surface in each stage. The statements about

methodologies are said with a degree of indifference, as if it is just routine tasks that have to be done.

When asked what she would take with her from her current employer, if she were to leave and start her own consultancy company, one participant says without a doubt 'the way that we work'. She explains what she means and refers to all the 'amazing models and methodologies' they have. In this concluding comment she thus constructs a client that is receptive to standard methodologies and models, in other words a standard client.

A second thing that occurs frequently in the consultants' descriptions about their work is the amount of experience that the consultant or the consultancy house has. Many give the impression that the reason they are so successful and confident is that 'they know that what they do works simply because they have done it several times before.' This reliance on experience indicates that the consultants have an image of clients as having similar needs and problems. Some even say that based on experience, they can predict what the clients want.

And often when you start talking to the client, pretty early on you know what the problem is. The client just doesn't know it yet. And that is based on our experience of similar situations. For the client it's a unique situation. The consultant might have done hundred similar cases before. He could, in theory, jump several steps ahead and find out what needs to be done.  
(Jack)

More senior consultants with years of experience 'just know' what is going on, one consultant explains. Directly after saying this, he hesitates for a few seconds, but then continues that that it is that type of experience that the client pays for.

Another indication of uniform client constructions is the use of the word 'always'. A large part of the consultants are eager to explain how things are, and in doing so they frequently use the term 'always'. They also tend to give examples of 'typical' dilemmas or problems. In doing so, they generalise and construct a homogenous client.

At every client's, there are persons you don't get along with. There are always people that want to pick a fight and complicate things. Always! I've never been in project that went exactly as we and our allies wanted it to go. There is always someone who doesn't think like we do! Always! I

mean, who don't agree with the consultants. It's never smooth. There is always someone who brings up things that are bad, for us. There are ALWAYS bridges to be built. (Harriet)

The above statement is said with a great deal of confidence, without any hesitation. Harriet is sure that the client always acts in a certain way. This excerpt shows that she constructs the client in a very fixed way and that these constructions seem to take place even without having met with the individual client.

A few times during the interviews, it becomes evident that according to the consultant, the clients want to think of themselves as unique even though many of them face the exact same problems and challenges as their competitors. With a great deal of irony a consultant leans back, rolls her eyes and says:

They all think they are SO special. (Cindy)

This shows that the consultants view their clients as a homogenous mass with a poor perception of themselves in relation to their competitors. Through an example, another consultant explains how the client wants standardised and readymade material that has been tested and proven to work. But at the same time he explains that they cannot admit it, that clients want custom made solutions. This he sees as challenging, as it becomes his problem to find the 'right balance' of uniqueness and standardisation of his product. He client concludes the interview by summarising this ambiguous situation:

The customers want to utilise the best possible information and the best possible message that exists. But they always want to have something unique. They might not be willing to pay for something really unique, because creating something really unique requires more effort than just utilising the best practice. ... So again, we come to the question of what the customer really wants and what he is willing to pay for. Because best practices are really good in e.g. making the operation efficient ... But if you are to come up with a new competitive advantage ... then working with the best practices doesn't get you anywhere because you just do the same as the other ones. (Karl)

This excerpt gives a very good indication of the ambiguous nature of consultancy and how the consultant perceives and constructs his client as having conflicting requirements.

#### **4.6. Consultant-familiar**

Common features of the consultant-familiar clients are that they have appropriate expectations and can set correct demands. The consultant-familiar clients know what they want and are able to express it. In many cases this is seen as a positive attribute, which makes the consultants work quicker and easier. 'They just buy' as stated by one consultant. The consultants' work becomes quick and efficient if the client has the right experience. Consultant-familiar clients are also talked of as prioritising the consultant's time, as the following example indicates.

The ones that are familiar say: Ok, now they are here. They are going to be here for a short time. We have to allocate time for them because they are here and we pay huge amounts of money for them. That's why we need to place demands. They have to deliver. (Harriet)

Harriet regards consultant-familiarity as something highly positive and she lights up as she talks about the consultant-familiar clients. In the process of constructing this client, she herself becomes excited and straightens her back, as if the consultant-familiar client makes her feel more important and professional.

Having a good relationship is another aspect that according to the consultants indicates that the client is used to consultants. Indirectly, one consultant talks about how clients who constantly have consultants sitting at the office 'know how it is and accept it'. This indicates that there might have been an initial struggle, but now that they are used to consultants they are no longer resistant. In this construction process she creates a client that is compliant and perhaps even cooperative. For many consultants, this means that their work could be done more efficiently and with more focus on the substance matter. When describing a client with whom he has worked for several years, Brad explains their efficient relationship:

There is no takeoff run when he wants to do something. We have found our way of working. (Brad)

Finally, 'speaking the same language' and 'having the same attitudes' were other expressions that many interviewees mentioned when talking about clients that are used to working with consultants. Here it becomes evident that the consultants see the ideal clients as someone who is as similar to him or herself as possible.

#### **4.7. Consultant-unfamiliar**

On the other end of the continuum, the consultant constructs the client as unfamiliar with consultants and consultants' way of working. The consultant-unfamiliar client is according to the interviewees unable to understand change and places unreasonable demands on the consultant. Many consultants say that the consultant-unfamiliar client expects magic or magical solutions and that they have a hard time understanding the underlying work that is expected to perform certain tasks.

Many clients think we can do magic tricks. And that nothing... They think of a function 'I want to export this to Excel and then they think that all you need is a little button. That can't take too long, could it?'. (Joakim)

Joakim says the last sentence with irony, indirectly saying that it is completely unreasonable to assume that it could be done quickly. In doing so, he constructs clients that have unreasonable expectations due to their lack of knowledge. This means that it is not his own lack of knowledge that makes him unable to give the clients what they want – it is the clients' expectations that in fact are irrational and impossible to live up to.

Having a hostile attitude towards consultants is one way that a consultant describes a client who is not used to consultants. She elaborates and says:

When I started, some of them were not used to working with consultants and you know they could come with comments such as 'Ah yeah, oh no, you can't go home at four you should go home at eleven in the evening!' and they just thought that they we were just working machines. They came with some pretty nasty comments sometimes. (Petronella)

From the tone of her voice, it is becomes evident that Petronella was upset by the comments made by her clients. In order to make sense of the situation, she states that this was because they were not used to consultants. Indirectly she then constructs the clients not as genuinely mean, but simply not used to the consultants. Unfamiliarity with consultants therein serves as an excuse for being 'nasty'. This view of consultants as 'working machines' was one prejudice that many consultant-unfamiliar clients possess, according to the interviewees. Other prejudices that surfaced include 'always wearing suits', 'driving fancy cars', 'using complicated PowerPoint slides' and 'getting paid too much'. Through these examples and stories,

the participants construct prejudiced clients with inherently hostile attitudes towards consultants.

Another way in which the participants talk about and construct a consultant-unfamiliar client is by referring to cultural differences. A consultancy culture is described by the interviewees as precise, organised, efficient and high-performing. Clients that do not possess these characteristics are said to be 'of a different culture'. One consultant even talked about a culture clash:

But for some companies they have never worked with consultants and it is kind of a culture clash sometimes. (Petronella)

Just like consultant-familiarity is expressed through a common language, consultant-unfamiliarity often results in different ways of expressing one's self. Many consultants talk about the importance of making sure that things are understood in the same way. 'Asking, re-asking and paraphrasing' is according to one consultant the key to creating a mutual understanding, something that is particularly important with new clients.

Speaking different languages is the challenge. That's what's difficult. (Harriet)

It's such a cliché, but if the client talks about activities, 'we'll do this first, then this and then that' we talk about 'information moving in a flow'. It's the same thing that happens, but you use different words and terminologies. ... I think it's a problem, or a challenge, to move closer to each other in order to speak the same language. (Walter)

Both of the statements above show how the consultants construct the client as unable to speak and understand the consultancy-language. As also shown in the excerpts, this is often seen as something negative, as a problem that hinders or slows down their work.

Furthermore, consultant-unfamiliar clients are constructed as not prioritising the consultant, the consulting meetings or the providing the consultants with information. One consultant tells a story about a project which he actually had to quit because the client was straight out mean to the consultants and simply did not show up to the meetings. Another consultant explains this behaviour:

The ones that are consultant-unfamiliar don't really take the time. They might prioritise other meetings first and us last. That is being consultant-unfamiliar. (Harriet)

Interestingly, as all the above statements indicate, consultancy-unfamiliarity is regarded as something purely negative and something that renders consultancy work more complicated, or even in some cases impossible.

#### **4.8. Knowledgeable Coordinator**

When explaining why certain client projects have been more successful than others, the consultants repeatedly refer to a relatively high level of competence of the client. Also when constructing imaginary, and even ideal clients to work with, the consultants talk about clients that know 'what they want' and clients that are not only structured and hands on, but even intellectually stimulating.

On one hand, in a way that I learn something from that person, and on the other hand that s/he knows what s/he talks about. It's always important to have a knowledgeable client. Because, if you don't know where you start or don't really know your organisation, it's hard to get anywhere... (Walter)

Consultants attribute clients that are 'easy to work with' with analytical skills as well as with the ability to explain their situation and clearly express his or her wished future condition. Some consultants even speak of their favourite clients to work with as those who can teach the consultants something new. Although one of the senior consultants prefers to work at his office rather than at the client's, he admits that it is by working next to client that he actually learns something, meaning that he, in a way, views the client as source of stimuli.

I definitely want to meet with my clients, since that's how you learn, get stimulation and build relationships. That's what the work is all about. (Björn)

Clients that are constructed as competent and who focus on the essentialities are seen as facilitating the collaboration of the consultancy intervention. In the same way, one consultant claims that a knowledgeable client renders the consultancy process more agile. The same consultant gives his definition of an ideal client by

constructing a knowledgeable client and by pointing to the general characteristics of a consultant:

Someone that is extremely pragmatic and smart enough to differentiate between what's important and what's not. And someone structured and analytic. A consultant, to be honest. To me, those are in fact the easiest clients to work with. (Donald)

We asked the consultants that if they could create their ideal client from scratch, what would that client be like. One consultant answers:

It's always easier with a client that's capable. If I were about to construct a figurine, then the head would be very big! A knowledgeable and wise client with big ears in order to listen, and a big mouth in order to express what s/he wants to say. (Ylva)

An important quality [of a client] is that they KNOW what they want. 'I want my company to have a turnover of x. I want us to be x persons and that we have the x level of fun when we do our job! Shoot!' I like it when it's like that, because then it's just rock'n'roll and go! (Steve)

Either by telling stories about former client projects or by imagining future clients, the consultants attribute good clients with wisdom and with an ability to explain, choose, decide and act upon the decisions made. At the same time as being highly competent and knowing how to 'order the right thing', paradoxically enough, the consultants repeatedly speaks of the knowledgeable client as someone in need of, and open to, consultancy services. In order for the client to 'order the right thing' from the consultants, the consultants often stress the importance of being open and knowing, in advance, what one wants.

