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Reconsidering the client complexity

-The diverse roles of management consultants

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Enjoy reading!

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Abstract

Title: Reconsidering the client complexity: the diverse roles of management consultants

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Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to bring attention to critical aspects in the consultant-client relationship. By considering the complexity of the client concept and what can be referred to as an institutionalized discourse, we draw attention to distinctions in roles seemingly taken on by consultants when interacting with clients.

Methodology: We have taken an inductive approach. The empirical material has been collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Theoretical perspectives: This study is analyzed and argued from a control and image management perspective.

Empirical foundation: Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with external management consultants, who have extensive experience from various projects.

Conclusions: The study suggests that consultants seem to have different roles at different levels in a client organization. There are roles depending on the hierarchical levels but also transboundary roles. We argue that this indicates a complexity in the client concept that is often neglected, and in extension the consultant-client relationship.

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1. Introduction

The consultancy industry has a prominent role in today's society. It is not farfetched to assume that no industry is as transboundary as the consultancy industry. There are consultancies to cover virtually all areas of the business community, from high-technology to auditing. We argue that the increasing presence of consultants in modern organizations makes it critical to keep exploring the consulting field. As the world is dynamic and continuously changing, it is necessary to revise the established conceptions and taken-for-granted understandings about our organizational environments.

Related to the expansion of the consulting industry at large over the last decades, is the growing interest in contingencies regarding the relationship between different actors. Of most significance seems to be the relation between consultants and their clients¹. One can understand the relationship from various aspects, namely power-relations, identity perspectives and so forth. Interesting is the observation made that in this relationship the complexity of the client is often neglected. Mainstream literature seems to equate the "client" with "client organization". As we will point out, there are reasons to suggest that this is not appropriate when trying to understand critical aspects in the consultant-client relationship. By undermining the complexity of the client concept, we argue that researchers side-step one of the more important considerations in this relationship.

The suggestion here is not that it is desirable to account for every aspect of the client, as the complexity is too great and if one would consider the full complexity nothing could be said about the consultant-client relationship, but merely about the relationship between two individuals. However, we suggest that the most prevalent views in current literature have too wide of a focus to give a nuanced and proper description.

¹ Some recurring terms and definition are explained in appendix

In an organizational environment which seems to draw researchers' interest to the relationship between consultants and clients, the suggested practice of control appears to be of significance. The field of study is divided according to differing views of the control relation between the two stakeholders, which presumably has implications for the consultant-client relationship.

On the notion of management control there are some recurring themes in the literature. Researchers make the distinction primarily between methods that according to literature can be perceived as obtrusive, such as behavioral control, and normative control methods (e.g. Ouchi, 1975; Ouchi, 1979; Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012). The often cited Ouchi (1975) shows a correlation between organizational level and the type of control exercised by management. It is argued that the level of ambiguity in output measurement and work processes has implications for the suitability of control method.

Related to this is the established understanding amongst academics about the ambiguous nature of most knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson, 2004). As management consultancies can be characterized as knowledge intensive firms, the ambiguity in process and quality has been subjected to a lot of research. In recent years this contingency has been linked to the importance of image management in the consulting industry (Alvehus and Kärreman, 2012). According to literature, consultancies are highly dependent on how people outside the organization view them in order to circumvent the lack of tangible qualities (Alvesson, 2004). Furthermore, the perceived image of the consultancy has implications for the image of individual consultants (Alvesson, 2004).

1.1 Problem Discussion

Amongst researchers on management consulting there seems to be a focal point around two views on the relationship between the consultant and client. On the one side is the functionalistic view of this relationship, which regards management consultancy as valuable to the client; on the

other is the critical image which challenges this assumption (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Both groups assert different roles onto the two stakeholders, related to varying levels of control (Werr and Styhre, 2003).

There is, however, a third way to understanding this relationship. Some researchers argue that within this spectrum there is a relationship that is characterized by balance, with neither stakeholder possessing control over the other (e.g. Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner, 2009). The *social learning model* view appreciates collaboration as a vital part of the consultant-client relationship, and is argued to be context driven. This view is less preeminent in the literature but its assumptions are suggested to be of relevance for the field and this thesis in particular.

It seems that the research on roles in the consultant-client relationship grew explosively in pace with the development of the consulting industry. One can find seemingly endless definitions of various roles that consultants take on in their interaction with clients. These roles often depart from the power and politics dynamic between the consultant and the client (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). The power distribution in the relationship could suggestively impose a specific order between the two stakeholders, consequently implicating the practice of control.

Much of the literature on management consulting focuses on the relationship between the consultant and client, and various aspects implicating this relation. It has become evident when analyzing this research that there is a widespread neglect to consider the complexity of the client configuration. When reading mainstream literature within the field, one gets the impression that the client, more often than not, is equalized to the whole client organization. As an organization is compiled of sometimes up to thousands of individual workers, this simplification is all too excessive.

Kubr (2002:64) follows this track and argues that the client is the widest term of the organization that hires consultants. The relationship between client and consultant is always about individuals (Kubr, 2002:64). When

the client employs a consultant it will almost every time be a decision made by a group of managers or supervisors in the client organization (Kubr, 2002:64).

The interaction between consultants and clients will vary between different units and different individuals (Kubr, 2002:65). Kubr (2002:65) continues with stating an importance of considering the whole client organization in the consultant work. They have to “*map out the network of relationships in which they are going to operate*” (Kubr, 2002:65). A common mistake made by consultants according to the author is that they treat the senior managers as the most important client, which can affect the whole organization and make the organization more resistant. Kubr (ibid) also points out that it is important to consider the senior manager but not exclusively.

During a project the consultant has to continue exploring the roles played in the client organization because the roles can change rapidly and also sometimes need to be modified (Kubr, 2002:65).

Schein (1997) denotes that a problem in a consultant-client relationship can appear when the consultant does not know who his or her client is. In the literature he argues that the client often is seen as un-complex and easy to identify. He notes that different problems may exist at different levels in the organization.

Mohe & Seidl (2011) argue when considering the client in the consultant-client relationship, the complexity of the client is often ignored. The role theory of today is unable to capture the complex relation between the consultant and the client. Further the authors mean that roles simplify the relationship and often describe the consultant as expert and the client as a buyer. We suggest that whilst a simplification is required, more consideration for the complexity should be taken when studying this phenomenon.

In order to understand the relationship between the consultant and the client, the complexity of the stakeholders needs to be taken into account.

The proposition made is, in line with the constructivist view, that organizational members continuously revise and reconstruct their social reality (Bryman and Bell, 2005). We argue that this dynamic calls for an appreciation for underlying complexity and contingency surrounding the relationship between relevant actors, in order to try and understand the relationship. In research today this seems to be an overlooked aspect when considering the role(s) seemingly taken on by consultants. This paper seeks to approach this present condition. We suggest that dividing up clients according to hierarchical levels in client organizations is relevant in order to near its complex nature.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to reconsider the client complexity and deepen the understanding about critical aspects in the relationship between change management consultants and their clients. We aim at highlighting distinctions in consulting roles in the consultant-client relationship.

1.3 Research Question

Our purpose has culminated into the following research question:

Q1: How do ten management consultants portray their role in relation to clients at different hierarchical levels?

1.4 Disposition

Chapter 2: Following the introductory chapter is the research methodology chapter. The main purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the research was conducted and what considerations have been made when collecting and analyzing the material.

Chapter 3: The theoretical chapter covers four theories that are of relevance for this thesis. The first two theories accounted for are an extension of our problematization, whilst the two following theories are the theoretical perspective used for analyzing our empirical material.

Chapter 4: The fourth chapter includes our empirical material, which is presented according to the different hierarchical levels in client organizations, and a consideration of the whole organization. As the statements are presented, a short analysis is made and various roles are deciphered.

Chapter 5: Following up on the short analysis made in the empirical chapter, is a deepened discussion about the tendencies indicated in the material. The discussion chapter connects the theoretical arguments and the empirical findings of our research.

Chapter 6: In the concluding chapter we present the contributions made in this thesis, regarding both theoretical as well as practical contributions.

2. Research Methodology

In this chapter we are describing our methodology. We start with describing our research strategy then the research design. Further we describe the data collection process and the analysis stage.

2.1 Research Strategy

2.1.1 Epistemology

In this thesis we depart from the idea of an “objective truth”; instead we are interpreting the actions and discourses used by the consultants in this research. When analyzing the material we do not take for granted that the consultants are depicting an objective reality, but rather presenting us with their subjective understanding or socially desirable claims about the topics. We look beyond the literal statements made by the consultants, and interpret the meaning of their responses, keeping in mind our ontological assumptions.

2.1.2 Ontology

Our ontological presumption is that social actors are constantly constructing their social reality. Therefore, we are attentive to the social constructivism that might underlie the consultants’ perceptions as well as their use of language in the interviews. We suggest, in line with Alvesson (2003), that the context in which the interviews were conducted may have influenced the discourse. The assumption made is that the discourse used by consultants is socially constructed.

Also of significance to our research is the awareness of our language use, meaning the used terminology, tone of voice, and its implications for the answers. As we adopt Bryman and Bell’s (2005) notion that social “facts” are constantly being revised, the social context in which the interviews were carried out should be understood as unique and thus critical for the outcome of the interviews.

