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Hybrid bureaucracies? Control and autonomy in small consultancy firms

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ABSTRACT

This research proposal outlines a plan for a 4 year multiple case study on the degree of bureaucracy and the type of control and autonomy in small partnership-based consultancy firms. These areas are particular interesting in relation to discussions of bureaucratic hybrids - most notably those of soft- and post-bureaucracies - where a literature review shows that there are empirical and theoretical discrepancies related to these ideas. As such more studies are needed and, it is argued, particular in small consultancy firms as these, by some, are seen as the ideal-types of the post-bureaucratic ideal.

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- Keywords:** Consultancy firms, knowledge-intensive firms, bureaucracy, KIF, bureaucratic hybrids, post-bureaucracy, soft-bureaucracy, autonomy, control, small-sized firms
- Purpose:** The overall purpose is to look at the degree of bureaucracy in small partnership-based consultancy firms with particular focus on how control and autonomy are exercised and how hierarchy and bureaucratic elements are constructed and interpreted.
- Methodology:** A qualitative multiple case study approach is outlined using semi-structured interviews and other forms of data collection techniques.
- Theoretical perspectives:** The research aims, among others, to contribute to the discussion on the idea of bureaucratic hybrids as the best form organizing knowledge-intensive firms and in particular in small consultancy firms.
- Practical perspectives:** The study can be of value to managers and consultants alike – not only in small consultancy firms – but also in large consultancies as well as knowledge-intensive firms in general.

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Background

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him¹.

The world has changed since Marx & Engels wrote their famous “Communist Manifesto”. The nature of the work is different, the workers themselves have changed and the world of business has changed. One may easily question if, in particular in the Western world, it makes sense to talk of a proletariat and of continuing class struggles as the decline of the classical manufacturing industries and the rise of service sector jobs and more knowledge-intensive jobs has made for new bred of educated workers (Bryson et al. 1997; Sandberg & Targama 2007) although these can also be interpreted as being a new form of educated, knowledgeable 'post-industrial middle class' (Reed 1996) with a historically unprecedented level of bargaining power connected to their level of expertise. This development has made for new ways of exercising governance and control with ideas such as bureaucratic-hybrids, post-bureaucracy, adhocracy etc. being hailed, by some, as the new grail of organizing the flourishing bred of 'knowledge-workers' seemingly in an attempt at buying in to the 'post-modernistic' focus on endless autonomy, 'inner directed' individuality, self-realization and self-management (Harvey 1989).

One may therefore argue that we are now living in a post-industrial world where knowledge is the new economy – an economy that is especially seen as the key competitive force of the western societies in combating against low-wage countries such as China, India, and Brazil etc. At the core of this 'new economy', according to some, is organizations known as knowledge intensive firms (KIFs) or knowledge-based organizations (KBOs)². Examples of these types of companies include advertising, management consultancies, engineering, pharmaceutical companies, accounting, law firms etc. which are all said to have common characteristics related to the notion that knowledge is the key production factor. One should though remain sceptic of the

¹Marx & Engels (2004, p. 12)

²In the following I will use the term KIF instead of KOB as the former is the most used.

significance of the idea of the 'knowledge economy' or the 'knowledge age' as some describes it, as it is not apparent that the knowledge workers, e.g. engineers, technical specialist, academics, are the new ruling class running society (Donaldson 2001, p. 960). It is further not entirely clear what a KIF exactly is as it is questionable how one measures the 'intensiveness' of knowledge and especially so since the concept of 'knowledge' in itself is a problematic and debated issue (Fostenlækken et al. 2003). Arguments arises regarding for example the level of analysis where some researchers argue that knowledge is situated in the individual while others, with a more organizational focus, argues that knowledge can exist independently of the individuals e.g. through organizational routines (Empson 2001b). Much of the research can therefore, in general, be divided into two different camps namely those that view knowledge as an asset or those that view knowledge as a process (Empson 2001a). At the base of these distinctive views are the classical questions of ontology and epistemology and whether knowledge is a social construct – or reflecting an objective reality.

But what is a KIF then? Is it an organization that possesses intensive amounts of knowledge? Or is the whole idea of KIFs simply a socially constructed term (Robertson & Swan 2000) that we construct because we view the work being done in them as knowledgeable? Or are the organizations classifying themselves as being KIFs (Alvesson 2001) thereby constructing an image of the expert, knowledgeable company? One example of a definition of a KIF, presented by Alvesson, is that they are: “organizations that offer to the market the use of fairly sophisticated knowledge or knowledge-based products” (2004, p. 17). This of course raise the question of what ‘fairly sophisticated knowledge’ exactly entails as all companies use knowledge of some sort (Alvesson 2001; Kärreman et al. 2002; Legge 2002) and what is sophisticated for one might not be particular sophisticated for another. Indeed, even in what most people would recognise as a KIF one should remember that the: “actual content of much so-called knowledge work is routine information handling and service work” (Fincham 2006). With these problems of distinguishing between KIFs and non-KIFs one can though still argue that KIFs represents: “a vague but meaningful category, with sufficient heuristic value to be useful” (Alvesson 2001, p. 864) and that they are interesting enough to demand a dedicated research effort.

The importance of KIFs in the “knowledge economy” or post-industrial society can though be questioned as it can be argued that key growth areas in future employment will happen

in low-level service jobs rather than in knowledge intensive jobs where e.g. the Department for Education and Employment in the UK (DfEE 2000, quoted in Thompson et al. 2001, p. 925) estimates that only 10 percent of new jobs in the UK can be classified as knowledge work representing only a small part of the GDP. This is though a question of definitions as for example Korczynski et al. argues for changes in front-line workers and service jobs going from a notion of 'assembly workers' towards being: "depicted as an empowered, committed, responsible and skilled employee" (1996, p.72) having more similarities with the knowledge work ideal than that of routine work ideal (e.g. Frenkel et al.'s, 1998, case study of customer service representatives). Korczynski et al. (1996) do though argue that more research is needed for assessing this and one should therefore maintain a critical attitude when talking about KIFs, knowledge workers and the "knowledge economy" and its (economic) significance.

The consultancy industry

A particular form of KIFs are consultancy firms which are argued, by some researchers, to represent prime examples of KIFs (Meriläinen et al. 2004) although, given the diversity in the industry and the wide variety of different business areas e.g. technology-, change-, human resource-, management-consultancies etc. with some delivering unique services while other delivers more standardised services it can also be questioned whether all consultancies are always knowledge intensive (Robertson & Swan 1998). The diversity in business areas is though not the only element that shows the wide variety of consultancy firms as these can be categorized in different ways e.g. by the type of client-consultant relationship where Turner (1982) categorizes consultancy firms into eight different types by the purpose and way with which they interact with clients, ranging from 'providing information', over 'making recommendations based on analysis' and finally 'permanently improving organizational effectiveness'. A similar approach is presented by Schein (1988, quoted in Canback 1998, p. 6) but has a simpler distinction into only three separate categories: 1. purchase of expertise; 2. doctor-patient relationship. 3. process consultation. Another way altogether to categorize is by the type of strategy and products or services offered (Løwendahl 2001) or, in particular for small firms, for their relationship to competitors and clients where Rainnie (1989) suggest four different categories: 'being dependent' on customers and acting as a sort of sub-contractor, 'being dominated' where the company has to act in relation to what the larger competitors do, 'being isolated' where

the small company trades in niches that the larger competitors for different reasons avoid and finally 'being innovative' where small firms are often argued to be more capable of responding to changes, having a larger degree of flexibility etc.

No matter the type of service and how to categorize and distinguish the consultancy firms the core idea seems to be that of being a 'helping profession' aimed at guiding and influencing clients (Emans et. al. 2009) but this role as the 'professional helper' is though not always clear-cut as consultants may also be hired to act as 'scapegoats' or 'hit-men' providing legitimacy for (unpopular) actions in client organizations (Alvesson et al. 2006; Starbuck 1992). Also, given the intangibility of the products in which the consultants trade, their job entails a degree of image-construction or 'impressions management' (Ram 1999c) whereby they legitimatise their role and credibility by e.g. claiming special knowledge, successful track-records and the likes and as such the consultancy firm can also be defined by looking at how they are constructed in the consultant-client relationship.