It's up to the client to know what s/he wants, and what we should achieve. ... There are many 'bad' buyers of consultancy services, and there are those who are extremely 'good' buyers. ... I believe that a good buyer knows what he wants to achieve ... he is able to provide the consultant with a clear description, and he is open enough with what he tries to achieve. He has no hidden agenda, in any way. (Ylva)

I think the most important thing when you are a consultant and working with the client is that they [the clients] can make a decision. (Petronella)

Constructing the good client, both Ylva and Petronella produce accounts in which they highlight and draw clear parallels between competence, determination and clarity, preferable of a level even greater than their own.

In the process of constructing the competent client, the consultants sometimes add confidence and trust as examples of typical qualities. Not only does a competent client trust the consultant and the value of the service, but according to the constructions made by the consultants, a competent client is also someone with high self-esteem. For instance, one consultant believes that when working as a consultant, one must always be able to trust the client. He expects the client to possess competence and knowledge when ordering a consultancy service. Between the lines, Joakim constructs the competent client based on the feeling of trust:

... knowledgeable, I mean that they have an overview of their organisation and their processes so... You should be able to trust the clients, be sure that they know what they're up to and that they know what they order. (Joakim)

Another, albeit more senior consultant, constructs his client as competent referring to someone who beforehand thinks through the problem, comes up with a solution and sometimes even how to implement it. The problem of this type of client, according to this consultant, lies in that client's limited pragmatic or structural capacities, or resources.

Not only do some of the consultants construct their knowledgeable clients as being well aware of their organisations, but also as being able to find a definition or label to the organisational complaint and know how to make priorities among the identified needs of their organisation.

... the best way to achieve something is still by knowing exactly where you aim at arriving. ... By knowing what is important and then trying to formulate a definition on it. (Ylva)

Another sign of the knowledgeable client, according to the consultants' constructions, is the ability to divide up the work load and delegate tasks, often because of a well-working management structure. Working with a competent client means that decisions are made smoothly and easily implemented. It also means that conflicts are rare, or even completely avoided.

I wish that the customer had their internal roles and responsibilities very clear. ... The management structure should be working, so that it's easy to know that if somebody makes a decision that decision holds and people work based on that. It makes it easier to ... avoid those kinds of conflicts that I was talking about. (Karl)

#### **4.9. Incompetent Critic**

As the consultants in some cases construct the 'desired' client as knowledgeable, and sometimes as copies of themselves, they, however implicitly, construct their 'actual' clients as rather unknowledgeable or even ignorant. The consultants are generous in giving concrete examples of former not very successful projects involving incompetent clients. Although most of these consultants try to avoid talking depreciatory about their clients, they still construct clients using words such as uninformed, unnecessarily critical, detail-focused, and with a vague perception of reality.

A junior consultant describes his least preferable client as someone without enough knowledge of the 'actual situation'. Working with an incompetent client, he continues, means spending the whole project budget on identifying the problem, instead of working on improving the situation. The consultant thereby constructs a client as uninformed, which he considers synonymous to incompetent.

It could be that ... the counterpart is not knowledgeable enough. There's one example when the whole budget was spent on finding out what everything actually looked like, instead of delivering a project. That's an example of an incompetent client, or a client that can't provide us with enough information, which I consider synonymous. (Walter)

Another sign of incompetence is, according to another consultant, when the client cannot see the forest for the trees, that is when a client remains focused on the details and is not able to see the whole. The client is then considered not being enough acquainted with the substance matter, and viewed as unnecessarily critical due to his ingrained inabilities:

... people from the customer's side aren't competent enough to see what is important and what is not. For example one customer was really strict in everything we did. Very critical with all the deliverables, but usually the things that he took up were, at least from our perspective not relevant.

They were not the real "beef" of the project. It might be the look of the PowerPoint slides or words or sentences, these types of things. Because it's easy for him, because he's not competent enough in the substance. ... I just felt that all the time, we were spending huge amounts of time on irrelevant things that don't get us to the objectives. (Karl)

An experienced strategy consultant constructs his current client as somewhat naive by saying that the client thought his strategy was well worked-out, but that he had only a vague idea of how to actually execute it. Björn, almost sniffing, talks about the incompetent client manager who thought he had his strategy set.

... Yes, he [the client manager] probably had the strategy pretty clear. ...however you could always discuss how clear a strategy should be. He thought the strategy was pretty well formulated, and I did not find it that well formulated. He planned to double the business in five years time, meaning 14 percent annual growth. The market doesn't grow 14 percent per year, perhaps only 6 or 7 percent. So where is the additional 7 percent supposed to come from? He had only loose thoughts on how to generate those percents. They just don't 'come' by themselves. You have to work for them to come. So, yes, he had a strategy, but it's probably 80 percent correct. (Björn)

A client depicted as impatient and not persistent enough, the consultant tend to construct him or her as rather incapable of implementing a consultancy project, and therefore difficult to work with. One of the consultants claims that such inability may be devastating for the consultant, but perhaps even more for the client company who has invested a lot of resources in the project.

Many people ... they're like 'I can't stand it. It's too much work. It's too expensive. So that half way through, they say 'No, I can't do this anymore.' Then you've paid a lot of money for something really expensive and you've hired a number of consultants. However, the biggest loss takes place internally as you've had around fifty people working on a project, and that you call the whole thing off just because you're not persistent enough. (Steve)

Another consultant gives an example of an unknowledgeable client who had not been clear enough on his motives for hiring the consultant. The consultancy report had been put on a shelf, and thus not implemented, which, from the consultant's point of view is an unsuccessful project. In addition, the consultant blames the failure

of the project on the client, since the client did not want to provide the consultants with enough information.

It could be that it's the client's fault that a particular project fail, because that particular client put the report on a bookshelf. ... There are people who want to let consultants in, but don't want to tell the whole story or give away enough information to the consultants. You wish to keep the consultants at arm's length. (Ylva)

Moreover, an incompetent client is constructed as indifferent to the solution suggested by the consultants, or even afraid of asking when something might appear unclear.

In worst cases the client might say 'Fine, we'll pay the bill but this won't make a difference to us.' Then we have somehow talked at cross-purposes. I believe that's a result of the client being afraid of admitting that s/he hasn't understood what the project is about, or where we're going. (Ylva)

Confusion of roles and responsibilities within the client company are repeatedly considered as being due to the incapacities of the client. For instance, Petronella, talks about how the after-effects of such incapacities surface when it is time to get the approvals of the project. Again, it is said to be problematic for the consultants, but the consultants tend to pity the client firm even more as there are inhibited by their own confusions.

It is very very frustrating that you are pulled in to solve and issue by the client and then when you want to do it you cannot get the necessary approvals to do it. ... They don't actually know who is making the decisions and everyone is running around confused. I've seen that a little bit and it's very frustrating because it doesn't go anywhere. (Petronella)

#### **4.10. Precise Professional**

On one side of this dimension appears a somewhat vapid client construction, similar to the conventional manager dressed up in a grey suit, ordering a professional service. This client construction often begins when the consultant constructs the 'typical' client by accounting for facts and formal qualities of their clients. In most cases, the consultant mentions the sectors in which the client operates, the size of

the client company, formal titles of the 'orderer' and the complexity of the problems that the clients typically face.

A typical client is a senior executive of a relatively big manufacturing company. Those I personally call 'CXOs'. [laughs] Usually, we say that we want to work with the executives, and typically with their most difficult business problems. I would say that it's what we do, in a nutshell. When we say 'CXO', we mean the president or the CEO, that type of people. It could also be the Operations Manager, or general managers. We work a lot with CIOs and CFOs. (Björn)

I work with big ... or rather long company transformation processes. They're often management based, meaning that it's the board of managers who order the services. I have not much experience from huge companies, but companies with 2000-3000 employees, in different sectors. Lately, I have worked extensively within the public sector. (Yannick)

Björn and Yannick, like many other participants, initially describe their clients according to facts and figures. The board of directors, the 'CXO' and the project manager are in general the formal titles that the consultants use to construct their primary client. It is they who 'pay the bills' and their wishes are therefore the most important. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, the main contact person on the client's side is regarded as having the final say. This can be the project manager, whose official authority within the client seems to differ from case to case. Even more extreme, one consultant views the client's client as the final decision maker. After all, she argues, that they are the end users, the ones that are most important to satisfy in the end. The following statements exemplify this multitude of primary clients.

Well, for us there is always the end decision maker. So we know, who is really behind the money, who pays our bills. [laughs] Of course, that is the most important person for us. We then just have to raise these questions onto the table and have these discussions with the decision makers. Speak clearly. (Karl)

If I were to choose one person to get along with, I would have chosen the project manager on the client's side. (Donald)

Another characteristic of the professional tentacle is that the consultants, instead of regarding them as friends, construct clients as a 'business case', 'project' or a 'process to go through'. Although the importance of having a relationship is not

overlooked, the relationship itself is described as contractual, distanced and often acted out in a routine fashion, as in the traditional, professional buyer-supplier context. The statements from Harriet and Joakim exemplify how the client is kept at arm's length.