2.1.3 Inductive Theory

The interprevistic and ontological considerations that make up this thesis propose an inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2005). Our research is based on the empirical material that we have collected. The foundation, thus, are the observations that we have made in our interviews. Based on frequently recurring topics that were raised by the interviewees we proceeded with the theoretical reflection, which is characteristic for the inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2005)

2.2 Research Design

2.2.1 Qualitative Approach

Given the nature of this thesis and its purpose, and in line with the majority of management and business research (Bryman and Bell, 2005), we have decided to conduct a qualitative research. Through in-depth interviews with change management consultants, we hope to secure relevant data to facilitate our purpose. This data should capture the interviewees' subjective understandings about his or her work.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Respondents

The primary data for this thesis was collected through interviews with ten active change management consultants. The consultants chosen for this study are employed by a large, global consulting firm.

The respondents have several years of experience in consulting, and have the appropriate practical knowledge of client consulting. Respondents have been chosen that have worked in leader roles with several different clients. Furthermore, we have spoken to consultants who have experience in consulting at different levels in an organization. This assortment has been made to increase the likelihood of diverse experience and perceptions. The seniority of the consultant has not been taken into consideration in the selection process, neither have distinctions such as gender, age, cultural

background and so forth been made. Such characteristics are deemed to be beyond the scope of this thesis.

As the purpose of this thesis focuses on the consultant-client relationship we argue that the consultant's perspective is relevant to explore. The research is designed to capture consultants' understandings of their interaction with clients, in order to highlight possible distinctions in this relationship.

2.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The data collection was executed in two steps. First we conducted a pilot interview. The purpose of this approach was to “pick-the-brain” of a consultant, who hopefully could help to guide our interviews in a relevant direction. In this interview the consultant was presented with very general topics about consulting. With the hope of receiving the consultant's actual beliefs, and not the discourse of the industry, the interview was designed as an open conversation between ourselves and the interviewee.

Second, with ten consultants from different parts of Europe, we carried out telephone interviews, in some cases interviews over Skype. The consultants were presented with semi constructed questions regarding their consulting work. The interview guide used in the first three interviews became somewhat altered. As we developed our interviewing skills and learned what themes we should focus on, the questions were either reformulated or replaced. From the initial conversations with consultants, we were able to derive certain recurring themes of interest, salient topics that seemed to be of relevance for our interviewees. In order to gain further insights to these areas of interest, we redesigned our interview guide accordingly.

As with the pilot interview, the aim was to gain the subjective beliefs of the consultants. Linked to our intent we have constructed a semi-structured interview guide, meaning that we have quite specific pre-determined topics (Bryman and Bell, 2005). However, we often came up with follow-up questions, departing more often than not from the interview guide to

capture the interviewees' perceptions on their consulting work and relation to their clients.

Since we are aware that the interview situation to some degree is a constrained situation, and that answers can be influenced by "social desirability", meaning that answers are steered by the respondent's understanding of how something should be (Bryman and Bell, 2005), we have formulated questions that are not in an obvious way concerned about the consultant's relationship to clients. By doing this, we hoped to evade this problematic and get insight to how this relationship looks. The respondents were asked questions about problems that arise during change projects, focus was on the common feature of resistance to change. This topic was chosen primarily due to its presence at each level in the organization, but also as a frequently recurring theme in change management literature. Questions were formulated as to gain understanding on how the consultant handles resistance that arises at different levels in a client organization. We have interpreted the answers as a reflection of the role that the consultant takes on, in relation to his or her client (i.e. the resistant employee).

Another way to evade the skewness in answers was to ask questions about why our respondents thought organizations engage external consultants for managing organizational changes. Our standpoint for this approach is the belief that the consultant's perception of why he or she is engaged by the client organization has implications for the relationship to his or her client, meaning that the role is influenced by this perception.

Interestingly, we were able to see signs of inconsistency in some interviews, however in many cases the answers were equivalent in suggesting what role the consultant might take on.

2.4 Data Analysis

The process of our data analysis has been of an iterative nature, depicting that the work of collecting and analyzing data has taken place in parallel (Bryman and Bell, 2005). A concrete example of this is the case of the revised interview guide, where data from completed interviews became the base for upcoming interviews.

During the analysis process we constantly take into consideration the assumed subjectivity and the socially constructed reality of our respondents. The analysis is therefore not based on the literal content of our empirical material but has undergone constant sorting and revised categorization.

In the process of what is portrayed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011:196) as *becoming familiar* with our material we ordered the data according to various concepts. Further we continued by trying to interpret the material according to these concepts. This was a continuous activity as it became evident that the concepts used initially were not adequate and had to be revised.

The structure developed from a focus on resistance amongst clients, to the concept of identity work within the consultant-client relationship. However, we concluded that the data did not support such an analysis. Instead we were able to interpret the material as reflecting how consultants seem to exercise control when consulting clients. We argue that claims made by the consultants indicate various ways of influencing clients, in order to reach more or less predetermined purposes. The characteristics of the methods applied by the consultants can be seen as reflecting how they position themselves in relation to the client, and there from what role the consultants seem to take on in this relationship.

We were able to distinguish another pattern in our material. Some topics were so salient in the responses that we considered them separately. These topics emerged from the consultants' understandings of why they were engaged by clients. These tendencies have been analyzed from a macro-

discourse perspective, interpreted as an institutionalized language used by consultants in their image management. We draw a parallel between how the respondents' think others perceive consultants, and their own self-image. This is then extended to the interaction with clients and how the consultants' might portray themselves in this interaction, given his or her self-image.

As stated by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011:205), to merely give an account for our empirical findings is not enough to contribute to the field of study. To fulfill our purpose of deepening the understanding about critical aspects in the relationship between consultant and client it has, thus, been crucial to independently argument for our interpretations and considerations. Our ambition, in accordance to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011:206), has been to relate our empirical material to current literature within management consulting as a way to make it more general than the immediate observations.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

In this chapter we highlight existing theories that are linked to the research question - *How do ten management consultants portray their role in relation to clients at different hierarchical levels?*. We bring forth established understandings about the consultant-client relationship and roles present in this context. We argue for shortcomings in this literature and the relevance for further considerations. For the purpose of supporting the upcoming analysis we present theories regarding control and image management.

3.1 Consultant-client Relationship

The relationship between the client and the consultant has been discussed a lot in the literature. The literature uses different theoretical models to define how the relationship can be understood. The common perspectives discussed are the functionalist and the critical. (Werr and Styhre, 2003)

Alvesson and Johansson (2002) note that the functional and critical perspectives are extremes and the literature can move from one perspective to another. Nikolova et al (2009) add the social learning model, which describes the interaction between the consultant and client from another view.

Neither the functionalistic view, critical view, nor the social learning model describes the complexity in the client organization according to different hierarchical levels in the client organization.

3.1.1 The Functionalistic view

The functionalist literature describes the consultant as the expert, and the client as a buyer of the expertise. The relationship is often seen as a long distance relationship that is contract based under a certain amount of time. (Werr and Styhre, 2003)

One characteristic for the functional view is that the external consultant is seen as objectivist and does not have any biases in the client organization.

The consultants are argued to have an external view on problems in the client organization and will not be affected by the politics. (Werr and Styhre, 2003)

The client is described as the controlling part in the relationship because the client suggestively has the power to end the contract (Werr and Styhre, 2003). To build in trust into the relationship becomes a very important task for the consultant in order to be in a better position. The trust filled relationship is assumed to help the consultant to know more about the client. (Kubr, 2002)

The functionalistic approach has been criticized for a self-celebration view on consultants and also questioned on the value that consultants create, while the functionalistic literature takes the value adding as obvious. (Fincham, 1999)

3.1.2 Critical view

The critical view developed as a reaction of the partial functionalistic views (Werr and Styhre, 2003). In this perspective the expert role that the functionalistic literature ascribes the consultant with is questioned (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Alvesson and Johansson (2002) mean that the critical view can be very negative about the consultant industry.

In the critical literature the consultant is regarded to have the power and the client is often seen as a victim. The impression management and rhetorical skills that consultants exhibit makes the client seduced and willing to buy the service. (Werr and Styhre, 2003)

Werr and Styhre (2003) mean that the critical literature describes that the techniques and the ideas that consultants have are used to facilitate change, to take control and to improve, as well as to reinforce the reputation of the consulting industry.

3.1.3 Social Learning Model

The social learning model is characterized by neither the client nor consultant having control. They have to work together in order to solve problems (Nikolova et al, 2009). According to the authors, the consultants' knowledge cannot simply be bought into the client organization because every client is unique; the solutions have to be customized to every single client, and they have to work together. The collaboration is based on a communication between the consultant and the client (Nikolova et al, 2009).

Werr and Styhre (2003) argue that the relationship is constituted by both clients and consultants. They mean that the relationship is institutionally embedded and will occur from social norms, ideologies and beliefs they share. The consultant-client relationship will be made by collaboration from both parties and will depend on the context (Werr and Styhre, 2003).

3.2 Consultant Role

The consultant-client relationship can often be further understood by see what roles the parties take on when interact. Just like the consultant-client perspectives the role theory has often problem to capture the complexity of the relationship (Mohe and Seidl, 2011).

The role theory within management consulting is one of the most well-known approaches. It assumes that consultants and clients take on different roles depending on aspects such as the context and power position (Mohe and Seidl, 2011).