The consultancy industry is therefore a diverse and heterogeneous industry and it can be as difficult to define what a 'consultancy firm' is as what a 'KIF' is. The definitions are essentially bound to be ambiguous as for example looking at the type of service delivered makes for difficulties as the consultancy firm with one client may have the role of the expertise seller as per Scheins "purchase-of-expertise" while with another client, having a well-established and long-standing relationship, the role may instead be that of process consultation. The same applies when looking at how the company is constructed as the consultancy company may have different relationship to different clients whom poses different demands and constructs the consultant in different ways.

The role of the consultancy industry

The importance of the industry, both in a societal and researcher perspective is, arguably, based in the significant position the industry and its companies fulfil for example in terms of economic significance as the consultancy industry and the related 'business advisory firms' are among the internationally fastest growing companies (Kennedy Research Group 1997, quoted in Suddaby & Greenwood 2001, p. 934) with management consulting specifically being a more than 200 billion dollar industry globally with an average growth rate exceeding 15% per year (Kennedy Information 2008, quoted in Buono & Poulfelt 2009). Another fact is that consultancy firms, especially the large international

management consultancy firm, are among the largest employers of graduates employing around 25% of graduates from leading business schools (Canback 1998) and that: “about half of the students graduating from the world's 25 top-rated business schools report 'consulting' to be their first career choice” (Stumpf 1999). Further the consultancy firms, as well as KIFs in general, can be viewed as role models to be copied by companies in other, less knowledge intensive, industries (Kärreman et al. 2002) and, especially for the management consultancies, through the services delivered seen as having a significant impact on shaping managerial thoughts throughout industries (Buono & Poulfelt 2009; Løwendahl et al. 2001). As such the consultancy industry - although being difficult to define – is seen as having a significant socio-economic impact making it an important area for research.

Research on consultancies

Buono & Poulfelt (2009) suggest the presence of four different research perspectives in the studies of the consultancy industry: the functional, the behavioural, the critical and the experience based. The functional perspective has as an underlying premise that consultants can add value to clients and describes models for how the consultant should act and how the process should be planned and implemented. The behavioural perspective is instead often seen in organizational development research with a focus on a therapeutic paradigm and having similarities to Schein's notion of a doctor-patient relationship as well as that of process consultation. The critical perspective are, as the name implies, critical of the consultancy industry and the value it claims to produce e.g. denoting consultants as 'whore's in stripes' (Jackall 1988, quoted in Alvesson 2004, p. 198), 'witchdoctors' or 'merchants of meaning trading in words' (Czarniawska-Joerges 1988, quoted in Alvesson 2001, p. 871). The last perspective, the experience-based, covers researchers working or having worked as consultants and drawing on their experience in describing how different types of problems may be solved, how consultants should act etc. Being somewhat akin to the functional perspective this perspective is though, according to Buono & Poulfelt, different in that it covers a more reflective and often introspective approach by the researcher-consultants.

It is noteworthy that much of the critical perspective on the consultancy industry to a high extent comes from 'pure' academics (Alvesson & Johansson 2003, p. 229) focusing on the work these type of firms perform, the claimed impact their services have, the assessment

of consultancy ideas and the techniques and rhetoric being employed to trick or convince clients, as well as society in general, of their worth (Fincham & Clark 2003, p. 9). This critical outlook – as well as the variety of researcher perspectives – has led some researchers to argue for a more neutral and reflexive approach (Salaman 2002, p. 247) which not only challenges the underlying assumptions of the industry but also those of the different research-perspectives.

Research on small consultancies

Interestingly the research being done is, to a large extent, focused on large international management consultancy firms (Robertson & Swan 2003; Werr & Stjernberg 2003) where the industry is treated as a homogeneous mass (Alvesson & Robertson 2006) even in the light of the huge variety of business areas, type of client relationships etc. The large global management consultancies do, to some extent, represent a significant portion of the industry earnings (Fincham & Clark 2003) but viewed in terms of number of employees the case is different as small consultancy firms represents a major percentage of the overall employees in the consultancy sector. The UK 1991 Census of Employment, for example, showed that over 80 per cent of jobs in most types of consultancy were in offices with less than ten staff and that an estimated 77 per cent of the UK management consultancy companies employed 12 or fewer professionals (quoted in Wood 2003, p. 55). Furthermore the segment of small businesses operating in the service industry has, especially during the 80s and 90s, boomed with continuing growth while most other sectors have stagnated (Ram 1999c) to the extent that the small- and medium-sized consultancies in the UK were found to represent over half of the earnings in the industry (Morrison 1998, quoted in Robertson & Swan 2003, p. 834).

The research being done on small businesses has focused primarily on the 'low-skill' manufacturing sector while the few studies of small consultancies has typically focused on more quantitative research outlining demographic features, growth patterns, spatial arrangements, business development etc. (Ram 1999c) and as such more in-depth, qualitative studies is needed on these type of firms (notable exceptions are Markham 1996; Ram 1999c; Reveley et al. 2004). It is not clear what the reason is for the lack of (qualitative) research on small consultancy firms compared to that of their larger counterparts. It may be that researchers have better access to large consultancy firms, it may be that there are more prestige or career opportunities for doing research in these

type of firms and that it is easier getting articles published in the right places when the subject of study are 'international, large management consultancies'. It could though also be that the lack of focus on small consultancies represents a trend in social academic research where small businesses generally have received little attention as the large corporations have been seen as the drivers for economic development and the historic place for major class struggles (Scase 1995).

Apart from their numbers small consultancies should also be interesting cases for research in that the researcher might here be able to examine processes and structures which can be further referenced in order to understand the dynamics in larger organizations (Scase 1995) i.e. one may, as Maina and Pedersen (2009) argues in their case, examine bureaucracy in the making in a young, small consultancy firm something which can potentially provide new vistas for interpretations and understanding on processes of bureaucratization in larger organizations. Another argument for why small consultancies are interesting research subjects is their special characteristics as e.g. Starbuck raises the argument that small KIFs, such as consultancy firms, are the purest form of knowledge intensive firms: "KIFs tend to lose knowledge intensity as they grow. This is because KIFs grow by adding more support staffs than experts, adding activities, products or services with the aim of increasing profitability per expert, or using experts more efficiently or extracting more value from the expertise already in-house" (1992, p. 728) and "when support staff come to outnumber experts greatly or when KIFs claim expertise in too many domains, KIFs lose their halos of expertise and their credibility" (ibid, p. 737). The argument made by Starbuck is though only correct if one defines knowledge-intensiveness by the number of experts compared to support staff and administrative personnel where e.g. Maina & Pedersen (2009) found in their case study of a small consultancy firm that the partners of the company complained about lack of administrative staff resulting in the partners using their time on the administrative tasks hence having less time available for what is supposed to be the more knowledge-intensive work. Still the point made by Starbuck is valid to the extent that there are differences between large and small KIFs when comparing the workforce and the percentage of working professionals in comparison to other type of staff. Whether or not this necessarily makes for a purer form of knowledge intensive firm is, in my opinion, debatable.

In summary I would argue that, given the significant number of small consultancies

combined with the fact that these type of firms have special characteristics, small consultancies represents an important area of research – and especially so given the lack of research focusing on these type of firms.

Problematization

Consultancy firms, as well as KIFs in general, have been argued to have specific characteristics that represent unique challenges for management in terms of governing the knowledge workers. The characteristics often highlighted are intangibility of their output (Mills et al. 1983) as this varies from client to client and what is purchased is: “a capacity to produce rather than a product” (Winch & Schneider 1993, p. 926) which again makes for inseparability between production and consumption i.e. most services delivered by consultancy firms cannot be stored. Further the consultancy firms are often, as said, engaged in 'impression management', selling reputation and trust in what they can and will deliver, a process which is further enhanced in that the evaluation of the services delivered, by the clients or the consultants themselves, are often ambiguous without a clear cause and effect relationship between delivery and impact in the client organization. As such the quality assessment is difficult as the: “service is intangible, results are hard to predict, and the client can judge only in retrospect” (Nees et al., 1985 p. 69) and even in retrospect it can become a question of opinions and internal politics of the client organization.