I'm the kind of person who doesn't want to become friends, or best friends with my client. But, of course it's important to be socially competent. It's essential. You need to be able to talk to the client etcetera. (Harriet)

Another way of dealing with the client is to just go through the project. ... it is not pleasurable, but we just do what we have to do. ... It's like you just pass through the project, simply because it's necessary. Then, perhaps the relation is acted out in a routine fashion, as you go on doing what you have to do... You don't make that little extra, it's just enough. I write my three documents to complete the project. (Joakim)

In the same way, the client construction on this extreme seems to be someone who appreciates objectivity and detailed action plans. Both Ylva and Karl's statements show how she constructs a client that clearly appreciates distance and how they themselves see distance as something positive for outcome:

I might put together a report or something, however I never take on a management role. I remain outside, maybe because I want to stay objective, or simply to be able to solve problems that are not part of the ordinary business. Then, [the clients] want us to be quite distanced. Objectivity and distance are important aspects. (Ylva)

Sometimes you start to feel like you are part of the customer's organisation. That is of course nice, but it's not always only a good thing. Certain distance keeps us on our toes. Of course it's always good to have sort of a sensible level of scariness. (Karl)

Furthermore, some of the consultants see the client as an important source of legitimacy and the orderer's personal agenda is seen as their reason for being at the client's organisation in the first place. For Yannick, the importance of the client's authority becomes apparent when saying that he cannot consider the HR-director as his primary client, due to the limited organisational influence of the HR-function:

And I believe that management consultants can be seen on different strategic levels of an organisation. Personal trust becomes more and more central the closer to top management you work, as well as the ability to respond to the actual agenda of the CEO. I, personally, whenever I can

avoid it, don't work for HR-directors – because they ask for detailed plans. However, they still need the authorisation of their boss, who is often the CEO, when it's about radical stuff. (Yannick)

Moreover, the consultants construct the professional client as highly accessible. Participants voluntarily tell stories about clients that are good or bad communicators, with regards to e-mail and telephone usage. Also, the amount of time and effort that the client puts into the project are considered as a measure of accessibility. Repeatedly, the consultants refer to a typical undesirable client as 'someone who does not respond to e-mails', and thereby drawing a parallel between professionalism and accessibility. Joakim describes the differences between 'good' and 'bad' client experiences:

Straight and open communication and that there was accessibility. If you sent an e-mail, they would reply directly, while others could let you wait another week before receiving a reply or a call back. (Joakim)

Another sign of professionalism, as indicated by the consultants, is when the client 'asks the right questions upfront' and he or she 'takes on the actions required'. The orderer is constructed to be a negotiator of price, although some of the consultants stressed that their services cannot be considered in terms of price. Two of the consultants talked of their services as being 'bought'– not 'sold'. Besides a good price, well-defined action plans, set goals and clear roles are typical demands of the orderer. The consultants depict this client construction as not open to surprise, but as wanting to stay within a 'realistic framework'. In doing so, the consultants construct a client, who is an analytic and pragmatic leader, in other words a highly professional client.

#### **4.11. Colourful Companion**

In addition to giving strictly factual accounts of the clients, the consultants often construct their clients by using adjectives and attributes clearly indicating an emotional value. Former and imaginary client projects are constructed using personal traits, images and narratives, depicting the client as an emotionally charged and colourful companion. In the interviews, the consultants present a collection of client constructions, pointing to both 'good' and 'bad' personal qualities that one normally attributes to a friend or to a partner. Contrary to the more

neutral construction process of the Precise Professional, the consultants tend to use more affective qualities when constructing the client dimension that we label the emotional character.

The centrality of this dimension is the client as a source of emotions and not just a source of, for example, business legitimacy and revenue. Some of the consultants even express how they value the client's satisfaction and a good collaboration higher, than the money they are paid. One consultant makes a distinction between the 'needs' and the 'nice' of the client, indicating that although the needs may be the reason for the initial contact, the client is as well the main source of the nice.

A good client is an including client who realises the value of a nice dialogue where we help, and where the client helps, and where we help each other to achieve something good. It is somehow that type of relation that we're looking for. ... And then, if the meetings are fun, it doesn't really hurt anyone. Some fun and games, so to speak. ... Nah, but it's always nice if you're able to laugh together after the meeting, and that you don't have to be dead serious all the time. Maybe go out for a beer together. That's a good client. (Björn)

Everything was very relaxed. [The client] could just as well have been a colleague. It was fun and there was kind of a playful atmosphere. You could be a little cheeky... A few practical jokes... When we visited them there was a great atmosphere. (Walter)

When constructing the 'good' client, as indicated above, Björn and Walter describe the feeling during the meetings as relaxed and jocular, clearly appreciating the feeling of an informal 'chat' between friends. Walter's mentioning of practical jokes is a further example of a very informal and unprofessional relationship, something that he clearly appreciates. Björn says that just like a friend, a client should include the consultant, understand the value of nice dialogues as well as strive towards creating something good together with the consultant.

The majority of the consultants assert that the essential work takes place 'behind the scenes' or 'next to the coffee machine', meaning that the clients are viewed as socially skilled as well as they require social skills of the consultants. Sometimes, even romantic allusions are made when constructing the client. One consultant constructed the client group as sensitive to the appearances of the consultants, after having noticed that a group of older ladies in the client organisation suddenly

started to attend meetings much more frequently as two handsome young consultants were conducting the meeting. Another consultant concluded a construction of her ideal client as someone with whom she has a good relationship and someone who can hug her.

Furthermore, another sign of the way in which consultants construct emotionally colourful clients is when emphasising the importance of the relational work for the success of consultancy projects. Some consultants view the clients as sad and a little regretful when the projects are over, and they perceive them as often being in need of more guidance and support. This is a clear sign of the emotional value they attach to their clients. Interestingly, one consultant talks about her 'ideal' client as 'strict but fair', which are qualities often ascribed to good parents. However, more or less explicitly, the consultants bring forth the personal chemistry between client and consultant as being of vital importance for the success of the project. Personal chemistry is then dependent on the client's willingness to engage with the consultant, according to the consultant. The following statement shows how the consultant detaches himself from the process of creating a 'good relationship' and hands over the entire responsibility to the client. It is as if it were only up to the client to create a good relationship:

Well, often [the result] has a lot to do with personal chemistry. ... if the clients realise that they, themselves, develop by working with us, and that we actually help them to execute their job, then they often become happy and the project turns out to be successful. (Donald)

Adding to the colourfulness of the client, clients are not only ascribed positive attributes, many relationships with clients are also familiar but in a negative way. Some of these constructions are based on bad experiences. Negative emotions are provoked by, for instance, annoying, hateful or arrogant clients. Björn exemplifies and clearly shows how these types of clients are problematic to work with:

I want to feel that the client treats me with respect too, and that we have an including relationship. So that the client doesn't keep the consultant at arm's length just for the sake of it, or that he tries to be smart and cocky. Those types of clients are never fun to work for. (Björn)

One of the interviewed consultants constructs her undesirable client as someone without a clue and who is just 'hip shooting' all over the place, whereas another

consultant, based on the business concept of a potential client, talks of that client as an 'evil' company. In many cases the consultant sees the client's unprofessional behaviour as reason for project failures. In a similar manner, another senior consultant states that the dysfunctional relationship is grounded in the client's inability to understand. In the end that type of mismatch leads to frustration and in this situation the consultant constructs the client as mean and childish, sibling-like traits even. Paradoxically, the same consultant, sees herself as responsible for the client's behaviour, and points to her own inexperience as reason for the client's frustration:

... maybe, I came in as a consultant thinking 'Let's just do this', you know, mainly focused on my way. That was just certain persons that I just didn't click with very well. We just didn't understand each other. And I know that they hated me. ... I could just feel it. They were kind of unfriendly and really annoyed. You could feel and hear that they were annoyed. ... I tried to explain something to them and they just didn't get it and I would then get more and more frustrated. And they would then get more and more frustrated. (Greta)

This interesting statement is a great example of how the relationship with the client includes ambiguous elements also with regards to professionalism. On one hand she constructs a client that is childish and mean, very unprofessional traits, and places the blame on the client. On the other hand however, she takes the blame for it when saying that the misunderstanding was based on her lack of consultancy experience, something that is related to professional ability. In other words, the consultants construct clients as strict and professional, and at the same time sibling-like and colourful.

#### **4.12. Needy and Receptive**

On the opposite side of the inconvenient and threatened client, the consultants construct an image of a needy and grateful client, who warmly welcomes the consultant to execute organisational change. In fact, the majority of the consultants viewed their client as having identified a specific problem and as being positive toward the consultants and their suggestions. Often the consultants present narratives of successful projects in which the client team had showed enthusiasm as

well as trust toward the consultants. One consultant speaks of a certain project as 'fun', explaining that receptive clients facilitate for interactive working styles and bring synergy effects to the end result.

We kept focusing on the objectives all the time, and we were never in doubt. We knew how it was supposed to be carried out, and we knew a lot of people at the client's, and they knew us, and they trusted us because... 'How great that these guys are here to give us a hand!' And that somehow enabled us to give them things to work on, as well, which they liked. And they thought it was fun that they could contribute to the result. So it was some kind of interaction with the client where 1 + 1 equalled 3, in that case... (Björn)

Another consultant constructs his 'ideal' client as someone that is open to hearing 'how it really is', although that might not always be pleasant to hear. Another important trait is, according to the same consultant, that the person listens attentively and does not ignore nor renounce the help that the consultant offer.

... a person with whom you can discuss and that is open to receiving... or hear things that s/he doesn't want to hear. Meaning that I can tell the person 'how it is'. That I can reveal how 'things are'. And that the person takes in what I say, and doesn't just ignore or reject what I say. (Jack)

At an early stage of the interview, a junior consultant talks of the client as merely positive, and as being comfortable as long as the employees understand 'what goes on'. Despite the fact that she was an inexperienced junior, the client group had faith in her and her colleagues from the start.

I have a group of people that are all super positive, as long as they feel safe and secure, and as long as we bring in all the aspects. They trust us, and they have trusted us from the start. They felt that they could trust me although I was new. And they were indeed very positive. (Greta)

In addition to being open-minded, the same consultant attributes her client construction with the qualities of adaptability and compliancy with the decisions 'from above', which according to her facilitate the work both for the client and for herself as consultant.

They buy into everything very quickly and they have said that 'This is a change, and then we just need to do it. It's a decision from above, and there is nothing else to do. And that's that!' (Greta)

Although many of the consultants openly admit that they constantly look for additional organisational issues, or 'resale', at the client firm, they still construct their client as always being, consciously or unconsciously, in actual need for help. This makes their work more meaningful and more 'genuine'.

Finally, while all interviewees at some stage underline that clients genuinely need consultants they often later on in the interview paint a more complex picture. One consultant for example, admits that he is unsure about the real value of the project. He even says that he hopes that the consultancy project brings actual value to the client, so that he doesn't have to lie to them. Making the picture even more complex, one consultant claims, paradoxically enough, that the consultant is responsible for 'setting the client free' from consultancy.

... that's how we're supposed to work, we're not supposed to stay forever.  
However, the client often wants us to stay. (Steve)

When saying that the client wants them to stay he obviously constructs a client that is in need of their help. The paradox enters the picture when he simultaneously says that the aim of consultancy is for him to leave the client.