Academics have tried to identify roles that consultants assume. The variation of roles that are conveyed in the literature ranges from only two, like Kubr (2002:70) suggests, up to nine roles which Steele (1975) describes. As we will argue, and in line with what Mohe and Seidl (2011) suggest, these roles often are not able to take into consideration the complexity that is embedded in the consultant-client relationship.

3.2.1 Defined Roles

The two roles that Kubr (2002:70) proposes are two basic consultant roles, the resource and the process role, and they can be seen as underlying roles to more refined roles. In the resource role the consultant is seen as an expert and the supplier of expertise. An example of this is the metaphor of a doctor-patient relation made up by Schein (1978). The consultant role in this relationship is to diagnose, or analyze, the client (Schein, 1978). Kakabadse, Lourchart and Kakabadse (2006), however, argue that the resource role is different from a doctor patient role. According to the authors the relation is more about helping clients to understand problems they might have in the organization, and to let them solve it by themselves.

The second basic role that Kubr (2002:70; 72) describes is the process role which is characterized by seeing the consultant as an “agent of change” that helps the client organization in order to change. In contrast to the resource role - where the consultant role is to diagnose the client and say what they should change - the process role is about helping the client how to change, and suggest solutions (Kubr, 2002:70).

Kubr (2002:73-76) further describes more refined roles that consultants can take on in the client-consultant relationship. He means that roles can be more or less directive. The most directive role that Kubr describes is the “advocate” who strives to influence the client’s decisions or the mind of the client. The least directive role that consultants can take on according to Kubr (2002) is the “reflector”, who tries to open the client’s mind by asking reflective questions and preparing the client to make decisions. In between those two roles there are six other roles that are more or less directive and the level of problem solving by the consultant varies.

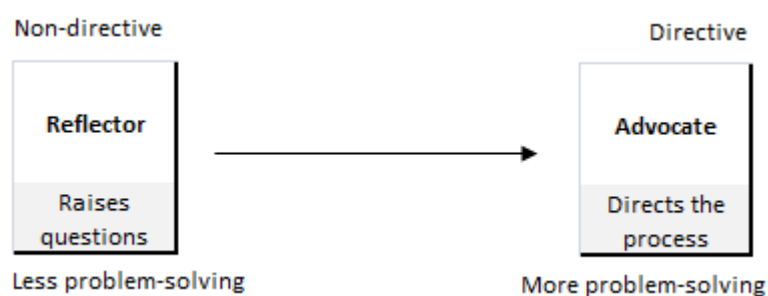


Figure 1. The two extreme roles in Kubr's model, based on Kubr (2002:74)

From a functionalist point of view the consultant role is always knowledge based. The consultant is described as an expert that the client buys to solve a specific problem that the client already has identified (Werr and Styhre, 2003). The functionalistic view is similar to the resource role that Kubr (2002:70) points out.

The critical literature takes a different approach and means that the consultant role is about manipulating the client and making a good impression (Werr and Styhre, 2003). The most extreme views from a critical perspective depict the consultant role as a “witch doctor” or “merchant of meaning” (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002).

In contrast to the critical literature, Kaarst-Brown (1999) has identified roles that points out an opposite relationship where it is the client that manipulates and has the control over the process.

3.3 Control

Literature that is concerned with understanding the consultant-client relationship assumes that it can be understood from a control dynamic perspective. The control mechanisms in organizations can have many configurations. Mainstream literature often considers mechanisms such as behavioral, output and normative measurements (e.g. Ouchi, 1979, Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012). According to Ouchi (1975) it is not a question of substitution forms of control; the author suggests that behavioral and output control should be considered independent in its relation. Furthermore the author claims that the purpose of the control is a critical factor for its appropriateness. Ouchi (1979) distinguishes various conditions that are significant for the type of control most suited. His research shows that contingencies have implications on how to measure, or control, in different contexts.

		Knowledge of the transformation process	
		<i>Perfect</i>	<i>Imperfect</i>
Ability to measure outputs	<i>High</i>	Behavior or Output measurement	Output measurement
	<i>Low</i>	Behavior measurement	Ritual and ceremony, Normative measurement

Table 1. The relationship between type of measurement and the contingencies, after Ouchi (1979:843)

From the table 1 can be discerned that the ability to measure output, in relation to the knowledge of the transformation process, indicates the possible type of measurement and thereby type of control most suited. The transformation process is related to specifying and administrating all operations in a work process (Ouchi, 1979). This process can be more or less ambiguous depending on what is being transformed (Ouchi, 1979). A simplified comparison can be made between the work process of the manufacturing of a tangible product and the “manufacturing”, or execution of a service; where the process ambiguity can be regarded as lower in the former and higher in the latter.

As with the transformation process, the measurement of the actual output can be more or less ambiguous. Ouchi (1979) signals the importance of regarding this aspect when discussing different types of control. According to the author there is a negative relation between the two phenomena, namely that low output ambiguity leads to high level ability to measure outputs, while high output ambiguity complicates the ability to measure outputs.

From Ouchi’s (1979) compilation one can denote that output control is viewed appropriate under opposite conditions than normative control. The former type of control postulates low ambiguity in the transformation process as well as in the measurement of outputs. In contrast, we can see

that the latter type of control is considered most suited in highly ambiguous organizational contexts, where it is difficult to define both the transformation process as well as outputs.

3.3.1 Behavioral control

Rooted in the long dominating Taylorism, the purpose of behavioral control is to control the behavior of subordinates (Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012). Significant for this type of control is the exercise of direct supervision of the employee (Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012). According to Ouchi (1979) it is likely that a manager with good understanding of the relation between means and ends will exercise behavioral control. The author denotes that personal surveillance, which is a cornerstone in behavioral control, is relatively more practiced at lower levels in an organization. Ouchi (1979) states that this tendency stems from the correlation between ambiguity in transformation process and output, and organizational level, where ambiguity often is positively connected to organizational level.

According to Kärreman and Rennstam (2012) the organizational literature tends to deemphasize the presence of behavioral control in today's organizations. However, the authors claim this type of control to be actual in modern industries.

Ouchi (1979:841) argues that managers are at risk of offending "*people's sense of autonomy*" if depending heavily on explicit surveillance and correction. The author denotes that such control can be seen as obtrusive and is often composed of offensive techniques. This suggestion is of utmost relevance in this thesis, as we will argue later there is reason to assume that a perceived obtrusive method is likely to be applied in some contexts but not others.

3.3.2 Output control

According to Kärreman and Rennstam (2012) this type of control is more indirect in its nature, compared to the behavioral control. The main difference lies in setting up goals instead of rules (Kärreman and

Rennstam, 2012). This implies that there is a higher degree of freedom related to output control. According to Ouchi (1975) the purpose of the control has implications for what type of control is appropriate. He states that the complexity of a large organization, linked to its differentiation and heterogeneity, calls for output control as a means of communicating the performance of subunits (Ouchi 1979:560).

3.3.3 Normative control

As with output control, and in contrast to behavioral control, normative control is a way to indirect influence subordinates (Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012). Activities associated with the normative control include socialization and identity regulation, with the aspiration to influence the beliefs, attitudes and values of the subordinates (Kärreman and Rennstam, 2012).

One can argue that the indirect nature of the normative control method suggests that the techniques can be considered less offensive and obtrusive than the behavioral control methods. We argue for the plausibility that the autonomy and self-control is less obviously intruded when exercising normative control, why it can be more appropriate in certain contexts.

According to Ouchi (1979) the normative control is a reaction to the high level of ambiguity in work process and output. The author states that the impossibility of rationally evaluating the work prevents the control from being direct.

Following the propositions stated by Ouchi (1979), one can draw the conclusion that it is perhaps not adequate to solely consider the condition of a whole organization, but take into account the contingencies within an organization. As different members of an organization have different job tasks, and thus a varying degree of ambiguity related to these tasks, there is reason to assume that the type of control suitable vary within an organization. As we will point out later, there are reasons to consider the complexity of organizational members.

The theoretical views accounted for above are based in the context of managers and subordinates, emphasizing the application of control from a purpose perspective (i.e. the purpose of the control). We use the theory as a tool to analyze various approaches to influence individuals from an acceptance perspective.

3.4 Image

There is an established understanding that organizational image is linked to the understanding about what people outside the organization thinks of it. According to Dutton and Dukerich (1991) it is the organizational members' perception of how other people view the organization that is of importance. Alvesson and Empson (2008:6) denote that the external interface is concerned with the question: "How are we seen?". The authors continue and highlight the connection between the perception of the organizational image and the self-image, where the former has implications for the latter.

3.4.1 Image in Management Consulting

As with other knowledge intensive work, the practice of management consulting is imbued with ambiguity (Alvehus and Kärreman, 2012). The understanding of the transformation process in consulting is imperfect, meaning that one cannot clearly specify and administrate the work process (Ouchi, 1979). As stated by Alvehus and Kärreman (2012), also of significance in the consulting practice is the somewhat problematic measurement of outcomes. Furthermore, the authors make a connection between the ability to measure outcomes and image management. They argue that when there is a high level of ambiguity in output, the importance of image increases.