All of this has led to the rise of knowledge management as a: “particular perspective on how organisational resources and especially the key one in the form of humans are being managed or at least how management tries to access or control them” (Alvesson et al. 2004, p. 166). At the heart of these challenges is the apparent fact that the production means are in the mind of the employees and that these type of companies only have the: “expertise of their staff as assets with which to trade” (Winch & Schneider 1993, p. 923) making for situations in which there are discrepancies between the power bases of management and the workers i.e. the knowledge worker may easily be more educated or specialized than the manager as observed by Løwendahl: “expertise is multidimensional, is frequently not linked to seniority and administrative experience, and operational authority may be unrelated to hierarchical position” (2000, p.95). As these knowledge workers are often aware of their importance they are claimed to favour a high degree of

autonomy and hence the management of them can be metaphorically described as “herding wild cats” (Løwendahl 2000; Minzberg 1998) with a prevalent notion seemingly being that the knowledge workers should be: “managed as volunteers, not as employees” (Alvesson 2004, p. 142) and management: “should be based on consultation and not command, and its content consists of information and advice not instructions and decisions” (Ibid, p. 131). Further the characteristics of knowledge-intensive work support this with its non-routine characteristic making for high cost of supervising something which makes a high degree of autonomy combined with self-monitoring much more efficient in economic terms (Fama & Jensen 1983) and as such the consultants - or knowledge workers - are seen as assets to be nurtured, guided, motivated – and (self)-controlled - rather than as cost to be minimized (Robertson & Swan 2004)

Bureaucratic hybrids

In general KIFs are seen to have two overall goals, namely attracting and retaining knowledge workers – through providing motivation, autonomy, identity etc. - and promoting innovation and creativity i.e. producing outstanding services (Newell et al. 2002, p. 24). The combination of these two inter-connected goals has caused a number of different organizational set-ups to emerge e.g. the network-based organization, the matrix organization, the learning organization, the flexiform model (Mills et al. 1983) which all caters to the notion of being more loosely coupled with a high degree of autonomy for the employees thereby believed to be promoting innovation and creativity - as well as - the retention and motivation of the employees. Underlying this is the classic idea of the adhocracy as put forth by Minzberg (1979, quoted in Legge 2002, p. 76) which is seen as the way to cope with the managerial challenges presented by a knowledgeable workforce even to the extent that some researchers claim that all KIFs entail a form of 'operating adhocracy' (Winch & Schneider 1993, p. 935).

The movement towards organizations with more adhocratic characteristics has led researchers to classify these new forms as bureaucratic hybrids - or more specifically - as 'post-bureaucracies' where “empowered and committed employees work as equal partners, free of the constraints of bureaucratic formality” (Grey & Garsten 2001, p. 237) or 'soft bureaucracies' where the assumption is that “soft controls, soft management practices and policies have supplanted hierarchical and bureaucratic control, and that entrepreneurial form of governance is pervasive” (Courpasson 2000, p. 142). Apart from

being fuelled by the characteristics of KIFs and the apparent demand for autonomy from the knowledge workers another important aspect behind these ideas is an increasing critique of the classic rational and rule-based idea of bureaucracy which, although having been recognized: “as *the* central process of and structure characterizing 20th-century 'organization'” (Courpasson & Reed 2004, p.6), is increasingly seen as being out-of-date in comparison to contemporary demand (Courpasson & Dany 2003). This idea especially caught hold through the 80s and 90s and was promoted by a number of academics as well as by different guru's e.g. the idea of corporate culturism by Peters and Waterman (1982) which can be seen as one particular anti-bureaucratic movement (Grey & Garsten 2001) in combination with the 'fast capitalist story' (Gee et al. 1995, quoted in Grey & Garsten 2001, p. 237) covering the idea that the world is changing in ever rapid ways making for the necessity of new ways to adapt to this 'new reality'.

The critique of the bureaucratic idea does though go back much further where for instance the French sociologist Michel Crozier in his book *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* from 1964 talked of bureaucracy as meaning: “the maladaptions, the inadequacies, or... the dysfunctions which necessarily develop within human organizations” (p.3, quoted in Riggs 1979, p. 575) and of the 'bureaucratic vicious circle' (p. 187, quoted in Abernethy & Stoelwinder 1995, p. 2) where attempts in organizations to impose bureaucratic means of control made for new attempts by professionals in evading these controls which again made for more administrative controls and so on and so forth. In essence much of the critique can also be seen as leading back to Frederick Taylor's idea of scientific management which came to be seen as an unethical rationalized system something gaining further weight with the horrors of holocaust intertwined as this was with a formal bureaucratic, rational system.

Bureaucracy has therefore, in general, gotten a bad reputation as a static form of organizing that directly inhibits the survival of the organization by suppressing creativity, innovation and the flourishing of its members. It has come to be seen as a form that is filled with in-efficiency, rules, red-tape and which, at its core, is amoral, seeking only to dominate and exploits its members through a dehumanized rational system. As a dinosaur that is not modern and generally not fitting to the dynamic, chaotic, fast-changing, globalized and complex world that we live in. This critical view of bureaucracy has become so widespread that one, in the words of du Gay, can talk of an epochal schema in which

bureaucracy is: “reduced to a simple and abstract set of negativities contrasted with an equally simple and abstracted, but positively coded, set of 'entrepreneurial' principles” (2003, p. 673). Further fuelling this view is also the different understandings of the word 'bureaucracy' where e.g. Riggs (1979) identifies 11 different meanings of the word from office-holders to rule-by-officials to the bureaucratic society. Another relevant problem that he highlights is the usage of mixing nouns and adverbs where for example to be 'bureaucratic' is often used synonymously with the noun 'bureaucracy' and mostly in a negative sense. This confusion of meanings and usage of noun and adverbs has arguably muddled the discussion and made for a situation where an abstract set of negativities can easily be attached to what is an apparent diffuse term.

The one-sided critique of bureaucracy combined with the confusion of its meaning has paved the way for the new forms of organizing such as the idea of 'post-bureaucracy' which, in essence, is mostly described as an opposite i.e. not being the: “stereotypical images of the creaking, paper-driven, inflexible and inefficient bureaucracy” (Hodgson 2004, p. 83) and can, as such, easily be argued to be a diffuse and unsatisfactory term. At the core of these ideas is reduction of formal levels of hierarchy, lack of life-time career system, a more permeable boundary between inside and outside the organization (Grey & Garsten 2001) and the idea of flexibility, worker autonomy and self-management in combination with soft control systems rather than rule-following. All of these characteristics are seen as promoting creativity and innovation something which, as said, is perceived as a necessity for motivating and retaining the (demanding) knowledge workers as well as securing organizational competitiveness and survival on the global marketplace.

It is though worth remembering that bureaucracy is not necessarily 'bad' and that much of the critique, arguably, is off-point. Bureaucracy is, at its core, a rational system which, in comparison to its historic predecessors, have significant benefits for example in form of removing particularism or nepotism and securing legitimate use of managerial power in the interest of the organization (Courpasson 2000). As such one should heed the fact that the rules of which the bureaucracy is built are not good or bad but rather they: “protect as much as they restrict; coordinate as much as they block; orientate effort as much as they limit it....; allow diversity as much as they restrict it” (Perrow 1986 p. 26, quoted in

Courpasson 2000, p. 157)³.

Control in post-bureaucracies

Perhaps the most distinguishing element of the 'new' bureaucratic hybrids is the issue of control of workers which is often seen to be softer and more focused on ideology and identity moving away from the traditional bureaucratic assumption that: "control is achieved by designing and applying appropriate structures, procedures, measures and targets" (Alvesson & Robertson 2006 p. 195). This has caused for the ideas of guiding workers through the use of organizational culture, missions and visions and in general for a number of different types of control to be coined connected to the idea of a form of ideational, ethical and moral form of control e.g. clan-control (Ouchi 1979), normative control, concertive control (Barker 1993), identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Alvesson & Robertson 2006), human resource management and aspirational control (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007b), socialization through client-interaction (Anderson-Gough et al. 2000) and so on. The basic idea of many of these 'new' forms of control is that the (knowledge) workers should buy into the identity and values of the organization to the extent that they can be allowed a large degree of autonomy and still be expected to 'self-manage' and act for the benefit of the organization. The control is therefore not necessarily explicit but is instead exercised through expectations, discourses, values etc. Or as Deetz puts it: "the modern business of management is often managing the "insides" – the hopes, fears, and aspirations – of workers, rather than their behaviors directly" (1995, p. 87, quoted in Alvesson & Willmott 2002, p. 620).