#### **4.13. Threatened and Resistant**

On the opposing side of needy and receptive, the consultants tend to construct their clients or particular individuals within the client firm as afraid and intractable, by labelling them threatened. In most cases, clients are viewed to react strongly to the very presence of consultants and showing signs of being afraid of losing their jobs or afraid of the consultants changing their 'world'. Typical signs of a threatened client is, according to some of the consultants, inattention to or malicious comment on the consultant's proposal.

Threat, in a sense that I'm coming to change or influence someone's world, without them knowing..., it's very common ... that we get comments like 'Why are you here? Are you about to take my job away or downsize the company?' ... Management consultants that step in as a suited troop, looking important and busy. That may indicate that there is some kind of change or rationalisation going on. ... They'll have to change your working style, and they can't see why. If the management team hasn't informed why there are consultants running around the

company, it might be a little scary ... and somehow threatening. Either because [the client] has to do things differently, people might lose their jobs or have to answer difficult questions. (Ylva)

Another reason for resistance is according to the narratives of several interviewees personal issues, 'hidden agendas' or 'political reasons'. One consultant had perceived a client as very aggressive, almost on the war path, with the aim of keeping the consultant from interfering. In this case, the client is constructed as facing the 'double control problem', where he has to satisfy both the organisation's goals and his own personal objectives to appear 'in charge':

We tried to change it, but the program director was just 'No.'. That was just out of question. It was also something political in the company because they saw consultants as... we were not enemies, but we were let in ... only to do our work and not to interfere with anything. It couldn't look like we were leading it, because they had to be on the paper at least, on the organisational chart, they were in charge. (Petronella)

'Knowing best' is another characteristic that many consultants use to describe clients that are resistant. This is seen as problematic, as the following quotation shows:

A person that thinks he knows the best, but simply doesn't know how to go about doing it. Very often we meet the kind of people who believe they know best ... and then they don't listen. (Jack)

Similarly, one consultant tells a story about a client that needed help with her presentation and communication skills. The consultant helped the client with a specific presentation and made her PowerPoint slides for her and wrote her speech. When she was about to do the presentation however, she decided not to follow the manuscript. Based on this one case, he constructs a very ignorant and stubborn client:

Within five minutes she had ruined everything! And it kept repeating itself. So in the end I became frustrated. [I thought] 'All right, you pay me to help you with your way of communicating with people?' But still, she came back saying that 'I can't say this, I want to say that, this is not my style!' Etcetera. So they do exactly the opposite ... They totally ignore the assistance I have offered. (Jack)

When telling this story, Jack seems almost offended by the clients' ignorance of his work. He continues and says that if he could decide, he wouldn't like to work with

those kinds of people. However, while many participants clearly show that they see resistance as something negative, they simultaneously show great empathy for the threatened clients. They explain the clients' behaviour as them being afraid of losing control and becoming seduced by the consultant. Many of the consultants are of the opinion that information is equal to power in many client firms. One consultant tells a story of an organisational member who tried to sabotage a project by not letting go of a document. The client is then clearly constructed as intractable, and although the consultant shows an understanding for the concerned client and his behaviour, he clearly speaks of the client as 'odd' and 'difficult'.

... it was an old man who just tried his best to ruin the project by pointing at shortcomings and by withholding information from us. I mean, information is power in many companies so they're scared of themselves being regarded as less valuable if they give away a database or an Excel file. They won't get as many questions as before, and people might start questioning their value. (Donald)

Ylva's statement shows how she is understandable and in the same way as Donald, she constructs a rational reasoning around the client's behaviour:

... it's because clients are either careful with the information that they give away, or afraid of what will happen... I believe that buyers of consultancy services are afraid of lowering the guard and often afraid of admitting that they have not understood, as the client then run the risk of being used. (Ylva)

Another ambiguity regarding resistance is related to the contradiction between the client who orders the consultancy service, and the same client who resists it. This theme is brought up by many interviewees. Comparing the client-consultant relationship to a dentist case, one consultant shows how the client alternates receptiveness with discomfort when working with consultants.

But, it's more or less like going to the dentist. There are many people that don't like the dentist, but none the less, they sit there in the waiting room and pay a lot of money for it – because it's nice when it's done. (Steve)

The patient (client) does not enjoy visiting the dentist (consultant), but finds it pleasurable afterwards. This clearly indicates yet another characteristic of the management consultancy clients, being resistant and threatened to the project that they at the same time need and want.

## 5. Discussion

How do consultants discursively construct the client? Answering this question was the main objective of our empirical research. Congruent with our methodological considerations discussed in Chapter 2. Methodology & Methods, we adopted a performative perspective on language and language use (Potter & Wetherell 1987, Whittle 2006) when analysing the accounts produced by the consultants. This enabled us to identify twelve distinct characteristics emerging when the participants discursively constructed the client. Together, these characteristics form a multifaceted and dynamic client construction. In order to understand the nature of the client, we propose visualising it as a squish ball with twelve tentacles protruding in different directions. A more detailed account of the squish ball can be found in the previous Chapter 4. Empirics: The squish ball. In the following section, our aim is to discuss the squish ball, what constitutes it and what it generates. As mentioned in chapter 2. Methodology & Methods, we will interpret the squish ball by applying critical sensitivity (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), meaning that distance ourselves from the participants' accounts in order to question the easily taken-for-granted phenomenon of the 'client'. Furthermore, we rely on the performative approach to language as outlined by Whittle (2006), in order to further discuss what our findings can achieve. We will conclude the discussion by reflecting on the client as an ongoing discursive construction process made by consultant as window into further understanding of the client-consultant relationship.

Before starting the discussion, we feel it is important to highlight the possible limitations and the function of the squish ball metaphor. While the squish ball is an interesting metaphor, it is not the ball or the twelve tentacles themselves that are of most value for our further discussion. Rather, the squish ball is valuable as it concretises something very abstract, the client. This in turn facilitates the following discussion.

## 5.1. Divergent accounts

As can be read from our empirical material, many characteristics that consultants used in order to construct their clients are to be viewed as compatible. The client is for example constructed as both 'knowledgeable' and 'powerful' in many interviews. However, we are of the opinion that our empirical material is worth a more thorough analysis than that. In line with our ambition of questioning the taken-for-granted (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), we are not satisfied by accepting the conventional view of the client and making the 'familiar more familiar'. The reason why we have chosen to focus on the divergent accounts is twofold.

First, it seems a little naive to think that all characteristics converge. If this, however, were the case, an analysis would be uncalled for. In addition, only convergent accounts would provide a weak basis for an academic discussion. Second, while client characteristics harmonising is an appealing thought, it does not correspond particularly well with existing management research. As shown in our literature review, consultancy is regarded as ambiguous and paradoxical (see for example Alvesson 2004, Clark & Fincham 2002, Whittle 2006). Fincham (2003) states that uncertainty is at the very heart of consultancy and researchers are increasingly inclined towards incorporating themes such as ambiguity, tension and irony into consultancy (see for example Whittle 2006, Calás & Smircich 1999, Alvesson 2003). With this in mind, it is both interesting and necessary to explore and discuss the divergent accounts given by the participants. How can the consultants construct a client using conflicting characteristics? How can the client be constructed as both superior and inferior during the same interview, even during the same answer? We argue that these divergent repertoires give rise to paradoxes. Referring back to the squish ball, the most divergent accounts are the ones that we placed on opposite sides of each other, using the same colour. This is shown in Figure 5.1. It is to these contradictory accounts, describing the same phenomenon, that we now turn. Before discussing how to make sense of the paradoxes in our empirical material, we will discuss how paradoxes emerge and how, as in our case, the paradoxical client can be seen as a resource.

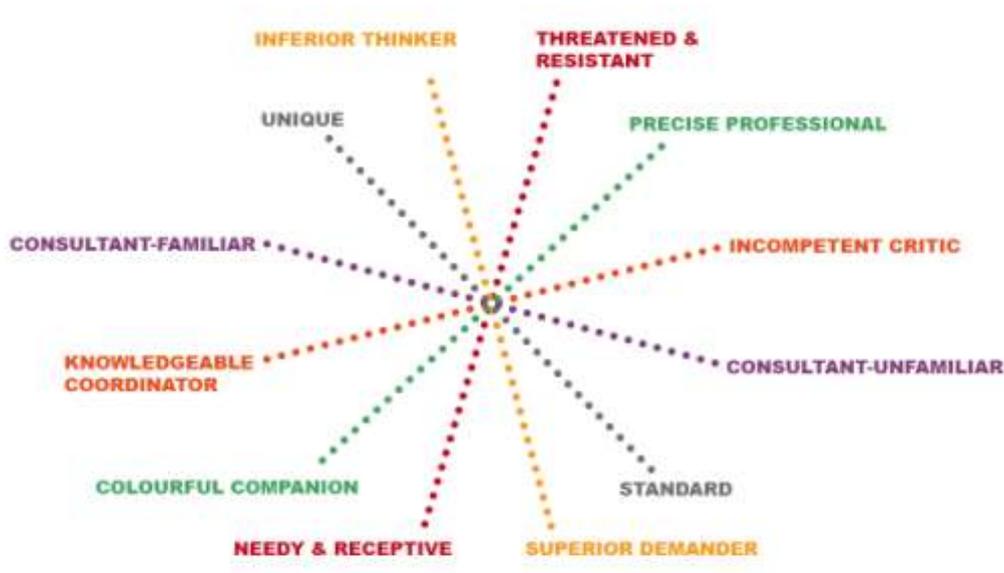


Figure 5.1 The squish ball presented two-dimensionally

## 5.2. Paradoxes – what to do with them?

Our empirical material indicates that there is a series of paradoxes that emerge from the conflicting ways in which consultants talk about their clients. But what do they mean? How should we deal with them? An initial reaction to the paradoxes emerging from the interviews might be to try and solve them, either by finding the 'true' account or by finding the 'most appropriate' account in a given situation. This instinctive reaction is not unnatural as paradoxes often appear difficult because of their 'inherently fractal quality' (Ofori-Dankwa & Julian 2004:1450) and tension ridden nature (Lewis, 2000).