As stated above, image is concerned with the question of how outsiders view the organization. According to Alvesson (2004) image sensitivity is closely related to organizations that are dependent on how they are perceived by others. He means that this is associated with a lack of tangible outcomes of the work. For knowledge intensive workers the

generally accepted view on their work is of greatest importance. (Alvesson, 2004) Thus, one can draw the conclusion that knowledge intensive firms and knowledge workers are image-sensitive.

3.4.2 The Relevance of Discourse

There is an understanding in literature on knowledge intensive occupations that the interaction with relevant markets, organizations, and clients can be of great significance. Alvesson (2004) emphasizes an institutionalized awareness amongst these types of firms to foster an image that signals trustworthiness and their significance. The macro-level discourse of knowledge intensive firms is thus concerned with communicating traits such as knowledge and expertise (Alvesson, 2004). As we will argue later, consultants' understandings of how clients view them can be reflecting such a macro-level discourse.

Salient in much of the communication with markets seems to be the portrayal of consulting firms as suggestively possessing "*profound specialist knowledge*" (Deloitte), key success factors are often attributed to "*the competence and knowledge of our people*" (Ernst&Young). Moreover, it seems of importance to consulting firms to pronounce their independent position, McKinsey claim to be "*independent advisors*" and assert their lack of interest in being "*popular*".

According to Alvesson (2004) image work is not only important in a distanced communication with the market, such as marketing, but also during the transformation process, that is the daily interaction with clients. Thus, the image is dependent on the language used by workers and the way they act, in more or less formal settings. One can assume that in knowledge intensive work as consulting, where the transformation process is ambiguous, the awareness of language use and actions of symbolic meaning is salient.

3.5 Summary

The perspectives accounted for above are all relevant for the purpose of this thesis. We have presented some of the more salient understandings amongst researchers in regards to the consultant-client relationship. The functionalistic and critical views, whilst most preeminent in mainstream literature, are considered insufficient and therefore complemented with the social learning model. These views consider the various dynamics that are imbedded in the relationship.

The critical perspective strongly disputes the value of the consulting practice and argues that there is a power-asymmetry in the relationship in favor of the consultant. According to this literature the client is a victim of the persuasive rhetoric and manipulative conduct of consultants. (Werr and Styhre, 2003) On the other side of the spectrum is the functionalistic view which assumes validity in the consulting practice. This literature argues for the actual contributions of the consulting industry and states that the client is the more powerful party who could easily discontinue the consultants' engagement (Werr and Styhre, 2003).

The less established social learning view suggests that the relationship is imbued with a balance in the dynamic. According to this view neither partner exerts control over the other and a prominent assumption is the collaborative nature of the relationship (Nikolova et al., 2009).

An established way of understanding the relationship between a consultant and client is the imposition of roles onto the stakeholders. Researchers such as Kubr (2002) and Steele (1975) argue for a range of roles that are taken on by consultants. Pervading in the literature, however, is the over simplification or lack of consideration for the complexity of the client. In this thesis we will try to approach this complexity and thereby extend the theoretical field.

For the purpose of analyzing the empirical material collected we have presented theoretical perspectives on control and image management. We argue that the purpose of control is to influence other individuals in a more

or less predetermined direction. We suggest that what you want to influence has implications for the suitable type of control. From an acceptance perspective this is connected to whether the individual will resist or accept the exercise of control. An obtrusive type of control, such as behavioral control, is thus more suitable in some contexts than in other, depending on what you aim to influence. One can assume that the obtrusive method is likely to be more accepted when the control is not directly affecting the persona of the individual, for example in streamlining the production process. In situations where the purpose is to influence the beliefs, values and attitudes of the individual the obtrusive control method can be inappropriate. We suggest that there is reason to believe that it might create resistance, why a less obtrusive method would be more suitable.

The assumption made in this thesis is that the institutionalized discourse in the consulting industry might have implications for consultants' understandings of how clients perceive them. This is related primarily to the understanding of why clients engage consultants in change projects. We argue that the macro discourse affects the self-image of the consultants, and in extension how they portray themselves in the interaction with clients.

4. Empirical Findings

In this chapter we are going to present findings from the interviews. Our research question is concerned to see what role the consultants seem to take on when working with the client. We have found indications that the roles might be different at different hierarchical levels in the client organization, which indicates a complexity in the client concept. For that reason we are going to present our findings with consideration to three hierarchical levels.

4.1 Considering Shop Floor Employees

The empirical material shows some interesting tendencies when considering the lower level employees. The consultants' understandings about their role when interacting with shop floor clients can be seen as somewhat contrasting, we have observed tendencies to take on a double faceted role.

When asked to consider what role they take on when interacting with shop floor employees, we were able to see recurrent signs of a more or less directive control. To some extent consultants seem to give direct orders on how an employee should carry out certain tasks, taking an authoritative approach.

“A directive approach is more likely to work at lower levels especially if you have low skill work force on the shop floor [...]” (Consultant B)

The nature of this activity implies that the consultant perceives himself as being more knowledgeable than the employee, on how to execute a task more effectively, signaling a self-image of being an expert. Two consultants explicitly argued for this assumption:

“you are focusing much more on practical hands-on guidance [...] you are showing people to do their job in a better way, it is very interactive and hands-on [...]”

'Let me show you a better way that is going to save you some time and help you improve your performance'."

(Consultant C)

"The thing is if you're talking about maintenance, you can be more hands-on and show them ok life becomes easier and then show the benefits." (Consultant G)

These citations imply that the consulting practice on shop floor is characterized by behavioral control. We argue that this view on how the consultant works with shop floor employees indicates a lack of individualized consideration, with less focus on the values of the employee and more focus on mechanical measures. Related to this approach is the consultants' perception that clients may know that something has to change, but lack the knowledge or experience of making change happen.

The common understanding amongst the consultants is thus that their role includes showing shop floor employees how they should do their job. We argue that this indicates that the role that consultants might take on when interacting with lower level employees can be considered to be characterized by behavioral control.

Of significance is however the contrasting approach which became evident when analyzing the interviews. Many consultants argue their role as interacting with the client, listening, and coming up to solutions together with the employees.

"From a change perspective it is very important that it is a solution that they have been part of." (Consultant

A)

Argumentations made by consultants indicate a belief that in order for a solution to gain acceptance at shop floor, it is necessary to work together with the client. One can be critical to this use of language, portraying it as being nothing but window dressing, wanting the employee to perceive collaboration without the consultant actually considering the input made

by the employee. However, illustrations of the consulting process made by some consultants enhance the trustworthiness of the statement, and lessen the probability of it just being a discourse of fashion.

“When I say ‘we’ I really mean the clients are deciding what they want in the future, so move from a specific problem they have identified they are going to decide a solution [...]. The hardest part is really keep pushing them or keep motivating them or keep pulling them, depending on what is most needed [...].” (Consultant A)

“getting trust also takes time so first thing I want to do is spend as much time as I can with the people that I am targeting, so let say it is shop floor then right from the first day I will be out on the shop floor even if possible being hands on I’m working alongside of the operators [...] I’m literally doing the same tasks they are doing, and doing the same job, so I understand how they feel on a normal shift and I understand better what their problems are.” (Consultant B)

Some consultants thus, seem to have a strong perception that they take the time to build a relationship to their clients. Consultant “B” makes a strong case arguing that he or she spends a lot of time with the client. We argue that only by getting to know the client, can a consultant affect his or her beliefs, attitudes and values. The claims made by consultant A highlight the involvement of the client in the creation of a solution, where the consultant perceives his or her role to be a supportive function. According to our interpretation this shows less of a behavioral control method and more of a normative type of control, focusing less on behavior and more on mindsets.

Following the above analysis, we have pointed to two somewhat contrasting understandings about the relationship to shop floor employees. We can conclude that consultants when interacting with clients on shop

floor level tend to take on a role which is characterized by an authoritative attitude, characteristic for behavioral control. At the same time, consultants seem to consider the individual and his or her beliefs, which is characteristic of the normative control method. This double faceted role can be illustrated in the narrative of a *personal trainer*. This role is distinguished by authoritative inclinations, derived from the consultant's self-image of being knowledgeable, whilst at the same time taking decisions together, with the belief that client acceptance comes from collaboration and creating solutions together with the client.

4.2 Considering Middle Managers

In slight contrast to the relationship to shop floor employees, when considering middle managers the consultants' perceptions showed no considerable division in the relationship. For this level in the organization, we argue that consultants seem to take on a role based on the exercise of normative control, meaning the activity of addressing the beliefs, values and attitudes of the client.

Amongst the respondents there was a recurrent understanding about the existing need to build a strong relationship to middle managers. Consultants stressed the importance of trust to imbue the relation. An approach often applied by the consultants is to spend the day with these managers, accompany them in their work, and invest time in understanding the individual manager. This undertaking is followed by a more challenging approach, where the manager is encouraged to reflect over his or her work, which implies that the consultant addresses the mindsets of this client.

“[...] typically it is more one-on-one coaching, you are spending the day with these people and see issues in doing the job; and you would sit in a meeting with them and after asking ‘how do you think that meeting went? When you ask this question do you think it had been better if you asked it in this way? Why didn’t you do this?’ And giving them real time feedback [...]”
(Consultant C)

“We do more operational consulting on lower levels, on the higher levels we are more challenging [...]”
(Consultant A)

The citations of the consulting process indicate a peer to peer relationship, where the client is asked instead of told (compared to shop floor employees). The second citation indicates that the consultant is more interested in the manager’s thoughts, and less about mechanical measures as seems to be the case when consulting on shop floor level.