In a sense there is therefore a division between on the one hand behavioural control and on the other hand that of a sort of 'mind-control' or 'management of meaning' where the workers attitudes are directly affected. Alvesson & Kärreman (2004) describe this in the framework of technocratic and socio-ideological forms of control with the former being the classic bureaucratic use of output measurement, standardisation, guidelines etc. which is: "exercised through output control (through focus on various key performance indicators, such as profit, sales, and quality measurements) or through behavioural control (such as direct supervision, rules, standard operating procedures, and business policies)" (2004, p. 425). The socio-ideological control is, on the other hand, defined as: "efforts to persuade

³For a further discussion defending the idea of bureaucracy see du Gay *In praise of bureaucracy* (2000)

people to adapt to certain values, norms and ideas about what is good, important, praiseworthy etc. in terms of work and organizational life” (ibid, p. 426). Underlying this idea of 'soft', socio-ideological forms of control is, as said, the basic assumption that knowledge workers want autonomy and that this is good for retention, motivation and innovation.

The academic discussion of control in bureaucratic hybrids has made for two different schools (Hodgson 2004) with on the one hand those who believe that soft controls have supplanted the rational forms of control connected to hierarchy and bureaucracy thereby ushering a new epoch of organizations. An example of this is Ouchi's (1979) contingency-like framework of four different forms of control (output & behaviour measurement, clan control etc.) where the 'right' form of control is dependent on the ability to measure outputs and the knowledge of the transformation process. The other school sees the 'softer forms' of control as being intertwined with the bureaucratic-rational form of controls where e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman finds that: “socio-ideological control is thus intimately tied to bureaucracy and output control. It is not, as claimed by most of the literature on control, an alternative to the latter two” (2004, p. 441).

The idea of new forms of ideologically-based forms of control - and maybe in particular that of intertwined forms of control - has led several researchers to critically point out that managerial control has become even more advanced and encompassing so that the post-bureaucratic form of control is stricter than the rational control in classic bureaucracies. Barker (1993) for example concludes on his famous study of concertive control in self-managed teams that the: “powerful combination of peer pressure and rational rules in the concertive system creates a new iron cage whose bars are almost invisible to the workers it incarcerates” (p. 435). In line with this is also Courpasson & Clegg (2006) who talks of the key characteristic of the new hybrid organizations being an: “iron fist of strong and centralized control mechanism, wrapped up in the velvet glove of consent” (p. 324). In connection to this idea of an all-embracing form of control is also what can be seen as the 'control revolution' during the 80s and 90s with new social technologies that carried with them new forms of surveillance and measurements e.g. through ideas such as total quality management, business process re-engineering, performance appraisal measurements and so on (Reed 1996).

It is though important to remember that control works both ways i.e. from management to

workers but also from workers to management through for example expectations, through organizational identity etc. Further ideological control is not necessarily a strategically constructed managerial tool but rather one can imagine a: “spectrum of forms of implementation of ideological control. At the one extreme, the agent of ideological control is reproducing ideas that he or she takes for granted and do not reflect upon – in this case the controller is him – or herself also controlled, and it is questionable if this is a case of (conscious) management control. At the other extreme, the agent is manipulating – proposing ideals and values that he/she himself does not believe in as means for influencing others” (Alvesson & Kärreman 2004, p. 426).

Another thing to keep in mind when looking at control, as discussed by Maina & Pedersen (2009), is also the use of the actual word e.g. that control is often connected to power, to force being exercised and to making subjects do specific actions. This is therefore, to some extent, presupposing a rational, intent act which often does not take into regard that the act may not be conscious as argued by Alvesson & Kärreman. A valid discussion is therefore whether one should talk of influence instead of talking of 'control' as this word has somewhat less negative connotations and to some degree also implies the fact that control/influence works both ways i.e. workers influencing managers, clients influencing workers and managers etc. where 'power-influence-plays' are part of all interactions in line with Tannenbaum's interpretation of organizational control as: “the sum of interpersonal influence relations in an organization” (1968, quoted in Ouchi 1979, p. 833). Along these lines of thought is also the relevant discussion by Grey & Garsten (2001) on the connection between control in post-bureaucracies on the one hand and trust as a social process and specific form of power that renders people and events predictable on the other hand. As this shows there are different ways of looking at a term such as 'control' as it is intertwined in complex social interactions and systems permeated by elements of power, influence, trust etc.

The question of autonomy

At the core of the discussion of control is the question of how to manage the employees' autonomy something which are claimed, by some, to be: “the most essential skill in managing professionals in organizations” (Raelin 1989, p.227). This question of autonomy is intertwined with the level and type of control and is often seen as a balancing act e.g. the question of how to: “mediate possible tensions between autonomy and control”

(Alvesson & Robertson 2006, p. 198) or balancing: “autonomy with control and uncertainty and flexibility with efficiency” (Robertson & Swan 2003, p. 831). Put in other words it can also be seen as the classic question that organizational scholars has been looking at for the last decades namely how organizations can be: “both simultaneously innovative (‘Organic structure work best’) and yet be able to implement and even control these innovations (‘bureaucratic structures work best’)” (Courpasson 2000, p. 141).

It is though worth to be critical of the idea of knowledge workers automatically craving autonomy as e.g. Bailyn (1985) found in her interviews with industrial scientist that only 5 out of the 30 interviewed expressed that they were directly seeking autonomy. A reason for this might be the fact that autonomy often goes hand in hand with expectations and responsibility thereby helping to maintain a form of control (or influence) over the knowledge worker. This is for example shown in two of the firms studied by Alvesson & Robertson where they conclude that these had: “only very loosely monitored utilization rates, promoting a sense of 'genuine' autonomy which also served to reinforce the idea that one belonged to an elite group” (2006, p. 212) and as such the sense of autonomy directly affected the elite-identity of the consultants which further enhanced the notion of self-management. One should therefore always keep in mind that the question of autonomy versus control is not an either-or question but that these elements can also reinforce each other and make for situations with high degrees of control as well as high degrees of autonomy. This is further shown in Markham's (1996) study of a small design firm with a high level of autonomy and self-direction combined with tight control and expectations by management of the final product - a combination which made for the designers to crave directions from management as the employees knew that they, in the end, were responsible for the product they delivered. The designers, even if they had a high degree of autonomy were they could choose freely how to solve a clients problem, felt this as an even tighter control as it resulted in the: “contradiction between the message of 'do whatever you like' and 'the feeling in the back of your head' that doing whatever you like will most likely result in an explosive encounter” (1996, p. 408). The popular story of knowledge-workers craving autonomy is therefore not necessarily true as it depends on the context in which this autonomy is available.

One problem in the discussion of control and autonomy is that the word 'autonomy' is often used uncritically and in a very general way. Raelin (1989) for instance presents a

distinction of three forms of autonomy namely strategic or institutional autonomy, administrative autonomy and finally operational autonomy. These distinctions covers whether the employee have the right to select goals (strategic autonomy), the right – and responsibility – for managing activities within a unit (administrative autonomy) and finally, at the operational level, whether there is the freedom to select how to reach a specific goal while operating under administrative and strategic constraints. Although these distinctions are a bit simplistic - as one would often expect the boundaries between the different forms to become blurred - it is still useful for realizing some of the various forms autonomy may take. In the aforementioned study by Markham it could for example be argued that the employees had almost complete autonomy on the operational as well as partly on the administrative level but that they had very low degree of strategic autonomy making for the situation where they experienced this as strict control.

A critical look at 'post-bureaucracy'

The, according to some, paradigmatic shift from the bureaucratic organizations towards an adhocratic, post-bureaucratic way of organizing raises the question whether or not this is actually a real change or whether it is simply new terms invented to describe and embody contemporary critique of the bureaucratic idea fitting well with ideas such as the knowledge economy, the rapid change in the globalized world and the idea of heightened individualism or expressivism which, especially in the Western world, has been argued to go counter to the inherently rational bureaucratic form in what is often described as the (narcissistic) post-modern world (Casey 2004).

The idea of post-bureaucracy, as described mainly in opposites of bureaucracy, leads back to the most used form of the word 'bureaucracy' which is the classic ideal-type put forth by Max Weber (1978) who described this as a centralized, impersonal and rational-legal based system of authority with more efficiency than the forms that historically preceded it⁴. Often missing the point here is the fact that Weber is putting forth an *ideal-type* which is not heuristically grounded and which per definition does not exist. Further an important point, when looking at contemporary critique of bureaucracy, is the fact that Weber's ideal has been created in a particular historic context: “because the ideal type was a construct from a highly specific place and time, it would have been odd for later and different

⁴ In Weber's analysis that of 'traditional' and 'charismatic' domination

realities to correspond to it” (Courpasson & Clegg 2006, p. 322). As such one can question whether or not the bureaucratic hybrids – e.g. post-bureaucracy or soft-bureaucracy - explains something new or whether it is simply terms covering forms which also existed when Weber made his famous ideal-type. It is for example notable that the idea of self-managed teams existed long before becoming a trend (Barker 1993) and that the use of clan control have always been mixed with bureaucratic control in professional partnerships (Hanlon 2004) indicating that at least some of the 'soft' control-systems connected to the idea of the post-bureaucratic organization existed long before this term became popular.