Whittle (2006) however, points towards numerous problems with trying to solve a paradox. First, finding out the 'true' account means having to dismiss the other side of the paradox and regarding it as false. This implies a very cynical and sceptical view of the accounts produced by the participants (Whittle 2006). It also gives rise to problematic questions. Do we as researchers have the authority to determine what is true and what is false? Which participants' accounts are truer than others? Second, determining the 'best approach' in a given situation is also problematic, if not futile,

considering the dynamic, ever-changing and contextually dependent nature of consultancy services (see for example Sturdy 1997, Fincham 1999, Berglund & Werr 2000). This means that determining the 'best client construction' in a particular situation serves no real purpose, as that exact context in which it was constructed does not reappear as it is in constant change. Additionally, Berglund and Werr (2000) show that conflicting accounts about consultancy are not only produced in different contexts but also in the same context. This also becomes evident in our empirical material as one consultant clearly states that 'My *only* ambition is that the client will succeed'. Not much later, the same consultant, with equal authority states that 'My most important role is not to make sure the client succeeds, it is to make sure our company succeeds'. In short, trying to solve paradoxes is problematic.

### **5.3. Paradoxes as opportunities**

With regards to the problems associated with resolving paradoxes, there is a need for a different approach. With the so called post-modern turn (see for example Whittle 2006, Calás & Smircich 1999, Alvesson 2003) researchers have begun regarding paradoxes not as problems to be rectified or questions to be answered, but as a result and medium of irony and humour (Hatch, 1997), opportunities for creating theories (Van de Ven & Poole, 1998) or a natural part of the discourses available within consultancy (Whittle 2006, Werr & Styhre 2003). Alvesson and Johansson argue that 'the complexity and diversity of consultancy assignments require that the consultant moves back and forth between a professional area ... and a non-professional area' (2002:240). This is also the direction in which our research aims. Inspired by Whittle (2006) and based on our methodological assumptions about language as a shaping force, we argue that 1) paradoxes are not problems to be solved, but rather opportunities to be utilised and that 2) it is through paradoxes that the client construction emerges.

The reasoning behind these arguments relates back to our performative approach to language, viewing discourse as a shaping rather than mirroring force. Accordingly, language has the ability to achieve something, in our case the client construction. When two seemingly contradictory accounts merge, they create a paradox and the contradictory accounts, we suggest, together constitute the client. The image, although somewhat simplified, figure 5.1., illustrates this construction process. The green squish ball symbolises the multifaceted, dynamic and ambiguous client construction.

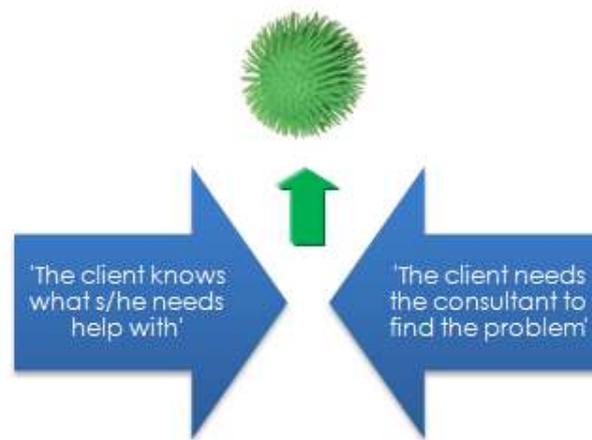


Figure 5.1 Contradictory accounts create paradoxes which constitutes the client.

There are mainly two implications that follow the recognition of the client as a paradoxical construction. First, it opens up for a deeper understanding on 'what goes on', simultaneously and even paradoxically, as it allows us to see ambiguities as constituents of the client-consultant relationship. Second, by studying the identified 'construction processes' where the paradoxes are crafted, we are able to discuss how they are actively, although perhaps unconsciously, utilised by the consultants and what implications that usage may have on the client-consultant relationship. The most salient paradoxes in our interviews will be presented and discussed below.

### **5.3.1. Client as Superior and Inferior**

The first paradox that we identified is concerned with the way in which the participants construct the client as both an inferior thinker and sometimes superior demander. By merging these two seemingly conflicting accounts, superior and

inferior, the consultants create a paradox. The following quotation exemplifies how the consultant, in the same context, struggles with putting words on the client as both powerful and powerless:

We could never do it without the client, so it's not like I'm sitting here saying that we can do everything and they can't do anything. ... We are good at facilitating and driving and they are needed for the business context. If they also try to lead without the competencies, we've seen that it doesn't go our way and we see that we will never meet the results or the deadlines. (Petronella)

Petronella talks about the client with much hesitation in her voice. It is as if she were unsure about who actually 'knows the best'. She solves this cognitive problem by stating that both parties are needed, but for different tasks: facilitation and the business context. This dual way of constructing the client's power is done both actively, for example when stating that the consultancy company is customer orientated, and passively, for example when discussing how problems are solved and therein expressing who's opinion weighs the most.

What does it mean for the client-consultant relationship? Constructing the client as that is both superior and inferior at the same time serves many purposes. It gives the client-consultant relationship more options and more space out of which to work and the paradox allows otherwise incompatible outcomes to co-exist. First, constructing the client as superior gives the client authority to steer the consultancy work, that is, to define what needs to be done and how. Having someone who can give direction and provide stability serves as counterweight to the otherwise complex, uncertain and ambiguous consultancy context (see for example Alvesson 2004, Clark & Fincham 2002, Fincham 2003). This becomes evident in the empirical material, as many consultants regard a demanding client as something positive.

It is crucial that the client know what they want and that they know how to demand it. (Harriet)

Harriet shows that she appreciates clients that know what they want, because it makes it easier for her to do her job. Second, a superior client can serve as motivator, or a substitute for motivation. Many of our participants indicated that much of their consultancy work consists of 'dirty work', administration or playing political games, something which most consultants regards as negative. Nonetheless, they accept

these tasks as a part of their job, and not as something that can be debated. This is due to the fact that they have constructed a client that is structurally more authoritarian and powerful than themselves. In doing so, they do not give themselves an opportunity to oppose the tedious tasks, thus avoiding a conflict. The same applies to taking the blame. Alvesson and Johansson state that 'consultants may often be wise to accept blame for what has gone wrong and give considerable credit to their client' (2002: 238). As a result of these superior client constructions, the client-consultant relationship is sustained as conflict-free and functional.

On the other hand, constructing a client as inferior also serves a purpose. By constructing an inferior and incompetent client, the consultants automatically ascribe themselves mandate and ability to take action. This in turns makes the relationship efficient, as the consultant because of their superior knowledge and ability, in theory, can make and execute decisions without the complete consensus of the client. In the following statement, Jack indicates that his superiority allows him to overwrite the client's opinions with his own.

As a consultant, it is our task, or I think our duty, to tell the client how things really are. (Jack)

Additionally, a weaker client serves as a *raison d'être* for the client-consultant relationship and consultancy. As long as the client is constructed as inferior, knowledge- or experience wise, there is a need for consultancy services (O'Mahoney 2010). This attitude is evident in many of our interviews, as the reason for hiring consultants is, according to the consultants, often based on a construction of an inferior client. Consequently, a knowledgeable and skilful consultant in combination with an inferior client construction facilitates the generation for new markets (Whittle 2006) and thus ensuring the continuing existence of consultancy.

### **5.3.2. Client as unique and standard**

A second aspect that consultants discuss is whether all clients are unique and need tailor-made solutions for every project, or whether clients' needs resemble each other and best fit practices and premade models can be applied. The same participant tends to construct the client as both unique and as standard, depending

on the situation. It becomes obvious that the consultants themselves have no clear-cut definition, but rather move back and forth between the two extremes:

We have methodologies and answers to everything, experiences of everything. But when you go to meet a client, you should in theory always go there with a blank sheet. (Jack)

Jack's statement clearly shows the contradictory elements in his client construction. Combining the notion of standardisation with the notion of uniqueness gives rise to a paradox. This paradox can however be of use in several ways. The unique characteristic of the client construction means that consultants can create exciting and unique places to work where every day means a new challenge. This is what many of our participants listed as the number one reason for becoming a consultant. Creating a unique client also allows for synergy effects, when combining market knowledge (standard) with local knowledge (unique) (Fincham 2003). In order for there to be a synergy effect, the client needs to consist of a, at least partially, unique setting. In the same way, by creating the client as unique, the consultant does not have to excuse his or her lack of knowledge in a particular situation. The consultant's lack of knowledge is thereby legitimised, because the 'problem' is not about the consultant's inability, rather it becomes a question of the 'particularities' of the client firm. However, to avoid that the situation becomes too unique for the parties to handle, the consultant has the opportunity to re-construct the client as standard, by applying well-known methodologies. The effects of the paradoxical client hereby become evident. Additionally, projects are regarded as more successful and more satisfactory for the client when adapted to different contexts (Whittle 2006). In organisations, standardisation has been ascribed a negative connotation while uniqueness is regarded as something genuine and positive (Leopold & Harris 2009). Talking about clients as unique is therefore an 'image booster' for the consultancy, as what they are doing is considered congruent with the predominant client-focus trend (Anderson-Gough et al. 2000).

However, by simultaneously constructing the client as standard, the consultancy service becomes more secure, as there are several quality advantages with well tested and standardised approaches (Jones 2003). Many of our participants talk about the advantages and benefits of tested methodologies. Methodologies are seen as a key feature of standardised knowledge (Werr et al. 1997). Constructing a

unitary and standardised client therefore creates a sense of security around the consultancy project. As previously mentioned, a standardised client also counterweighs the increasingly chaotic and fast paced world (Alvesson 2002, Alvesson 2004, Buono & Poulfelt 2009).

This following excerpt gives a very good indication of the paradoxical nature of consultancy and how the consultant perceives and constructs his client as having conflicting requirements. Karl sees this as challenging, as it becomes his problem to find the 'right balance' of uniqueness and standardisation of his product.

The customers want to utilise the best possible information and the best possible message that exists. But they always want to have something unique. They might not be willing to pay for something really unique, because creating something really unique requires more effort than just utilising the best practice. ... So again, we come to the question of what the customer really wants and what he is willing to pay for. Because best practices are really good in e.g. making the operation efficient ... But if are to come up with a new competitive advantage ... then working with the best practices doesn't get you anywhere because you just do the same as the other ones. (Karl)

### **5.3.3. Client as Knowledgeable Coordinator and Incompetent Critic**

A third paradox emerges from client constructions as knowledgeable coordinators and incompetent critics. This paradox becomes evident mainly when the interviewees describe their most and least preferable clients. The paradox is closely related to power, politics and jurisdiction, which in turn are ambiguous (Alvesson 2004) and far from unproblematic concepts (Muhr & Whittle 2010). Being knowledgeable is regarded as something highly positive, as it can create trust (Bloomfield & Danieli 1995) and makes clients appear as informed and sophisticated decision-makers (Alvesson 1993a, b). All of the consultants construct the most desirable client as someone who is talented and able to provide the consultant with a good overview of the organisation. Clients that are constructed as competent and who focus on the essentialities are seen as facilitating the collaboration of the consultancy intervention. In the same way, one consultant claims that a knowledgeable client renders the consultancy process more agile. Additionally, the

desirable client is often described as someone who has identified the problem and who already has an idea about how to solve it, as Walter shows:

The client needs to be knowledgeable, I think. It is almost a prerequisite in order for the project to be successful. (Walter)

At the same time as being highly competent and knowing how to 'order the right thing', paradoxically enough, the consultants repeatedly speaks of the knowledgeable client as someone in need of, and open to, consultancy services.