“Because they are squeezed from a leadership group that is asking them to deliver results today but they are actually not able to deliver the changes and the results on their own. They need to motivate and have to help their operators or technicians to deliver the benefits on their behalf so they are really squeezed.” (Consultant A)

This statement suggests that the consultant appreciates that middle managers face problems in their intermediary position between senior management and shop floor level. The consultant highlights the low ability of measuring the output of middle managers, and the perception is a high demand on motivating subordinates. We suggest that this acknowledgement implies that the consultant rejects output control as a suitable method and instead points to the significance of attitudes and values of middle managers. This illustration indicates the consultant’s

perception that it is important for middle managers to prioritize and value supportive functions (such as motivation), signaling an inclination towards a normative control approach adopted by the consultant.

It seems that the consultants place great emphasis on a high level of personal investment into creating a trustful relationship. One aspect of this is the proclaimed interest in understanding the individual manager. The reasons for this approach can be interpreted as a way to gain access to the thoughts and beliefs of the client, in order to exercise a more normative type of control.

“Yes I mean the most important one is to be a trusted partner for him so that he can tell openly about his concerns and his problems, and the next step would be to figure out what we can do about it, and I mean it really comes down to the trust relationship you build with the client.” (Consultant F)

This illustration depicts that the consultant seems to have an interest in knowing what concerns the middle manager, the next step being to designing a solution together. Here the consultant emphasizes the collaboration by referring to the parties as “we”. The consultant perceives communication to be of importance in the relationship to the middle managers; by having a two-way communication he or she denoted the opportunity of *“getting the buy in from him”* (Consultant F).

The declarations made by consultants when considering the relationship to middle managers in client organizations, indicate a departure from behavioral control. Instead we can identify work methods used by the consultants that indicate the endurance of a normative approach. We argue that compared to the relationship to shop floor employees, consultants perceive their role as more of an advisory relationship. Unlike in the interaction with shop floor employees, there is little indication of a directive management, thus erasing the authoritative attitude. This attitude

is representative of the personal trainer role, thus eliminating its applicability on middle managers.

To summarize the role that consultants seem to take on when consulting middle management, we emphasize the perceived importance of trust in the relationship. Also of interest is the interpretation made of why this is of interest to the consultant, being that it might be a way to exercise a more normative type of control. The characteristics of the relationship to middle managers have been captured in the role of *trusted advisory*.

4.3 Considering Senior Management

From their understanding about the relationship to this client we can detect a humble, in some sense latent, approach. Consultants seem to view the senior client as a competent individual who possesses the capacity to come up with suitable strategies for the organization:

“When you’re consulting to the highest level it is more of a peer to peer advisory role so they are much more interested in what I call a sparring partner - somebody that can challenge their thinking who can bring new insights and new ways of thinking. So it is less about coaching it is more about being a discussing partner helping them think through their strategy and you necessarily not need to be so hands on (do this do that), you give them feedback.” (Consultant C)

This consultant argues that his or her role has a supportive function, where the actual solution or strategy is constructed by the senior manager.

In this relation the consultant seems to take on the role of a discussing partner, where solutions emerge from a partnership between consultant and client. We argue that this is a contrasting role to that at lower organizational levels, notably at a shop floor level. An illustration of the collaborative relationship with the client can be detected in consultant I’s description of how he or she works with a senior client. The statement

indicates a close collaboration, where there is no obvious distinction between consultant and client:

“A lot of the consulting will be done with him [senior manager] and his management team, actually around the management team table. So I will end up sitting, well, working with them day in and day out and solving the same challenges and be a part of the same discussion” (Consultant I)

This description of the consulting process almost indicates lack of control in the relationship. The image of partnership that the consultant brings forth can be interpreted as lacking pre-established goals with the consulting. However, as we have seen in some responses consultants seem to have more or less given ends to their consulting activity:

“[...] some of them [consultants] take their time to just listen and understand and you’re almost planting ideas. So sometimes solutions that come out are not even ours it is the clients ‘I designed this, perfect!’ - even though we could have give him that idea 2 weeks before. So it all tactics, what we say to all of our teams is that 80% engagement and 20% technique.” (Consultant I)

What can be detected in this illustration is the deliberate focus on dealing with senior managers’ mindsets, which is characteristic for the normative control method. From this statement we can depict a very latent form of normative control, where the consultant reaches the solution he or she designed through concealed influence on the client’s values, beliefs and attitudes. A benefit from this approach seems to be the acceptance that comes with the client’s belief to be the creator of the solution.

Also of interest to consultants when considering senior managers seems to be to have a good relationship to this client.

” If I am a consultant and I think I knew better than you and I am pushing out my knowledge of what you are doing wrong you not going to be very popular. If I am a consultant that built up my experience but I take the time to understand your problem before I give you a potential solution then we can have a good relationship.” (Consultant I)

“If the senior don’t trust you they will have an issue of the project. [...] If you build relationship and trust between the client and you it will be totally different. The client and I are then looking for solutions together with the same interest.” (Consultant E)

Again the awareness of the consultant’s approach to senior managers is illuminated. We assume this awareness to be unspoken and a part of the consultant’s control method, where focus lies on senior managers accepting the changes occurring. We argue that the consultants’ understanding of the importance of partnership on this level supports this assumption. Emergent from the consultants’ perceptions that a partnership relation exists between the consultant and senior manager, we argue that consultants take on the role of *partner* at this level.

There are reasons to reflect upon why consultants take on this role when interacting with senior managers. A salient understanding amongst the interviewees was the increasing importance of politics as you move up the hierarchical levels in an organization. Consultants point to managers’ concerns about their status and image, emphasizing a need to save face.

“The political playing field becomes more important, it is more important higher up in the hierarchy. The political playing field, loss of face or loss of position [...] Of course the political game becomes more important the higher up in the organization, that’s no news.” (Consultant G)

“If you move up in the organization most of the senior are not teams they are set as individuals...so it becomes a lot more political and infighting and it is much more about ‘me’.[...] so you are absolutely right about the ego - it is much more important upstairs.” (Consultant I)

As this perception was common amongst the consultants, as well as the understanding of the partnership relation, we propose there to be a connection between the two. The suggestion is that the partner role might be a way to exercise a very latent form of normative control, as a tactic to not infringe the senior manager’s ego, in order to gain acceptance.

4.4 Considering the Whole Organization

When considering the relationship to clients, not all considerations could be divided according to occupational level in the client organization. Some themes were recurrent independent of this factor. As these understandings were frequently noted in the consultants’ answers we argue their relevance in understanding what role consultants take on in client organizations.

Alongside to the above analysis, of significance to this research are the transboundary understandings of the consultant role in client organizations. Some of the perceptions amongst the respondents are not apparently limited to the organizational levels. For instance, many consultants agreed on the premises on which they were engaged by client organizations. In our interviews experience and objectivity were salient topics, recurrent in the consultants’ understandings of how clients view them. When asked to consider why they believe clients engage consultants in managing change, the notion of experience was commonly asserted.

“We have the experience and can say we have done it before and we have done the change management before and we understand the pitfalls. I think it is about experience” (Consultant D)

“[...] the consultancy has expertise, skills and capabilities that the organization itself doesn't have, so it is an effective way to rent that expertise.” (Consultant C)

As can be interpreted by the narratives portrayed, there seems to be a widely spread idea that external actors view consultants as experts. Based on the assumption that the image of the organization has implication for the image of the individual, we argue the plausibility that consultants portray an image of themselves towards clients that is characterized by expert knowledge. We argue thus, that in relation to his or her client the consultant has a (more or less conscious and exposed) understanding about being an expert.

Following on the interpretation of consultants' perception of how others view them as signaling an institutionalized discourse, is the notion of independence. We argue that as the idea that consultants are objective in their assessments is a frequently recurring view, it can indicate a universal language adopted to describe consultancy work. As has been emphasized by the interviewees, there is a common agreement that one reason for their engagement is the objectivity that supposedly follows from their outsider position.

“[...] you are quite objective as a consultant because we have so much experience from other projects. Being objective is more difficult for someone from the inside. It's easier to give an objective assessment.” (Consultant F)

“[...] people [consultants] come from outside all that experience can set a more challenging target than compared to someone that works in the organization [...] that person maybe will hesitate to a starting targets because it may put his or her colleagues in a

uncomfortable position and may even put himself in an uncomfortable position” (Consultant B)

“[...] the aspect of outsiders, I am not supposed to have any connection to anyone in the organization so I am not biased in anyway [...]” (Consultant A)

The quotes show that the consultants perceive their positions as objective. They point out that the client internally has difficulties to be objective and for that reason they, as external consultants, can do a better job. We argue, as with the expert image, that the macro-level discourse on consultants' independence might have implications for consultants' self-image; thus portraying themselves as objectivists.