Even if 'post-bureaucracies' have existed for a long time it can though still be that the characteristics associated with this form have become more widespread so that these elements are now present in a variety of organizations in different industries something which may be due to an improvement in the education of the workforce as well as the need to work more with knowledge i.e. more and more firms becoming more and more knowledge-intensive. The idea of the bureaucratic hybrids which are more flexible, innovative and which empowers the workers and provide them with a high degree of autonomy is in essence a positive story that goes opposite to all the negativities associated with the classic bureaucratic ideal. Common assertions is that the high degree of autonomy and entrepreneurial governance makes the work more pleasurable and that the new form of governance and self-management creates a room for self-improvement, self-realisation etc. for the employees (Robertson & Swan 2004). It is though also wise to be critical of this positive outlook as it one the one hand makes empowered and committed employees but at the same time, as described, this also goes hand in hand with responsibility and expectations further heightening the strain on the employees. It further presents, in the words of Grey & Garsten, an “anxiety-provoking dystopia in which the anonymous forces of global competition threaten ruin” (2001, p. 237) something which has been strengthened by the apparent lack of stable career patterns making for an individualised marketplace in which it is every worker for him- or her-self competing in the permanently shifting job-situation.

In summary I believe that the question should not be whether or not Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy is on retreat especially since it, as said, has never been heuristically grounded. Rather I agree with Hall who said that “bureaucracy in general thus may be viewed as a matter of degree, rather than of kind” (1963, p. 37). What is interesting then is

whether there has been a general change to this 'matter of degree' when looking at the rise of KIFs and consultancy firms. This is something which has been examined in a number of case studies that have looked at the level of bureaucratization⁵ in KIFs. Most of the findings from these are, surprisingly, in stark contrast to the general idea of the ideal-type KIF being loosely structured in a post-bureaucratic way with high degrees of autonomy for the members and a low degree of bureaucracy.

The case study by Kärreman et al. (2002) for example, of two large KIFs, namely a management consultancy firm and a pharmaceutical company, showed that especially the notion of these firms representing a trend of debureaucratization and adhocracy was off point. Their study shows instead that managerial control and bureaucratic modes of operation is very present something which they interpret as 'selective bureaucratization' in that this: "only indirectly and marginally affects core work, while administrative and planning matters are tightened up to a stronger degree" (2002, p. 88). In line with this is the study of an expert consultancy firm by Robertson & Swan (1998) where they also found an increased bureaucratization and formalization in seemingly contrast to the direct wishes of both management and the consultants who all saw a need of maintaining a high degree of autonomy: "even in this expert consultancy, where people constantly referred to the importance of retaining a flexible, communication-intensive mode of organizing, this was hard to sustain" (1998, pp. 561-562) leading them to speculate that if there is a paradigm shift in organizing - e.g. towards soft- or post-bureaucracy - this could be towards a form that is inherently fragile. This fragility is also present in the study of Barker (1993) on the introduction of self-managed teams in a small manufacturing company in the telecommunication industry. In the beginning the control is team- and value-based but as time passes Barkers study shows that the normative rules becomes formalized and rationalized to the extent that one can talk of living rules taking on: "their own rationality and legitimacy" (1993, p. 429) and making for an even stronger 'iron cage' of control.

These studies to some extent mirrors the findings of Maina & Pedersen (2009) who, in their case study of a small consultancy firm, showed how the company underwent a process of introducing hierarchy and bureaucratic measures related to the wishes of growth of the company. Contrary to the findings of Kärreman et al. the bureaucratization in

⁵ As said Riggs (1979) have highlighted the problematic usage of noun and adverbs when talking of bureaucracy. When I use 'bureaucratization' this is to be seen as a higher degree of bureaucracy i.e. nearing the bureaucratic ideal. This is not to be seen as something negative in itself.

the study of Maina & Pedersen more directly affected the work processes of the consultants especially related to how the consultants were supposed to engage with clients with the overall aim of increasing efficiency and creating a uniform, high quality output. Maina & Pedersen argues that the reason for this difference in bureaucratization is due to the several factors. For one is what is seen by management as a necessity of strictly managing resources which are scarce and crucial for the survival of a small and young consultancy company. Another reason is the aim of growth in itself combined with the type of products and services delivered which are characterized as being 'solution based problem solving' (Løwendahl 2000) with some degree of standardization being possible and hence making for a situation where management sees more standardized work processes as a means of growing the company both by enabling quicker introduction of new employees and by ensuring a high quality work output: "challenges of growth have triggered the management to enforce a more structural control both through the hierarchical organizational setup as well as the different bureaucratic measures" (Maina & Pedersen 2009, p. 53).

These findings go against the ideal of KIFs being adhocratic organizations with a low level of bureaucracy. This may signal a change towards a trend of bureaucratization in KIFs in general as well as in consultancy firms specifically something which could be seen as the result of a trend in knowledge management of making knowledge explicit as argued by Donaldson: "much of what is occurring in knowledge-intensive organizations is an increase in the formal rationality of their knowledge accompanied by increasing bureaucratization. This is seen in consulting firms where the knowledge of individual consultants is being written down (made explicit) in prescribed formats (codification) according to set procedures for recording and retrieval (bureaucratization)." (2001, p. 957). This trend is seemingly being driven by the realization of knowledge as a key competitive factor combined with advances in IT such as intranets, data-gathering and data-warehousing technologies (Dunford 2000).

It could though also reflect wider circumstances such as increased competition, growth and mergers between consulting firms which again may stem from a wish to provide services to global clients operating internationally. This is indicated by the case study by Ferner et al. of one of the 'Big Six' where they find that: "The external challenges facing *Business Service* were resulting in an increasing formalization of management control

through budgeting, appraisal, and even dismissal... The stagnation of the market in the late 1980s provided the trigger for a greater formalization of management control” (1995, p. 348). This is also supported by Robertson & Swan who, in their study of a UK-based high-tech scientific consultancy company, found that the global recession and the connected economic problems in the firm caused it to move from: “adhocracy to something resembling a mediated adhocracy” (2004, p. 138). Further their study showed that the process of going public for a consultancy company resulted in the introduction of hierarchy, centralization of power and a performance measurement system thereby enhancing the bureaucratization of the company which - if a general trend - could indicate that most large consultancy companies are becoming more bureaucratic as these to a large extent have been going public during the last decades to the extent that almost 40% are public corporations (Greenwood & Empson 2003).

These findings fit well with the study of Hanlon on how control and institutional features have shifted over the last 100-150 years in professional service firms where he finds that the firms have: “used a mixture of controls for most of the 150 or so years of their existence. Certainly they have relied on the elongated socialization of personnel, but they have also made extensive use of bureaucratic controls” (2004, p. 189) hence supporting the idea of intertwined forms of control. In his examination of the historic changes he finds that the period 1920-1980 saw a form of collegiate professionalism with a partial strengthening of the clan form (Ouchi 1979) while the 1980s and onwards have seen a tendency to bring bureaucratic controls back. There are a number of reasons for this development and, among others, Hanlon highlights the recession in the 70s, the development towards a globalized marketplace as well as a professionalization of clients purchasing policies through a new strand of professional managers. All this made for an increase in pressure that again made for demands of a more commercial, entrepreneurial way of acting that had the effect that these firms moved: “away from aspects of the clan organizational structure and adopted more bureaucratic results. Thus today, unlike in the era of collegiate professionalism, firms rigorously measure individual performance.” (2004, p. 202).