Furthermore, knowledge is traditionally related to rationality and predictability (Alvesson & Johansson 2002), however also confined by it. As a contrast to the knowledgeable coordinators, consultants also construct clients as incompetent critics. These characteristics are some of the least desirable, according to our participants. Ignorance and too much focus on irrelevant issues are commonly used traits when the consultants construct the persons associated with unsuccessful projects. One consultant constructs the client as follows:

... the internal team leaders didn't do anything, it was just us driving it. They didn't have the competencies for it, not all of them at least, and didn't have the experiences. (Petronella)

As in the previous cases, the paradox allows for multiple conflicting client constructions to co-exist and create positive outcomes. For example our empirical material shows that when consultants construct a knowledgeable client, the consultancy work becomes easy, meaningful and efficient. An additional benefit that the competent client construction suggests is that there is a possibility for mutual learning and that the workplace is stimulating.

On the other hand, in the same manner as consultants can serve as a scapegoat (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Fincham 2002), an incompetent client can take the blame for projects that fail or creep out of scope. This is also evident in most interviews, as consultants ascribe much of the success or failure of projects to the client and his/her qualities. In doing so, they remove their own responsibility of projects to the client and are able to maintain a competent image of themselves.

#### **5.3.4. Client as Precise Professional and Colourful Companion**

The fourth set of characteristics relates to whether the client is constructed using either hard and factual adjectives, or soft and more emotionally appealing traits. Thus, on the one side, the client is constructed using attributes echoing professionalism, precision and objectivity (Alvesson & Johansson 2002, Clark 1995). On the other side, the client is constructed out of characteristics that are normally used when describing a friend or family member (Werr & Styhre 2003). Interestingly, many of the emotionally loaded client constructions are of positive as well as negative nature, therefore labelled 'colourful'. While the more formal picture of the client often appeared early during the interview and the more emotional construction surfaced at a later stage, both types of accounts were evident during the same interview. The following statement is a great example of how the relationship with the client includes ambiguous elements with regards to professionalism.

... maybe, I came in as a consultant thinking 'Let's just do this', you know, mainly focused on my way. That was just certain persons that I just didn't click with very well. We just didn't understand each other. And I know that they hated me. ... I could just feel it. They were kind of unfriendly and really annoyed. You could feel and hear that they were annoyed. ... I tried to explain something to them and they just didn't get it and I would then get more and more frustrated. And they would then get more and more frustrated. (Greta)

Greta constructs a client that on one hand is childish and mean, very unprofessional traits, and places blame on the client. On the other hand however, she takes the blame for it when saying that the misunderstanding was based on her lack of consultancy experience, something that is related to professional ability. In other words, the consultants construct the client as strict and professional, and at the same time sibling-like and colourful.

These contrasting client constructions enable a range of things. Firstly, professionalism is related to many positive outcomes such as factual knowledge (Kubr 1996), efficiency (Alvesson & Johansson 2002) and value creation (Poulsen & Payne 1994). Constructing the client as professional and precise also assists in maintaining a professional image of the industry, something which recent literature has been

questioned (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Additionally, preserving a professional relationship with the client hinders consultants and clients from becoming too attached to each other. Given its project-based nature (Werr & Styhre 2003) consultancy implies a separation after a given time frame. By creating a professional client and remaining distanced and 'objective', the 'break-up' is easier to deal with.

While, the professional client construction implies many possibilities, so do the unprofessional more familiar constructions (Alvesson Johansson 2002). By constructing a familiar client, consultants create a comfortable ambiance where emotions are allowed to exist within the relationship. In this way the consultant is not forced to suppress emotions, in order to appear professional (ibid). Many participants give joyful accounts of the client as such as a 'good friend', 'joker' and 'beer-drinking buddy'. In these cases the client as companion gives rise to emotional stimuli which can deepen the client-consultant relationship, for instance by creating trust (Werr & Styhre 2003) which in the end can lead to a better outcome of the project itself (see for example Alvesson & Johansson, 2002, Buono & Poulfelt 2009, Fincham 1999, Werr & Styhre, 2003, O'Mahoney 2010). By creating a client with whom the consultants can have an open and less strict relationship, they also open up for a wider spectrum of tools with which they can manipulate, persuade and seduce clients (Alvesson 1993b, Fincham 1999, Jackson 1996) and thereby generate more business. Finally, in many cases the consultant sees the client's unprofessional behaviour as reason for project failures. Again, the possibility of placing blame becomes evident (Whittle 2006).

### **5.3.5. Client as Needy & Receptive and Threatened & Resistant**

The fifth paradox is based on the consultants' client constructions as needy and welcoming towards consultants, yet sceptical and doubtful. Scepticism and doubt are often connected to resistance (Ford et al. 2008), something which is seen as negative by the consultants. It is to be concluded that the consultants construct the client as keen on receiving help and even thankful towards the consultants (Berglund & Werr 2000), but also as threatened and afraid of letting go of information. The following excerpt is a great example of this:

... Assuredly, you may come into a company and realise that the employees' opinion on things are very different from the opinion of the executive team... It is special and very difficult. ... Because some executives are receptive and listen very carefully, while others become defensive and become afraid and says 'You don't know anything! You're from the outside!'. But the reason why I can move around freely at the clients, at the floor for example, is because I'm not a threat to them, I think. (Steve)

This paradox can achieve a range of things. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, a needy and receptive client construction implies a great demand for consultancy services (Sturdy et al. 2009) and a general legitimacy for the industry (see for example Clark & Fincham 2002). Because of the general scepticism towards consultants professionalism (Alvesson & Johansson 2002) and honesty (see for example Clark & Fincham 2002), constructing a client as genuinely needy is a welcomed counterweight to the questioned role of consultancy. Sturdy (1997) for example argues that consultants often create the need for the services they themselves offer. A client that is constructed as receptive sees the value in the consultancy service and accepts the consultant as superior with regards to knowledge and expertise (Werr & Styhre 2003). This in turn gives to power (Werr & Styhre 2003) and increased opportunities for sell-on (Whittle 2006).

Simultaneously however, the construction of the client as threatened and resistant also creates opportunities. A threatened client symbolises inferiority, and thereby gives increased authority to the consultant. Political reasons are often stated as being behind resistance and the client is constructed as faced with the double control problem (Fincham 2003). This construction allows consultants to ascribe a rational reasoning (the double control problem) behind the client's 'irrational' behaviour (resistance). In doing so, the consultant rationalises the resistant behaviour and thereby makes easier to deal with (Ford et al. 2008).

### **5.3.6. Client as Consultant-familiar and Consultant-unfamiliar**

Finally, we identified a more speculative dimension of the client constructions. It concerns whether the client is familiar or unfamiliar with consultants. This seemed to be a decisive factor for many of the consultants, as a client that is familiar with consultants is depicted as a 'better' and 'easier' client to work with. 'Speaking the

same language' and 'having the same attitudes' were expressions that many interviewees mentioned when talking about the client that is used to working with consultants.

The consultants define their ideal client as someone who is consultant-familiar. The consultant-familiar client is then defined as being as similar to themselves as possible. This serves multiple purposes. First, working with one's double means that one's knowledge, experiences and ways of working are highly applicable. Applicable knowledge has at least in functionalist literature been regarded as highly correlated with professionalism and legitimacy (Alvesson & Johansson 2002). Therefore, a construction of the client as consultant-familiar and similar to the consultant, creates strong legitimacy for the consultancy service. Second, it reduces potential political conflicts as both parties by definition have the same ambitions and tensions (Schein 1969). Third, political power struggles can endanger the project (Whittle 2006) and working with a double therefore ensures a more successful relationship.

The majority of the interviewees make a clear distinction between the 'new' client who had never been in contact with consultants before, and an 'old' client with whom they already have an established relationship or who are used to having consultants around. In this way, they construct distinct clients.

Some companies are more used to consultants than others. Some are used to always having consultants there and very used to consultants having to perform. For others it might be the first time they use consultants. Then they are very consultant-unfamiliar. That means that they are used to doing everything themselves and maybe don't pay as much attention to what consultants say and... well, they might not be used to the comprehensive diagrams in PowerPoint that we present. (Harriet)

Interestingly, as the above statement indicates, consultancy-unfamiliarity is regarded as something purely negative and something that renders consultancy work more complicated, or even in some cases impossible. Accordingly, being used to consultants is regarded as something positive, that enables consultants to work fast and efficiently. At first glance, this might not seem paradoxical. But what does it mean that the novice client is seen as 'problematic' and that the client with consultancy-familiarity represents the 'good' client? One implication could be that

consultants are slowly, but surely draining their own business, by only favouring 'old' clients. Another explanation could be that the favourism of consultant-familiar clients is an indication of further growth of the industry. The mere appearance of a term such as 'consultancy-familiarity' indicates that consultants are becoming the norm rather than the exception within organisational life. An occupation that by definition is hired on a contractual and short term basis (see for example Clark & Fincham 2002) has now become the default. The term 'consultancy-familiar' indicates that consultants are becoming more and more permanent in organisations.

#### **5.4. Client construction or constructing the client?**

As a final part of the discussion, we would like to shift the focus back to our initial ambition with this research: to increase the understanding of the client-consultant relationship. With the increased understanding on how client constructions are made and what they enable, what does it mean for the client-consultant relationship? Given the relational nature of consultancy (Sturdy 1999), the client is better understood, not as an independent object itself, but rather as something that the consultant constructs. Based on our findings, we suggest that the client can be seen as a phenomenon labelled 'client' which signifies under which an array of characteristics co-exists. Some of the characteristics are naturally convergent, such as 'needy' and 'subordinate', where as other are divergent. The conflicting characteristics give rise to paradoxical client constructions, such as 'client as superior' yet simultaneously as 'client as inferior'. This is what the squish ball stands for. It serves as a metaphor for the client constructions, enabling a further discussion about the 'client' as a phenomenon.