For the consultants in our research another important aspect evident is the concept of individual awareness. As stated by Kubr (2002), there is a potential in management consulting for offering excellent service to managers by considering each manager's individuality. As salient in many consultants' perceptions of their work:

“[...] it's about understanding what their [clients'] feelings are, why they [clients] are resistant to the change” (Consultant H)

“[...] resisting change will intense personal reasons and you need to understand that reasons, otherwise you will be solving the wrong problem.” (Consultant C)

“I think if you're going to change people you need to take the time to understand them” (Consultant I)

“[...] there is no magical solution; you just need to take your time to listen and understanding.” (Consultant I)

From these declarations we can identify that consultants seem to understand their role in the relationship as being concerned about conditions that are actual for that particular client. We argue that the

consultants' perceive that they are regarding the individuality of the client, as a way to create opportunities for collaboration, in some cases as a way to control the individual. This perception indicates a humble attitude towards the client. We denote this approach to be of an investigating nature. Of importance to the consultants seems to be to leave out potential preconceptions, and gain a personal relationship to the individual client. The consultants seem to consider their solutions to be context driven.

When considering the whole organization in the consultant-client relationship, we have found that three themes are foremost recurrent; experience of the consultant, being objective, and understanding individuals. As these features are evidentially recurring in established theories on management consulting, we argue that this discourse can be viewed as image management. Of significance is our reflection about the institutionalized image of consultants, and how this might have implications for the individual consultant's image. We argue that consultants might portray themselves more or less as experts, objectivists and investigators, depending on who they are interacting with. Our material shows however, that these images are recurrent at all levels in a client organization.

4.5 Summary

In order to highlight the distinction in roles seemingly taken on by consultants when considering different levels in client organizations, we have constructed a table which presents the before mentioned roles.

Personal trainer	Trusted advisory	Partner
The consultant has an authoritative approach, and to some extent leads by directives. The consultant takes into consideration the precondition of the client	The relationship to the client is imbued by trust. Consultants practice one-on-one advisory and use normative control.	Solutions are designed through collaborative efforts. Consultants exert highly latent normative control.

Table 2. The characteristics of the three roles depending on hierarchical level, own construction.

Significant distinctions have been made based on perceptions held by consultants in this research. There seem to be varying control methods

embedded in the relationships to different clients. We have seen tendencies towards a more direct control in relation to clients at shop floor level, which seems to be in contrast to methods used at the other hierarchical levels. We have interpreted consultants' understandings of the relationship as indications of the type of control used, and thereby make out different roles that consultants might assume.

The control method that can be perceived as a more obtrusive form of consulting which seems evident on the shop floor indicates the adaption of behavioral control. An interesting aspect however, is the observed contrary understanding amongst consultants about the relationship to shop floor employees. As a recurring perception seems to be a collaborative consideration, in this situation consultants seem to insinuate a normative approach. This somewhat contrasting role is likened to a personal trainer. The consultant in this role has an authoritative approach, but at the same time demonstrates consideration to the individuality of the client.

As consultants move up the hierarchical ladder in client organizations, they seem to move away from the behavioral control. The perception amongst consultants of the interaction with middle managers suggests a more coaching approach, where they challenge the attitudes and values of the client. In this relationship consultants appreciate an increased need of collaboration. This can be drawn from how they perceive their consulting process, where the work is imbued with one-on-one coaching, and directives are replaced with questions. To illustrate this relationship and the role that consultants might take on when considering middle managers, we have concluded consultants as being a trusted advisory for this client.

At the senior level in client organizations it is apparent that the behavioral and output control is non-existent when interpreting the consultants' perceptions of the relationship. Here the relationship seems to be characterized as being a peer to peer discussing relation, with sole attention on the normative understandings of the client. According to most consultants, the collaboration between consultant and client is considered to be of utmost importance at this level. We have seen indications in the

interviews that support the notion of a latent type of control. The way consultants portray themselves in relation to the senior client indicates a partner role.

In addition to concrete distinctions between differentiated roles at different levels in client organizations, we have seen more transboundary tendencies. The most salient tendencies amongst consultants in regards to the whole organization are shown in the illustration below.

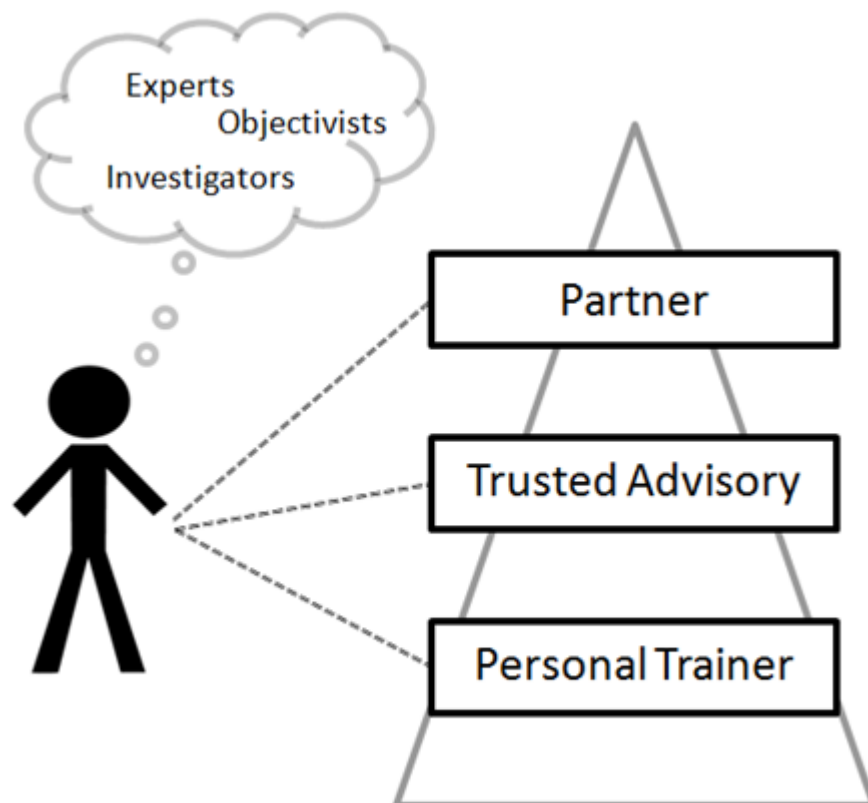


Figure 2. How the roles are dependent on hierarchical level, own construction

The illustration indicates the different roles linked to the hierarchical division of client organizations, as well as the generally recurring themes. As the frequency of these themes in the interviews is very high, it might indicate an institutionalized discourse within the consulting industry. We suggest that such a discourse shows implications for the consultants' language use and in extension their self-image. We argue further that the consultants' appreciation of this image shapes how they portray themselves when interacting with clients. As we will discuss, there are reasons to assume that this portrayal might be more or less salient

depending on what level in the organization the consultant is currently working with.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the thesis is to highlight critical aspects in the relationship between consultant and client, and how these have implications for the role taken on by consultants. We have shown that the consultants seem to take on different roles depending on who the client is, in this chapter we will discuss how these roles can be understood.

Most of the existing literature on the roles in the consultant-client relationship does not take into consideration the complexity of the client (e.g. Schein 1997; Kubr 2002). The main stream literature does not make a difference between the levels in the client organization, and the client is often referred to as the whole organization. We enhance that the complexity of the client concept requires a reconsideration of the roles in the existing literature.

Below we are going to discuss the roles that we found in the empirical chapter, we are going to present them according to dependant roles and transboundary roles.

5.1 Dependent Roles

The role(s) that we found vary in level of directive approach according to organizational level studied, which goes in line with what Kubr (2002) suggests. We argue that in lower levels the directive approach is more prevalent. This is illustrated in the interaction between the consultant and his client, from the consultant's perspective. According to our findings, consultants seem to be more hands-on in their consulting at shop floor level, adopting what could be considered a more obtrusive form of control. The perception amongst the consultants seems to be that they possess the knowledge on how the client should be doing in order to be more efficient. This indicates that the ability to measure the output at shop floor level is considered to be high, as well as the understanding about the transformation process at this level.

Ouchi (1979) argues that the purpose of behavioral control creates a need for a high ability to measure output and at the same time have perfect understanding about the transformation process. We were thus able to show that consultants tend to manage shop floor employees in a fashion that indicates this type of control. By identifying better ways of performing work tasks, and directing employees to perform accordingly, we argue that consultants conduct behavioral control. This goes well in line with Ouchi's assumption.

However, we were also able to depict tendencies amongst the consultants to not steamroll the employees, but utilize their knowledge base. Consultants gave the impression that they work together with the shop floor employees, indicating that they take part in constructing the solution. If one adopts this understanding as legitimate, and not merely as a way to manipulate the employee, it points to a more normative type of control. The practice of involving the shop floor employee can be interpreted as a way to gain employee commitment for the project. One can assume that by being part of the solution, the client buys into the concept and accepts it. This, thus, can be a conscious practice from the consultants, a way to control the beliefs of the client.

From the empirical material concerning middle managers, we are able to observe some recurrent topics that seem to be of importance for the consultants in this relationship. The consultants' focal points indicate a greater interest for the mindset of this client. In many cases consultants emphasized trust and collaboration as vital in the consulting process. Also, there seems to be an understanding amongst the consultants that middle managers should be challenged, indicating that the consultants take an interest in the mindsets of this client.

The focus on mindsets has been interpreted as the exercise of a normative type of control. Here we argue that the consultants' practice of spending time with middle managers in order to understand them can be viewed as part of the control process. The assumption made is that in order to

challenge the client's mindsets, the consultant needs to appreciate the current beliefs and values of the particular client.