It is therefore clear that the socio-economic context in which the company operates to a large extent can affect the organizational structure of the firm in line with Donaldson's observation of an increasing trend towards: “formal rationality in organizations, through

increasing bureaucratization, spurred by increasing size, technology and professionalization of administration” (2001, p. 956). It may therefore be that the notion of KIFs and consultancies being 'operating adhocracies' is merely related to the context and time in which this idea was coined e.g. the companies benefiting from growing markets and booming demand for services reflected in the growth of (management) consultancies making for a looser, adhocratic way of organizing. The notion of increased bureaucratization in KIFs and consultancy firms can though also be due to the specific type of firms studied where it is noteworthy that the studies of Ferner et al. (1995), Kärreman et al. (2002) and Robertson & Swan (1998 and 2004) focuses on large KIFs and not on their smaller counterparts as well as on consultancies in particular. This is especially interesting as the literature suggest that the age of the organization (Rockness & Shields 1984) as well as bigger size leads to more bureaucracy (Greenwood & Empson 2003; Robertson & Swan 2004) because of increase in support staff and specialist professionals making for division of labour - or in other words: “size also involves greatly increased coordination requirements which either foster the need for full time managers or need for sophisticated constraint systems limiting the autonomy of the professionals” (Løwendahl 2000, p. 135). Further the trend of making knowledge explicit and codified through the use of technology-based knowledge systems could support this as one could hypothesize that these systems in particular are present in large companies due to the economies of scale in these organizations (Greenwood & Empson 2003).

It may therefore be that part of the reason for the picture of bureaucratization in KIFs and consultancies that these case studies show is due to the fact that the research has focused on large organizations instead of the numerous small organizations that, as said, in particular within the consultancy industry represents an under-researched area. This is further particular noteworthy in so much as these small firms are not only argued to represent the purest form of KIFs (Starbuck 1982) but also to be: “good examples of post-bureaucratic organizational form, characterized as they are by relatively few layers of hierarchy, flexibility, a degree of participation in decision-making and loose career structures” (Alvesson & Robertson 2006, p. 197). Further they are claimed to typically being: “very loosely structured around self-formed and self-managed project team working” (ibid, p. 198) and generally being organized differently than large consultancies, operating in a more informal manner with a more 'familial' culture and with relations being complex and negotiated (Moule 1998) often in the form of fraternalism where managers work

alongside employees and where employer strategies: “emphasize the overriding importance of identification and nurture interpersonal relations accordingly, with differentiation between employer and employee being defined as inevitable but nevertheless subsidiary or secondary element in the relationship” (Scase 1995, p. 587). Also they are often characterised by having more specialised services, more dependency on clients as well as being highly people dependent (Alvesson & Robertson 2006) with fewer (economic) resources and a more centralized decision system.

Small consultancies also tend to be organized in partnerships more often than their larger counterparts (Greenwood & Empson 2003) where the partnership form, as a particular form of governance, has been argued to be particularly suited to management of knowledge workers supported by the fact that it is the most used governance form in the consultancy industry - although also being a under-researched organizational form (Hinings et al. 1991). The reason for its suitability for organizations with knowledge workers is the fact of having the distribution of authority institutionalized in the ownership structure where several owner-managers are all residual claimants in the organizations therefore having a economic incentive as a motivating factor – both in relation to their own work – but also for mutual monitoring and assisting in the actions of other partners as they are equally liable for their mistakes. This is believed to create an ideal setting for autonomy as the motivation for the individual partner is implicit in the ownership structure making, in particular in small partnerships, for a form of clan-, peer- or collegial form of control which relates to the idea of small firms being good examples of the post-bureaucratic form. As such it is typical in small partnership firms that the decision-management (initiating and implementing decisions) and decision-control (ratifying and monitoring decisions) are concentrated in most of the partners as these are all sufficiently knowledgeable to participate efficiently (Fama & Jensen 1983).

Another element in the partnership form is the apprentice system where juniors are under the tutelage of more experienced partners connected to the up-or-out system that is normally an integrated part i.e. that you either become partner after some years or you leave the company. This creates a hierarchical pyramid structure where the norm is a large amount of non-partners all striving to become partners but with only the select few reaching this stage. This hierarchical system is though not necessarily as prevalent in small firms given the small amount of people as for example Morris & Pinnington (1998)

found that the up-or-out system where more common in large than in small firms in the UK thereby providing further support for the idea that adhocracy could be prevalent in small (partnership based) consultancy firms.

Summary

The last decades has seen the rise of bureaucratic hybrids - such as soft- and post-bureaucracies - all being hailed as the new form of organizing which fits the characteristics of knowledge work, the needs of knowledge workers as well as the general needs of an individualised society. It is, as shown, though not clear whether this is a real change or whether it is just new terms explaining something already existing. It is also not clear whether it is simply an utopian ideal promoted by academics and guru's alike without sufficient empirical foundation as there, as shown, have been several case studies highlighting a higher than expected level of bureaucratization particularly in large KIFs and consultancies.

Courpasson & Reed claims that it is: "in exactly the type of conditions prevailing in 'knowledge-intensive sectors' that we might expect the 'post-bureaucratic/network organization' thesis to be at the zenith of its explanatory powers" (2004, p. 9). I do not disagree with them but I believe that one can be more specific and say that it is particular in small partnership-based consultancies that we might expect this. These organizations, as discussed, are severely under-researched yet at the same time also represent a significant part of the employees and earnings in the consultancy industry. Further they are claimed to represent the epitome of the adhocratic, post-bureaucratic form catering to workers autonomy combined with the use of peer or collegial forms of control. They therefore represent an important area of study which can contribute to the discussion of the thesis of 'bureaucratic hybrids' as well as a more nuanced discussion of control and autonomy. As such there is both theoretical – and empirical – basis for a study focused on these elements in small partnership-based consultancies.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to look at the degree of bureaucracy in small partnership-based consultancy companies and how this connects to the ideas of bureaucratic hybrids in particular that of post- and soft-bureaucracy. I will focus on the following question:

- How is control and autonomy exercised in these organizations?
- How is hierarchy and bureaucratic elements constructed and interpreted in these organization?

As for the notion of 'small consultancy' I estimate an offset point of <20 full-time employees. This is an arbitrarily fixed number as the definition of 'smallness' is bound to be ambiguous (Scase 1995) differing for example with the type of consultancy and its products or services, with different sizes being the norm in different countries and with the question of how to include freelance and temporary employees etc. I am not looking at small sub-divisions of larger consultancy firms but solely independent, small consultancy firms and as such believe that less than 20 full-time employees fits well. Another criteria, based on the fact that the study is focused on control and autonomy, is that there should be minimum size of the company and for this I arbitrarily estimate a minimum of 5 full-time employees.

Methodological considerations

Planning a research study and selecting the best methods in order to address the purpose is bound to provide difficulties as the method choice not only depends on the purpose and research questions but also on the object to be studied and issues such as availability of the persons or organizations one wishes to research. Further the choice of methods is not only the selection of specific data-gathering techniques but also reflects a particular epistemological stance of the researcher (Perren & Ram 2004).

With an outset in the research purpose of this study I have decided to pursue a qualitative line of study. I find this the most relevant given the purpose and my intention of pursuing an inductive line of inquiry looking at how elements such as different types of control relates to employee autonomy and how the relationship between these elements, as well as that of bureaucracy and hierarchy, may be interpreted and understood. As for the epistemological position I adopt an interpretivist agenda with inspiration from elements of social constructionism in particular as put forward by Hacking (1999). I acknowledge that knowledge is a shared and fluid concept which is created during research by the researcher and his or her interactions with the research objects and as such that one cannot claim data to be entirely free of theory (Silverman 2006).

Of course one may criticize my standpoint for buying into relativism with the risk of ending in subjective, anecdotal research. This criticism, often put forward by those inclined towards a positivist or realist approach, may be valid. I would though argue that it is not that relevant and that the focus on relativism versus non-relativism as well as the discussion of reliability and validity in qualitative research is off-point. Rather the focus should be on the quality of the research in itself on its own premises as well as what might be gained from it. My plan for this study is to gain access to a rich case material of high quality with the intention of questioning existing theories in particular as these, for the most part, are based on studies of large management consultancy firms and hence there is a likelihood for differences when studying small consultancy firms. Following this questioning of existing theories is of course also the aim of providing new and interesting suggestions for theories related to control, autonomy and bureaucratic degree in small partnership based consultancies as well as consultancies in general. Finally my intent is to raise questions, highlighting vistas for further research following the claims of Alvesson & Kärreman that: "asking innovative questions can be as important as providing answers" (2007a, p. 1277).