As shown in our empirical material, and as communicated through the squish ball metaphor, the client constructions are not static, but rather an ongoing process. Therefore, we suggest that it is the process, in which these constructions are made, that constitutes the client. Consequently, the client constructions do not exist independent of the consultants' construction process. In other words, it is not the squish ball itself that can provide us with valuable insights, but rather the process of *constructing* the squish ball. This process becomes evident in our empirical material, for example, when Steve constructs a client as a mountaineer about to climb Mount Everest:

If you come to a Sherpa and say 'I want to climb Mt. Everest' than he will say 'It's OK! I'll carry your stuff for you. I'll walk behind you and prompt. I'll tell you where to go. I'll carry your equipment and make sure you make it to the top and that you come down again.' That's us! (Steve)

Steve is actively engaged in constructing a client that conveniently fits his image of himself as a Sherpa. In doing so, his client construction process legitimises his own position and places himself in a very favourable role, in this case as an altruistic helper. This example shows that the *process* of constructing the client plays a more important role in the client-consultant relationship, than the client construction itself, in this case a mountaineer. This means that despite the call for research to focus more on the 'client' (Sturdy et al. 2009), we call for research to focus on the *process* of constructing the client. An increased understanding of the client-consultant relationship is better achieved, not by focusing on the client construction *per se*, but rather on the process in which the client is constructed.

## 6. Conclusion

'Now tell me... what is a typical client like?' Our research shows that there is no one answer to this question. Instead, we suggest concluding this paper on three levels. These three levels are illustrated in Figure 6.1. In the following section, we will discuss our conclusions and outline our contribution to the field of consultancy. We will conclude by discussing potential implications for practice, and suggest that the limitations of our research open up for further research.

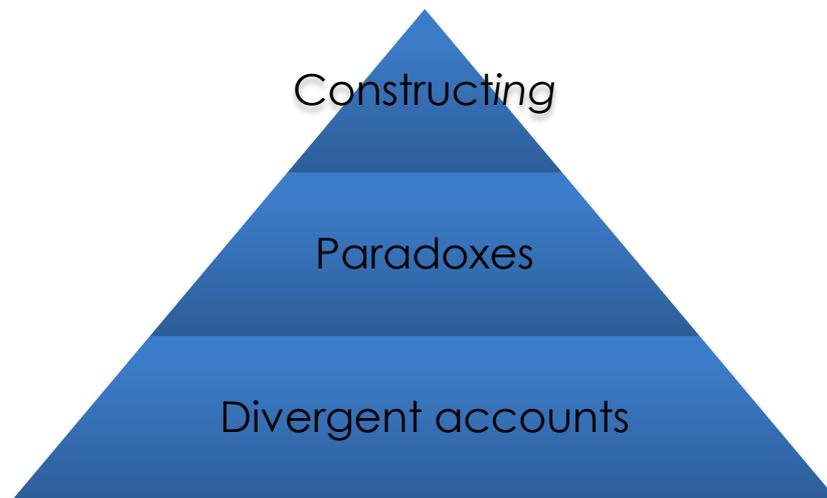


Figure 6.1. The 'client' pyramid

In the first chapter, we showed that consultancy is a highly ambiguous and dynamic phenomenon that seems to intrigue both practitioners and researchers. In our review of existing management literature in chapter 2, it became apparent that the client has in much critical literature been marginalised, in favour of the consultant. Going back to our metaphor in the Prologue, it was as if all the torches faced the consultant and the client was left in the dark. This disequilibrium fuelled our interest in studying the client as a phenomenon. Given the relational nature of consultancy (Sturdy 1997a, Alvesson 2004) we adopted a performative approach to discourse meaning that we consider language as achieving reality rather than reflecting it.

Our performative approach to language enabled us to recognise, de-familiarise and reflect upon the conventional view of the 'client'. Through an interview-based method, we showed that consultants construct clients using contradictory accounts.

These twelve sets of characteristics were grouped and presented metaphorically as a squish ball. The aim of the squish ball was to illustrate the client constructions as dynamic, ambiguous and even conflicting. In other words, rather than seeking the essence of the client constructions, we empirically illustrated their variations. Using the multidimensional squish ball as a metaphor enabled us to shed new light on the conventional view of the 'client'. This can be seen as the first level of our conclusion.

On a second level, we concluded that consultants employ contradictory accounts when constructing the client, which in turn gave rise to paradoxes. In other words, one way of viewing the paradoxes is that they together constitute the client. In our discussion, we also argued for the usefulness of paradoxes when managing the client-consultant relationship. The most predominant outcomes from constructing a paradoxical client were:

- Counterweighing complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity
- Legitimising consultancy services
- Facilitating collaboration
- Creating a stimulating working environment
- Dealing with resistance

Previous levels of our conclusion enabled us to reach a third level. Based on our findings, we suggest that the client can be seen as a label under which an array of characteristics co-exists. As shown in our empirical material, and as communicated through the squish ball metaphor, the client constructions are not static, but rather an ongoing process. Therefore, we argue that the process, in which these constructions are made, is actually what constitutes the client. In other words: it is not the study of the squish ball, the 'client', itself that can provide us with valuable insights, but rather the process of constructing it.

This opens up for numerous other questions and implications. When and how does this construction process take place? Which contextual factors influence the process? Could it even mean that consultants construct 'the client' before actually meeting the client? What does this imply for consultancy work?

## **6.1. Contributions**

Our first contribution to the field is related to balancing out the critical literature, which currently favours the consultant. As can be read from our literature review, the consultant has been subject of much research, while the role and the nature of the client have to a great extent been neglected (Alvesson et al. 2009, Fincham 1999, Hislop 2002, Sturdy et al. 2009). We therefore set out to assist in rectifying this situation. If we are to view the client-consultant relationship on equal terms, we need to balance out the current favourism of the consultant. By empirically illustrating the diversity of client constructions, we have given attention to the client and therein contributed by balancing out the critical consultancy literature.

Our second contribution to the literature on consultancy relates to increased consistency with the underlying assumption of the critical paradigm. Up until now critical researchers, claiming to believe in social constructionism and in a socially and discursively constructed reality, have only applied their critical glasses when looking at the consultant. This indicates that the literature's image of the consultant is highly nuanced and regarded as socially constructed. However, this does not apply to the client. Contrary to the consultant, the client has in many articles simply been taken for granted to 'be around'. We have through our empirical material, the squish ball, illustrated the diverse and dynamic nature of the client, by studying the client concept as a construction made by consultants. The client has been attributed with both convergent and divergent characteristics. Our findings provide an image of the client that is more consistent with the critical paradigm. Multiple and even contradictory constructions are thereby not problems to be solved, but rather opportunities for further understanding and creating room for action.

## **6.2. Practical implications**

In addition to theoretical outcomes, our research findings have several practical implications, both for consultants and for clients. A performative view of discourse is highly practical and can enable actors to define problems, construct allegiances, make decisions, accomplish events, generate ideas and implant new practices (Whittle 2006:431). For consultants, being aware that they construct a paradoxical

client means an increased knowledge and awareness about the nature of their work. Knowing that paradoxes serve as a resource, and not simply a constraint, can also reduce anxiety about seemingly conflicting opinions about clients. For example, a consultant might feel unease when confronted with two incompatible client constructions and how to deal with them: 'Is the client my beer drinking buddy or a professional business partner at arms' length?'. Accepting and embracing paradoxes as a natural part of consultancy work can in this situation provide 'peace of mind' for the consultant. Additionally, being aware of the various client constructions makes consultants able to confront their own biases and prejudices.

On a more practical level, paradoxical client constructions can enable consultants to make use of otherwise incompatible strategies, knowledge and tools. For example, as outlined in the discussion, consultants can construct a needy client who legitimises the consultants' presence, while at the same time construct a threatened client who provides the consultants with authority and power. Clients can in the same manner as consultants, make use of the paradoxical constructions.

Managers may benefit from being aware of the fact that consultants' construction of the 'client' does not necessarily correspond with their own perception of themselves. The knowledge about consultants' client constructions being multidimensional and multifaceted, even contradictory, can bring important insights on why, when and how consultants act in a certain manner. For example, knowing that consultants construct clients as both 'professional' and 'emotional', can provide an explanation why consultants sometimes act inconsequently.

### **6.3. Implication for further research**

There is still much research left to be conducted on the client before we can view the client-consultant relationship on equal terms and with equal emphasis on the client and the consultant. Additionally, the unbalanced situation is something that we in our research took for granted, without further exploring its underlying reasons. Studies on *why* research on consultancy has favoured the consultant to such a large extent are still underdeveloped (Sturdy et al. 2009). Are there reasons for why the client has been neglected? If so, what could that reason be?

Since our methodological approach allowed us to see what language can achieve, we urge researchers to consider adopting a performative approach to language in future management research. What else can language and language use achieve?

Furthermore, the concept of 'consultant-familiarity', as outlined in our discussion, is an area that we suggest deserves critical scrutiny. What does an increasing 'consultancy-familiarity' mean for consultancy?

Finally, our research provides a deeper understanding of the client as a discursive construction made by consultants. What could be achieved by including the client into the construction process? How do clients discursively construct themselves?

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## Appendix 1: Article

# What constitutes the 'client'?

- how consultants' talk gives rise to the client in consultancy

**'Tell me... what is a typical client like?' At first glance, the subject might seem trivial. However, answering this question has proven to be easier said than done. Although researchers have emphasised and re-emphasised the relational nature of consulting (Fincham 1999), the focus has been on the ambiguous and multifaceted role of the consultant. The client, according to Alvesson et al (2009), 'is assumed to represent a distinct and immutable entity' (253) and has received considerable little attention (Sturdy et al. 2009). The aim of this article is to highlight the nature of 'client', and gain an insight into the client consultant relationship by viewing consultants as linguistic craftsmen as they are discursively constructing the 'client'.**

Since its emergence during the past century, the phenomenon of consultancy has fascinated researchers and laymen alike (see for example Kubr 1996, Schein 1969, O'Mahoney 2010, Alvesson 2004, Czarniawska 2001, Sturdy 1997, Fincham 1999, Clark & Fincham 2002, Berglund & Werr 2000). Despite their influential roles in modern society (Alvesson 2004, Berglund & Werr 2000), consultants and their work is still feebly understood (Clark & Fincham 2002). What is it that consultants really do? A number of researchers claim that consulting is a knowledge intensive profession (Alvesson 2004), while a more critical strand of researchers question the knowledge intensity and the actual value of consultancy services (Clark & Fincham 2002). Instead, critics claim consultancy to be all about impression management (Alvesson 2004) and fine-tuned political artistry (Muhr & Whittle 2010) that require intensive relational work between the consultant and the client. However, while the client-consultant relationship has received much attention from researchers, the majority of the investigations have been conducted on the consultant. More precisely, while critical researchers have given the consultants a myriad of roles and attributed them with a toolbox consisting of magic tricks (Clark & Salaman 1996), political manipulation (Alvesson and Johansson 2002, Muhr & Whittle 2010) and rhetorical devices (Berglund & Werr 2000, Whittle 2006), the client has remained in the backwater.