We argue further that the trust and collaboration, that are perceived by the consultants as being critical in this relationship, can be explained using the same assumption. As was illustrated by a consultant, in order to gain access to the understandings of the client, he or she presumably has to trust the consultant. Our interpretation, thus, is that the claimed importance of trust and collaboration can reflect that consultants tend to focus more on the values, beliefs and attitudes of middle managers, than on mechanical measurements. In extension this indicates normative control methodology.

The normative control also seems evident in the interaction with senior managers. From the consultants' statements of how they interact with this client we have seen indications of a latent type of influence, where the consultants' seem to focus on the mindsets of the senior manager. This concealed influence was in some cases explicitly depicted by the respondents, indicating that it is a conscious undertaking.

We have shown that consultants' understandings of how they interact with shop floor employees indicate a behavioral type of control, signaling that the role they take on has an authoritative characteristic. We denote, in line with Ouchi (1979), that this approach can be perceived as more direct and obtrusive in its nature, than the normative method.

In contrast, when considering senior level there are no signs in the illustrations made by the consultants of behavioral control. The purpose of the control is suggested to be to influence the beliefs, attitudes and values of the senior manager, why consultants seem to take a less obtrusive approach and adopting the role of a partner. We argue that this disparity reflects that a client organization cannot be generalized to be a "client"; if this would be the case, we suggest that the role taken on by consultants would be homogeneous for all hierarchical levels.

Current theory does not explain the phenomena that the roles seemingly taken on by consultants change depending on the hierarchical level in the

client organization. We argue that this finding indicates a complexity in the client concept that is not being considered by researchers. Thus, we suggest a re-consideration of the complexity of the client, and in extension the roles prominent in the current literature.

Figure 3 illustrates how consultants seem to exert control at different levels in the client organization. As stated above at shop floor the consultants seem to use behavioral control, but we have also found tendencies towards a more normative type of control. At middle manager level and senior level the normative control seems more prominent. At senior management level, the normative methods seem more latent than at middle management level.

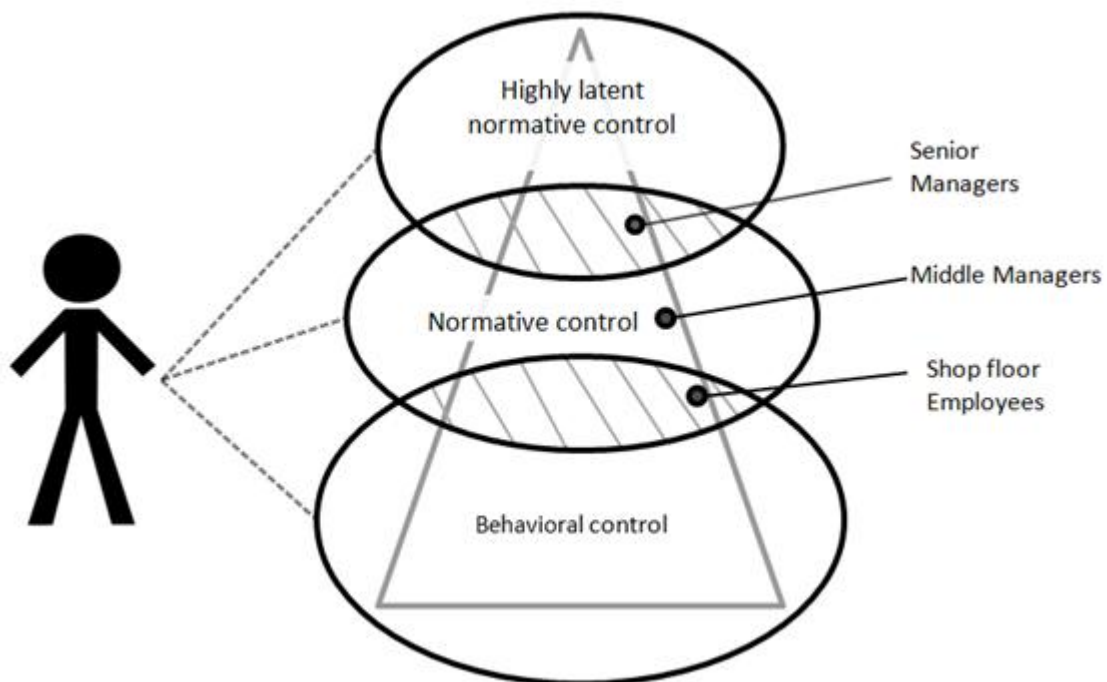


Figure 3. The connection between roles and type of control, own construction

Literature that is concerned with understanding the consultant-client relationship assumes that it can be understood from a control dynamic perspective. There are three established views that adopt this idea: the functionalistic view, the critical view, and the social learning model. According to Werr and Styhre (2003) the functionalistic view suggests the

relationship to be characterized by distance and objectivity, where the consultant is a knowledge worker and the client is a buyer of expertise. In contrast to the critical view, the functionalistic perspective asserts that it is the client that possesses the power (Werr and Styhre, 2003). According to this literature the consultant therefore is dependent on having a strong and trust filled relationship to the client. In our research we have observed an appreciation for such a relationship as being critical. However, we have been able to make a distinction between different levels and the perceived importance for a trust filled relationship.

From the interviews we can depict that the consultants' seem to emphasize trust as an increasingly important factor as we move up the hierarchy. We argue thus that conceptualizing client as an organization imposes the risk to neglect the complexity in the concept and thereby the consultant-client relationship.

This can be further illustrated by the social learning model perspective and its assumptions. According to this literature, the relationship between a consultant and client is dependent on the collaboration between the two actors (Nikolova et al., 2009). As we have pointed out above, the consultants' in this research emphasize collaboration as being especially important at middle and senior manager level. This variation in actuality depending on who the client is, once again points to a necessity in considering the complexity of the client concept. We argue that this is neglected in the current views on the consultant-client relationship.

When considering the relationship between the consultant and the client, many researchers have found various roles that consultants suggestively take on when interacting with clients. We have presented a few of these roles that are represented in mainstream literature. The characteristics of these roles can be found in numerous versions under different labels, the attributes that we have specified from our empirical material is no exception. We do not argue for the uniqueness of our presented roles, but merely for the extended considerations that have been made in our research.

Kubr (2002:70;72) makes a distinction between resource and process roles, the assumption that he makes, alongside many of his colleagues, is that the client is considered to be the whole client organization. The author argues that consultants take on the role of “agent of change” in order to help the client organization through a change project. We argue on the basis of our findings that such simplification is at risk of neglecting critical aspects in the consultant-client relationship. From our interviews we see tendencies that indicate diverse consulting roles within a client organization, supporting the proposition that the client is a complex phenomenon.

5.2 Transboundary Roles

The transboundary roles that we found in the empirical material were the expert, objectivist and investigator. We noticed that the politics in the client organization became more important at higher levels in the organization, and that this is something the consultants seem to take into consideration when they consult the client.

In the functionalistic literature the consultant is often attributed properties such as expert, objectivists and independent of the political games in the client organization (Werr and Styhre, 2003). As this is a salient use of language to describe the consulting industry and its actors, it is not an exaggerated claim to call it a macro discourse. We argue that theorists and practitioners alike are responsible of preserving this discourse. Stated by critical literature is that the consulting industry use this language for the legitimization of its existence (e.g. Alvesson, 2004). The ambiguity of consultancy's nature according to this literature requires such discourse in order to maintain the validity of the industry. The functionalistic literature however, argues the importance and actual contribution of consultancies (Werr and Styhre, 2003).

The frequent use of this language by the consultants in this research indicated that it might be an institutionalized discourse within management consulting, as a part of an image management practice. The knowledge intensive consulting industry is image-sensitive and thus relies on image

management even during the transformation process. When encountered with this discourse in our interviews we have interpreted it to be an institutionalized use of language, with implications for the individual consultant's self-image.

As stated by Alvesson and Empson (2008:6) the perception of the organizational image has implications for the image of the individual. Thus, one can assume that consultants' understandings about why clients engage consultancies, has implications for how the individual consultant views him or herself in relation to clients. We argue therefore that when consultants perceive that clients engage them for their experience, it can create a self-image of expertise. In extension, the consultant's image is assumed to influence how he or she portrays him or herself in the interaction with clients, meaning the role taken on by the consultant.

The portrayal of the role can be more or less explicit in the relationship to clients. One can assume for instance that the role of expert is more salient in some contexts than in others, where it might be more accepted by the client. At other times, the consultant might down-play this role in order not to intrude a client's ego. As has been evident in the interviews, the political aspects are increasingly important higher up the hierarchical ladder, where consultants consider senior managers to be more aware of their facade. Based on this observation we would propose the plausibility that consultants down-play their expertise when consulting senior managers, in order to gain acceptance for their presence. Therefore we argue that the expert role seems present at all levels in a client organization, but that it might be more or less prominent depending on what level the consultant is working with.