The article by Alvesson & Kärreman (2007a) and their notion that a researcher should seek the 'mystery' or anomaly when looking at empirical material and accepted or proposed theories have been an inspiration in formulating the purpose of this study. I have in particular drawn on a former study I was involved in, that of Maina & Pedersen (2009) and the findings and conclusions drawn from this. I find, as argued, that there are interesting discrepancies between this study as well as a number of other case studies in comparison to for example the ideas of KIFs representing de-bureaucratized organizations with loose control structures and high degrees of autonomy. This has further been supplemented by the apparent lack of studies in the area of small consultancies as most research, as said, have focused on the large, international management consultancy firms. As such there is not only a size focus in difference but also that I am not focusing in particular on 'management consultancies' but rather small partner-based consultancies in general. I therefore have a 'mystery' based in discrepancies between empirical material and existing theories further supplemented by a general lack of research in the area.

Purpose & choice of method

Based on the research purpose and the time available for the study (4 years) I have

decided that a multiple case study in small partner-based consultancy firms is the best approach using semi-structured interviews, observations, 'hanging around' and other forms of data-gathering techniques in line with Yin's claim that: "good case studies benefit from having *multiple sources of evidence*" (2004, p.9). The case study approach are ideal for studying research topics where current theories can be argued to be inadequate (Chetty 1996) and for studying phenomenon's where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly understood and where it is difficult to separate these (Yin 1984, quoted in Soy 1997, p. 1). As such I contend that this approach is fitting in light of the lack of research in the area, the research purpose for this study and the focus on different elements and how their relationship may be understood. As for having multiple cases instead of a single case the multiple case study can, arguably, improve theory-building (Eisenhardt 1989) by presenting the possibility of comparing elements in common between the cases as well as having contradictory findings being the springboard for further theoretical reflections (Bryman & Bell 2003).

In general one can talk of two approaches when talking of the case study method namely having an explanatory or an exploratory approach - or in other words - that of testing theories and that of building theories (Chetty 1996; Eisenhardt 1989). That there is a clear dichotomy between these two approaches is though not clear as it in my mind does not make sense to make an either/or selection. I believe instead that the study should include both as new theories of course has to differ from existing theories and hence the theory-testing is to some extent a necessary element. This is also found in the case study of Echtelt et al. (2008) who chooses a theory-testing approach but following this argues that these form of case studies rarely are purely explanatory rather being a mix and hence making for their choice of talking of 'theory refinement' instead. My intent in this study is, as described, part theory-testing and part theory-building but with more weight on the latter as I am focusing on a population of organizations that differs from most other studies i.e. being different from the studies of large management consultancy firms.

My choice of doing a multiple case-study is, apart from being based in my purpose, also affected by my experience from having worked in a consultancy company. The consultancy experience is a blessing in that it can make it easier for me to relate to the subjects of study by having an in-depth, practical understanding of the exigencies of small consultancy firms (Ram 2000) but at the same time it also provides the risk of being too

influenced by these experiences from a single organization. As such I believe it to be valuable for my reflection that I have several different cases to compare in which the data can challenge my own assumptions, opening up for reflection and having data from one case asking questions, informing new interpretations etc. to that of another case. I therefore find my choice of doing multiple case-studies in line with my consultant background while of course also realizing that this choice provides a researcher-challenge e.g. making for a variety of different data from different cases which can increase the complexity and pose a challenge for the analysis.

The type of analysis will of course be based in the available data but from the outset I plan to use a reflexive approach (Alvesson 2003; Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008) in line with the claim put forth by Salaman (2002) on the need for more neutral and reflexive studies in the consultancy industry. As such I am not selecting a specific type of approach such as hermeneutics, grounded theory, post-structuralism etc. but instead have the aim of avoiding 'reflective reductionism' or in other words the: "one-sided emphasis on a specific aspect of research" (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008, p. 249). I will be looking at the taken-for-granted assumptions, the understandings and discourses present in the organizations with an aim of challenging these and looking for other possible explanations as well as having a critical eye on theory e.g. the discussion on the difference between using a word as 'control' versus instead talking of 'influence'. This can of course be argued not to be that reflexive but rather being a critical theory or a discourse theory type of analysis. I am inspired by these methods but will still maintain the claim of having a reflexive and neutral approach where the critical study of discourses is valid while also looking at how these discourses are part of larger whole e.g. the social context in which the organizations operates, the global discourse of 'fast capitalism' as well as others thereby going for a more hermeneutic approach looking at how the parts relates to the whole – or in other words - how the consultants and the organizational context relates to common ideas of consultant identity and knowledge economy in a (post)-modern socio-economic capitalistic context.

Instead of doing a multiple case study I could also have opted for an ethnographic study which is claimed, by some, to have a considerable potential for studying employee relations in small-scale organizations (Revelley et al. 2004). Choosing this method would have provided for a more in-depth study of a single organization with more focus on for

example the role of informal gatherings outside the normal organizational context e.g. Rosen's (1988) study of the role a Christmas lunch plays in an advertising firm or Revelley et al.'s (2004) study of the role of the Friday after-work pub-visit in a small UK manufacturing firm. A long-term ethnographic approach would have the possibility of including informal gatherings such as in the above mentioned studies – gatherings that may be particularly important in small organizations which, as said, are often claimed to be operating in a more informal way with a 'familial' culture. As such I believe an ethnographic approach could be valuable but, given the mentioned benefits of a multiple-case study approach, I have chosen to opt for this. Similar reasons apply for not choosing an ethnomethodological method but for this also specific considerations related to the primary use of observations and video-recordings that is connected to this approach (Given 2008) where I believe using interviews is essential given my purpose and the aim of looking at how various elements e.g. control and autonomy, are interrelated and how they may be interpreted and understood.

Population

I have a defined population of organizations that I am interested in namely small partner-based consultancy firms. From this population I will select organizations for the case study that differs on different characteristics e.g. type of services delivered, type of clients serviced and the general characteristics of the client-consultant relationship in order to get a diverse sample covering some of the heterogeneity in the consultancy industry. I am therefore mainly striving for a theoretical sampling which is consistent with my aim on building new theory (Eisenhardt 1989).

While there are no ideal for the number of cases one should study as this depends on the topic, existing information and the likelihood for gaining further information from more case studies (Eisenhardt 1991, quoted in Chetty 1996) it has though been suggested that between four and ten cases are a good number for theory-building (Eisenhardt 1989). Given the time-frame for this study, the fact that I am the sole researcher and my intent to have a rich and in-depth data material from the different cases, I am striving for the lower end of this number. As such I expect the sample to involve around 4-5 cases.

Gaining access to 4-5 cases of this type is something that often present some difficulties and especially so as I want the cases to be different on the various characteristics

mentioned. I believe though that I will be able to get access without major problems as I already have a number of contacts in the consultancy industry in general as well as to both consultants and managers in some small consultancy companies which 'fits the bill' directly.

Specific considerations for studying small consultancies

Doing research in the context of small companies in general as well as consultancies in specific provides some particular challenges. One of the key questions is that of maintaining anonymity when dealing with companies with less than 20 full-time employees. This is especially relevant in this study as studying elements such as autonomy and control are bound to touch upon personal issues, on managerial critique and in general just touching upon issues that might be 'high-explosive' in the organizational context. The question of anonymity is though less when doing several case studies as compared to doing ethnographic research in just one company as it, in the former, will be easier to create anonymity because more companies and more people are involved in the study. Another way to directly address the issue is to provide the opportunity for the interviewees of reading through the text in which their answers are used before it is published so that potential issues can be addressed by the researcher. I intend to provide this possibility if it is a wish from the interviewees. Apart from this, addressing the question of anonymity is also a question of the researcher gaining the trust of the interviewees, showing understanding of their positions, explaining clearly what the object of study is and what the results will be used for. I believe my background of having worked as a consultant as well as having done a case study in a consultancy firm (Maina & Pedersen 2009) has provided me with valuable experience that will hopefully make it easier for me to relate to the positions of the consultants/interviewees.

Other considerations for studying small consultancies, as put forth by Ram (2000), is the potential dominance of the founding entrepreneur, the identity of the consultants and their possibly attempt at 'impression management' i.e. attempting to put themselves in a better light, as well as the fact that many small consultancies are often organized in an informal way with a familiar atmosphere in which the researcher has to operate. All this leads Ram to suggest an entrepreneurial research approach where one as a researcher discovers and creates opportunities for data-gathering as well as engages in an ongoing trade-off with the company where one as a researcher are expected to provide input, advice and

general value to the company. This is of course something that can become a slippery slope in terms of becoming too engaged in the research subjects but it is often the case that trade-offs are bound to occur and maybe be expected in order for the researcher to gain access. As for Ram's point of the dominance of the founding entrepreneur I expect this to be less of a problem as I, as stated in the purpose, will focus on partner-based companies i.e. where one would expect that the partners are 'on level' in terms of hierarchy and as such that the founder plays a lesser role in comparison to companies without the partnership governance structure.