### **'Client' as discursive construction**

There is a clear need for academia to highlight the multifaceted nature of the 'client' in consultancy. This might appear as an impossible mission. However, we suggest that the very concept of the 'client' could be viewed as representing something more complex than just a buyer or receiver of consultancy services. In order to gain a better understanding of the conventional concept of the 'client', we suggest it to be viewed as a result of the consultancy discourse, meaning that the client is constructed as the other part of the relationship consultants talk about, describe and ascribe meaning to the 'client'. By investigating this construction process in which consultants *discursively* construct the 'client', we open up for an alternative understanding of the ambiguous phenomena that is consulting. To get a hold of what linguistic building blocks (adjectives, metaphors and stories) that the consultant employ to construct the 'client', 16 interviews were conducted with junior,

senior and self-employed IT and management consultants from Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

### **'Client' as squish ball**

Because of the ambiguous and multifaceted answers given by the interviewed consultants, the discursive client constructions cannot be summarised with a static metaphor, nor can they be reduced to a set of roles. Instead, what we suggest is that the constructions of the client bare resemblance with a twelve-dimensional squish ball in movement. A squish ball is soft, flexible and does not have a fixed position or shape. Its 'tentacles' protrude into different directions, in our case twelve different directions, and they can be stretched out or made shrink. The twelve different directions are the twelve different sets of attributes, taken to their extremes, which the consultants use to construct their clients. The squish ball, presenting the twelve sets of attributes that the consultants' used when constructing the 'client', is presented in figure 1. In an attempt to graphically explain the squish ball, we have temporarily 'flattened' the ball into the image below. We however urge the reader to keep in mind that it is not just a static model, but as mentioned a dynamic, heterogeneous and changing framework.

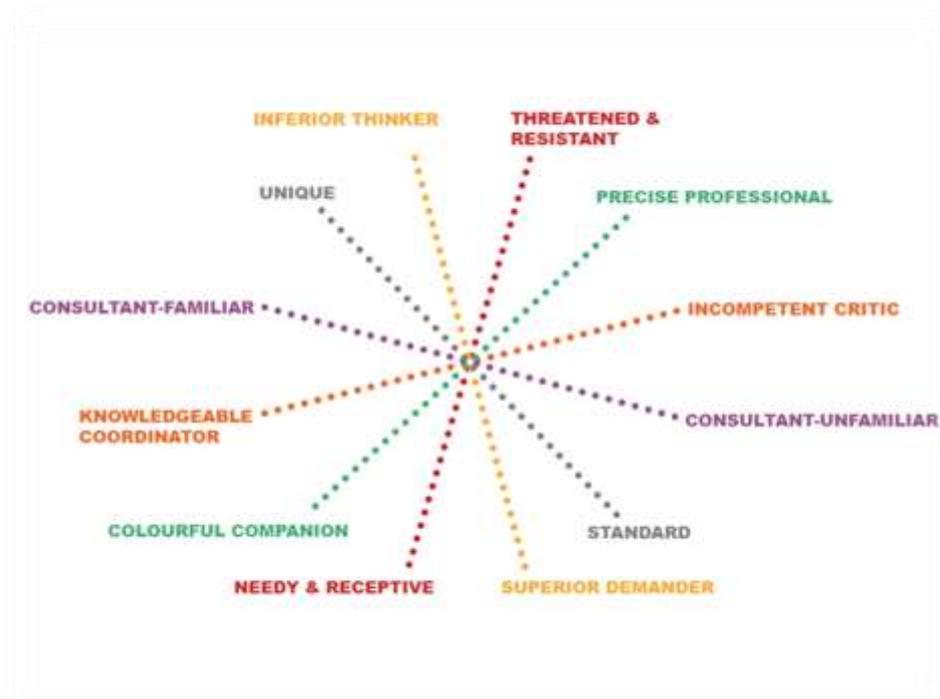


Figure 1. The squish ball - an integrative metaphor of consultants' client constructions

### **'Client' as paradox**

The sets of attributes and characteristics, which we consider building blocks, that the consultants used when referring to the 'client', are both convergent and divergent. It is with little effort that one can see how the 'client' may be inferior and needy simultaneously. However, the picture becomes more complex as consultants construct the 'client' using

contradictory accounts. For instance, the 'client' is constructed as both subordinate and superior, simultaneously. The interviewed consultants showed evidence of both sides and repeatedly contradicted their own statements. Evidence of both attitudes can be detected in the same interview, even in the same answer. The following statement exemplifies this ambiguity:

Because it's the client that decides. We never decide anything. Or... of course we can decide over the client. Or... they are the ones that make the decisions. (Harriet)

We suggest, however, that the paradoxes that these contradictory accounts give rise to, are natural and essential elements of the client-consultant relationship. Furthermore, we argue that paradoxical constructions of the client are worth embracing as they enable consultants and clients to strategically manage the inherent ambiguities of their relationship. On a more practical level, paradoxical client constructions can enable consultants to make use of otherwise incompatible strategies, knowledge and tools. For example, as outlined in the discussion, consultants can construct a needy client who legitimises the consultants' existence, while at the same time construct a resistant client who provides the consultants with authority and power. Another example is that by constructing clients that give rise to paradoxes, as argued by Whittle (2006), consultants are free to alternate between using standardised and tailor made knowledge and tools.

### **Constructing the 'client'**

With this increased understanding of the 'client', as a paradoxical and discursive construction made by the consultant, and what such construction may enable – how can we understand the client-consultant relationship better? Given the relational nature of consultancy (Alvesson 2004, Sturdy 1997a), it does not make much sense to study the 'client' independent of the consultant. Instead, the client is better understood, *not* as an independent object itself, but rather as something that the consultant is *constructing*.

Based on our findings, we suggest that the 'client' can be seen as a label under which an array of characteristics co-exists. Some of the characteristics are naturally convergent, such as 'needy' and 'subordinate', where as other are divergent. The conflicting characteristics give rise to paradoxical client constructions, such as 'client as superior' yet simultaneously as 'client as inferior'. This is what the squish ball stands for. It serves as a metaphor for the client constructions, enabling a further discussion about the phenomenon. As became apparent during the interviews, and as communicated through the squish ball metaphor, the client constructions are not static, but rather *ongoing processes*. Therefore, we argue that these processes, in which the client is constructed, are actually what constitute the 'client'. In other words, it is not through watching and describing the squish ball itself that we will gain valuable insights into the client-consultant relationship. Rather, we suggest, it is better understood by viewing the consultant as continuously *constructing* the squish ball. This reasoning becomes evident in our empirical material, for example, when Steve constructs a client as a mountaineer about to climb Mount Everest:

If you come to a Sherpa and say 'I want to climb Mt. Everest' than he will say 'It's OK! I'll carry your stuff for you. I'll walk behind you and prompt. I'll tell you where to go. I'll carry your equipment and make sure you make it to the top and that you come down again.' That's us! (Steve)

Steve is actively engaged in constructing a client that conveniently fits his image of himself as a Sherpa. In doing so, his client construction process legitimises his own position and places himself in a very favourable role, in this case as an altruistic helper. This example shows that the process of constructing the client plays a more important role in the client-consultant relationship, than the client construction itself, in this case a mountaineer. This means that despite the call for research to focus more on the 'client' (Sturdy et al. 2009), an increased understanding of the client-consultant relationship is better achieved, not by focusing on the client construction *per se*, but rather on the process in which the client is constructed.

These insights open up for numerous other questions and implications for future research. When and how does this construction process take place? Which contextual factors influence the process? Could it even mean that consultants construct the 'client' before actually meeting the 'client'? What does this imply for consultancy work?

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## **Appendix 2: Examiner's feedback**

### **Squishy Constructions (E. Jansson and E. Kjellqvist)**

This thesis focuses on what the authors argue as a neglected topic ie the construction of the client in the context of consultant-client relationships. A social constructivist approach is adopted that foregrounds the performative rather representational view of language.

Although the type of discourse analysis undertaken ie analyzing interview transcripts has a fairly low level of research ambition, the thesis is exceptionally well written, coherently structured and contains a convincing "red thread" that effectively links the reader back to the aims of the thesis at all the appropriate junctures. The empirical material is well presented and analysed in an original way through the use of the squishy ball as a sort of meta-concept that unites the dimensions of difference or ambiguity that are evident in the accounts of the respondents. The implications for both further research and practice are clearly set out in the concluding chapter.

However, a rather more convincing argument could have made in the first chapter for the choice of topic – the fact that not much has been written on the topic (p10) doesn't in itself mean that there is a mystery or a research problem. And where is figure 1.1? The subtle but important distinction between studies of the client and studies of the construction of the client that the authors end up with on (p83) could I think have already been signalled upfront in the first chapter. And why the choice to approach the topic by seeing the client as being discursively constructed by the counterpart (p11), and not other approaches?

The methods section flows nicely and positions the approach clearly and consistently. The authors make great efforts to point out their endeavour to question taken-for-grantednesses in their empirical material suggesting a very reflexive stance, but I wonder whether similar reflexivity was directed back at themselves. Another point is that the authors argue that their study reveals that the constructions are not static but dynamic. Presumably this is on account of the fact that they were frequently shifting during the interviews. I'm not persuaded by this – if they are/were

dynamic it is only so in the context of the interview situation and not in the context of client-consultant interactions. There isn't the data in the study to argue for the latter.

I did get a little confused by the discrepancy between the dimensions on the squishy ball (6 by the way, not 12) in fig 4.1 (and unnecessarily repeated as fig 5.1) and the labels of the continuum on p34.

Overall, however, the reservations I have expressed here are rather minor compared to the excellent quality of the thesis otherwise. The authors as I understand it conducted their work with a high degree of independence and excelled at the defence. And there are prospects of a genuine contribution to the literature here.

Some of the minor problems I have pointed out here can and should be addressed in the text prior to the final upload.

Suggested grade: A