These considerations are something one should keep in mind when engaging in research of small consultancy firms. Still though in the end it comes down to the classics of gaining access and trust and of keeping a reflexive and critical mind towards the data one creates and the conclusions one can draw from this.

Detailed research plan

The following outlines in more detail the work I plan to undertake during the four year period that this RP covers. Given the uncertainties when planning this type of research I have kept the planning at an overall level i.e. operating with no. of months as the smallest scale. As I do not know the starting date this is set as M0 (month zero) and the final date is M48 as the overall time period to conduct the study is 4 years which includes 1½ years or 18 months of course work in the beginning but is otherwise full-time research. Following the outline of the plan I discuss various risk factors for the research study and what contingencies might be put into place in order to address these potential risks.

A dissertation will represent the final result but it can also be that different interesting avenues will open up during the study making for the possibility of publishing articles in select journals e.g. Human Relations; Journal of Management Studies; Organization; Organization studies; International Studies of Management and Organizations; International small business journal. If this is the case I will pursue this and alter the plan accordingly.

Month	Action	Comments

M0-M9	Identifying and establishing contacts to case study organizations	I hope to have all organizations committed before M9 but have planned with this month just in case. I will start initial data-gathering dependent on how fast I establish contact – but the main focus will be to have 5 organizations committed during this period.
M10-25	Data-gathering and initial analysis	<p>I have planned 15 months for data-gathering as I am not full-time in the whole of this period i.e. I am also doing 1½ years of coursework. I also know this process to be time-consuming as there are dependency on access to persons and organizations, re-scheduling of interviews etc.</p> <p>I will attempt to divide my time between the different cases but dependent on the organization, its size, interest, the level of access etc. I am bound to spend more time in some of the case companies than in others.</p> <p>I will mainly focus on the data-gathering but will also begin initial analysis as I record and handle the data, writing down ideas, thoughts etc.</p>
M25-36	Analysis	<p>This period covers the detailed analysis of the data-material as well as re-checking facts, conclusions, usage of material so that anonymity is maintained etc. with the interview persons.</p> <p>In connection with the contact to the interview persons and case organizations I also plan at least 6 follow-up interviews in the first half of this period.</p>
M36-48	Writing dissertation	Finalizing the dissertation including presenting a draft version at least 6 months before deadline. Also providing feedback to the case companies on the

		results of the study as well as any relevant advice and contributions for them.
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I consider the end of all of the above periods as milestones. Apart from these I also plan to do a review of the research project at least every 12 months in cooperation with my supervisor.

Risk and contingencies

Throughout four years of study I am bound to face a number of challenges and contingencies that will alter my planning, change the direction of the research project etc. In the following I will consider some of the potential risks and what I can do accordingly.

Risk: not being able to establish contact to case organizations

I consider this risk to be low as I already have established contacts to organizations that can be used for the case-study. Apart from this I also have a wide network within the consultancy industry and believe that I will be able, through this, to gain access to interesting organizations that have the characteristics I am looking for.

Risk: loosing access to one or more case organizations during the research project

I deem this risk to be high as there can be many changes to small consultancies through a prolonged period e.g. going bankrupt, being sold off or just, suddenly, not wanting to participate in the study as it is too time-consuming, creates too many managerial challenges etc. In order to address this risk I will from the outset be aiming at the high number of case organizations i.e. aiming for 5. If I lose access to one I therefore have the possibility of finishing the research anyway as I, as said, believe 4 case organizations to be enough.

A worst case scenario would be to lose access to two or more organizations. I believe the risk for this to be low and even if it happens I hope that I, at that point, have already acquired enough data to be able to finalize the analysis. Otherwise I will maybe have to change my methodology so that I focus more in-depth on getting a rich data-material from fewer organizations i.e. going for example for a more ethnographic type of study.

The above risk are concerned with problems and challenges associated with acquiring data-material. Another risk is of course that I do not find anything of interest. This conclusion can of course also be relevant yet I do not think it likely given the rich data-material that I am aiming for which will make for a high likelihood of being able to identify findings of interest – findings which may of course differ from the purpose of my study and which can raise the issue of maybe altering the purpose and related research questions.

A final issue concerns the risk of not being able to finish the research project on time. I believe this primarily to be a question of planning and that this, if the above overall plan is followed, will not pose a 'risk'.

Contributions

One may of course argue that research does not necessarily need to have expected theoretical or practical implications. Indeed there have been a number of examples of obscure research being performed solely based in (a lone) researchers interests afterwards resulting in completely unexpected findings and implications both for existing and subsequent research as well as for society by large.

Even so I find it relevant to at least outline some expected implications or contributions by this study. I have therefore in the following described this distinguishing between theoretical implications which is more focused on the research community and practical implications by which I mean how the research and its results are expected to be of value to consultants and consultancy firms. This distinction between theoretical and practical contribution is of course highly arbitrary as there are bound to be overlaps as well as unexpected findings, implications and so on and so forth. Still the distinction is often used and I find it does provide some value and help in outlining different expectations.

Theoretical contributions

As I have described the research on small consultancies are severely lacking and I, of course, hope to contribute, in a small part, to this lack and to hopefully bring forth interesting results that may catch the eye of other researchers hence raising the general awareness of this area in the research community. In particular I hope to shed more light on research issues which have largely been overlooked in the study of small professional service organizations which have focused on more quantitative studies (Ram 1999c). As such I hope to contribute to the research on management, work-relations and the connection between autonomy and control in these types of firm. These findings, while being focused on small partner-based consultancies, can hopefully also provide input to the theoretical discussions of KIFs and consultancies in general.

Further the notion of bureaucratic hybrids and in particular the idea of 'post-bureaucracies' has been the talk of the day for some time even if there, as discussed, has been some critique of these ideas. As argued several studies have shown a higher than expected degree of bureaucratization in KIFs in general and one can raise serious questions to whether there actually has been a paradigmatic like shift in the way of organizing as some

researchers and management gurus claim. As small consultancies are seen as the 'ideal-type' of adhocratic, post-bureaucratic organizations I hope to be able to bring forth some valid empirical findings that can contribute to this on-going debate.

Practical contributions

I have the hope and intention that the study and its results will prove of interest to managers of small consultancies as well as the consultants themselves. As such I hope to counter the general criticism on lack of relevance and concern for practitioners which much of the academic research on small firms has seen (Gibb 1996; Ram 2000).

The examination of how these types of companies are governed will, ideally, provide managers with relevant input into how these companies can be organized and how consultants can be managed in particular with relation to an understanding of the interplay between administrative, formal and informal types of control seen in relation to workers degree and type of autonomy. Further the study will provide a view into some of the (hidden) logics in which small consultancies operates and as such will provide both managers and consultants the opportunity and means to reflect upon their roles and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Apart from being directly relevant to people working in or with small consultancies I also believe that the study will be of relevance to those in larger consultancies. My belief is based in an assumption that many of the processes and logics operating in small consultancies to some extent are mirrored in the structures in larger consultancies. This belief is fuelled by a case study which I was a part of, that of Maina and Pedersen (2009), where it was suggested that the wish for growth of the case company and the management of this process laid the foundation for organizational structures such as the introduction of formalized hierarchy as well as several bureaucratic elements. Also the 'trick' of managing consultants - or knowledge workers in general - is, as said, seen by several researchers as a question of balancing autonomy and control and as such the study of this 'balancing act' in small consultancies can be useful for managers in consultancies and KIFs in general.

Further there has, with the words of Gibb, been a: "well documented move towards 'smallness' in the wider business context in respect of restructuring and downsizing of

large firms” (2000, p. 19). The study of small consultancies can therefore provide potential benefits in how to manage downsized knowledge-intensive companies, how to manage spin-offs as well as how to manage in large organizations consisting for instance of somewhat independent sub-divisions e.g. as in large international consultancies being organized in (small) national consultancies which operates independently with own cost structures, means of control etc.

With its contribution to the on-going debate on bureaucratic hybrids, as mentioned under theoretical contributions, the study also have the potential to bring forth a more nuanced discussion on these ideas in comparison to much of the 'guru talk' on the area. My aim is that this empirical based look at these ideas can provide practitioners with a more reflexive outset when contemplating the designs and structures of organizations.

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