If one considers the consultants' discourse on independence as being an important factor for clients when engaging consultancies, one can analyze whether this is equally important throughout the client organization. An assumption made in the literature argues that the macro-level discourse is used to spread expectations and firm reputation to the market, to stress the necessity of consultancies (Alvesson, 2004). This employment would

arguably be directed towards those in charge of hiring consultants. Extending this assumption, we argue that the portrayal of being an objectivist suggestively might be more explicit in the interaction with senior managers than with shop floor employees. As it is most likely clients at managerial levels who engage consultants, we argue that it might be of more importance to visibly portray oneself as objective to this client. However we denote that it seems not to be limited to this organizational level.

As stated in the functionalistic literature, consultants suggestively can benefit from having good relationships to their clients, not the least in order to learn more about them (Kubr, 2002). This assumption could also be connected to the macro-level discourse and interpreted as image management for sustaining a good reputation; which according to Alvesson (2004) is of utmost importance in knowledge intensive organizations. Consultants in this research frequently argued for the importance of understanding their client. This was recurrent throughout the interviews, with no clear connection to organizational level.

As was denoted in the discussion on “dependent roles”, the normative control seems to be more evident higher up the hierarchy. One could assume that understanding the client therefore might seem more important at middle and senior managerial levels in client organizations. This is based on the idea that normative control aims at influencing the mindset of the client, which arguably requires an understanding of the client’s persona.

A reflection that has emerged during the interviews is that a connection relationship might exist between the objectivity of the consultants and their investigative conduct. From this assumption we see a problematic in the consultants’ ambitions to learn more about their clients and at the same time keep their objective perspective. We argue for an impending risk that the objectivity decreases as the knowledge about the client increases. Therefore it might be of relevance for consultants to make a tradeoff between the two roles in the relationship, to find the appropriate balance

between objectivity and acquaintance. One can question the functionalistic literatures assertion that the consultant has no biases in the client organization (Werr and Styhre, 2003), as a point made in this literature is the benefit of getting to know the client (Kubr, 2002). According to our argumentation this would have negative implications for the independence of the consultant.

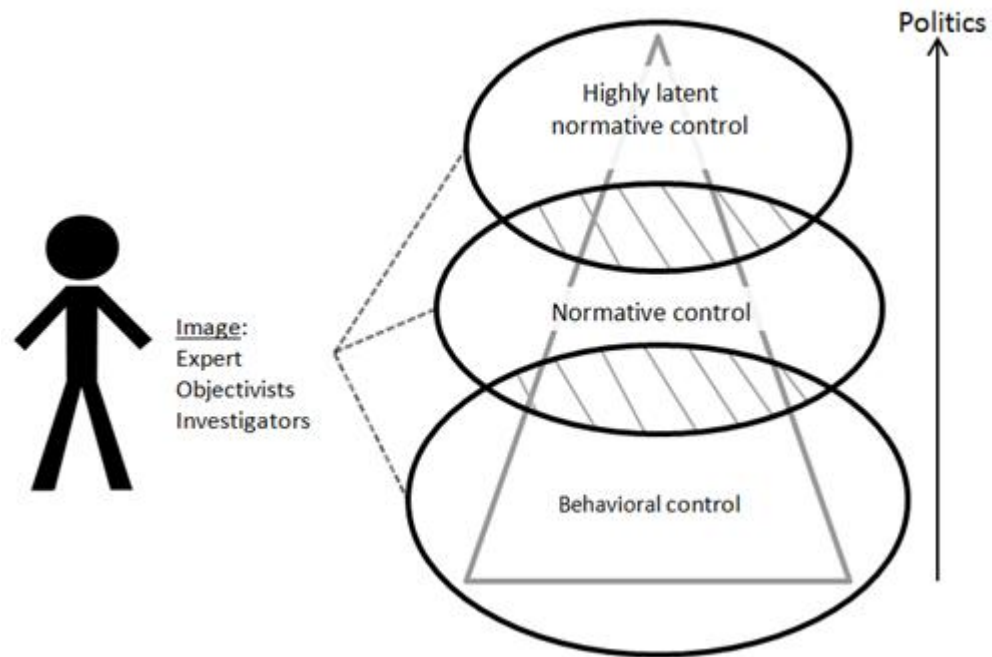


Figure 4. Transboundary roles, types of control and the increasingly important politics, own construction

Figure 4 depicts that the consultant seems to portray him or herself as being an *expert* and *objectivist* when interacting with clients. Also illustrated is the *investigative* conduct which seems to be existent at all levels. We have argued that these roles seem to be transboundary, meaning that they seem to be adopted by the consultants independent of hierarchical level. However, we suggest that they can be more or less explicitly adopted by the consultant for various reasons, foremost in order to gain client acceptance. The upwards pointing arrow illustrates the consultants' perceptions that politics are considered more important higher up the hierarchy, which seems to have implications for the visibility of the expert, objectivist and investigative portrayal.

6. Conclusion

In our research we observe tendencies in the consultants' understandings of their relationship to clients which indicate that consultants take on different roles depending on what level in a client organization they are working with. We make an effort to near the complexity of the client concept by dividing the client according to three hierarchical levels; shop floor, middle manager, and senior manager. This is not a complete presentation of the complexity at hand, but a way to approach it. From this analysis we can draw conclusions that indicate a complexity in the consulting work.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

The purpose of this paper has been to widen the understanding of the complexity at hand when regarding different roles that change management consultants take on when interacting with clients. Our approach to this problem tries to take into consideration the complexity of the client by challenging the assumption that a whole organization can be considered a client. We have focused our research on different levels in client organizations, including shop floor, middle managers and senior managers.

The findings show tendencies amongst the consultants' perceptions towards different roles depending on who the client is. We have categorized these perceptions into three roles; personal trainer, trusted advisory and partner. We argue that whilst theories on consulting roles include the characteristics of our roles, our consideration to the complexity of the client concept in the consultant-client relationship means that we have made a theoretical contribution to the field.

6.2 Practical Contribution

Of significance in this paper has been the finding that there are recurring understandings amongst change management consultants about their

relationship to clients. According to our findings, consultants seem to take on different roles depending on who the client is. We argue that this has practical relevance as it highlights critical features in the consultant-client relationship. When consultants interact with clients, an understanding of their own role in relation to that particular client might have implications for the collaboration.

Being aware of the ways in which the consultant thinks of him or herself in relation to the client can create an opportunity to reconsider taken-for-granted conceptions. We argue, thus, that awareness of possible pre-established conditions is a way to circumvent preconceptions that one might have. For instance, if consultants are aware of a macro-discourse that might be unconsciously learned and attached to their image, they would have the opportunity to look beyond such language and thereby get a distanced view, which might be cleared from instilled conceptions.

In our discussion we suggested that there is a tradeoff paradox in the consulting practice between getting to know and understand the client, and keeping one's objective perspective. We argue that this assertion is of practical relevance for management consultants during the consulting process, where it might be of value to find a balance between the two positions.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

During the process of writing this thesis we have encountered numerous interesting areas which might be relevant for further study. In addition to the topics highlighted in this research, consultants indicated some considerations that can be of importance for practitioners and academics alike. One such consideration was the appreciation of cultural differences amongst the consultants' clientele. We suggest that such differences can be of significance when researching on critical aspects in the consultant-client relationship.

In aspect of the time frame for this thesis it was necessary to narrow the definition of client, we therefore approached the complexity of the client

concept by distinguishing between different organizational levels. For further studies there is scope to continue approaching this complexity by considering other aspects, such as gender, age, educational background of clients and so forth.

Furthermore our research was constrained by both financial and time resources, which had implications for the methodology used. As our respondents were located around the world, we had no opportunity to attend during their consulting practice. We argue however that an observation study could be a relevant approach to explore how consultants interact with clients.

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Appendix

Terms and definitions

In the thesis there are terms that can be ambiguous and to improve the readability we will present some definitions:

Knowledge intensive firm: We follow Alvesson's (2004:237) definition of knowledge intensive firms and argue that one important characteristic for these organizations are the intellectual skills of the work force. Furthermore the key offer of these types of firms is knowledge based products that more often than not are intangible and therefore ambiguous in their nature.

Consultant: In this thesis we argue consultants to be knowledge intensive workers whose primary contribution to customers is knowledge based products. We focus on change management consultants, i.e. external consultants who implement change projects at client firms.

Client: The concept of client is ambiguous. In the thesis we approach the concept. In existing literature the concept of clients are often simplified and is often referred to the whole client organization (Kubr, 2002:64).

Consultant-client relationship: This entails the various relations that exist between a consultant and his or her clients, based on direct and indirect interaction.

Management consulting

Reconsider the Client Complexity

The client organization consists of more than one client

May 16th 2014, 15:00 | By: Ekvý, J & Pawlicka, M

MANAGEMENT consultants perceive themselves as having different roles at different levels in the organization. “Everybody can’t consult at all levels of an organization because you need different skills” says a management consultant.

Often when talking about clients the meaning is the whole client organization. However research shows that the management consultant work is more complex than to just going into an organization and start to change them – you need to interact and understand the client. A management consultant means that “there is no magical solution; you just need to take your time to listen and understanding.” This understanding can just be made by trusted relationships.

The results come from good relationships. To build up a relationship you need different strategies when interacting with senior managers, middle managers as well as shop floor employees. With this understanding of the client organization, management consultants can become more aware when they interact.

At shop floor, findings show that consultants often have a more directive approach than with the senior managers. The control at shop floor is often behavioral, when moving up in the client organization the control used by management consultant is more about changing ideas, beliefs and norms. At more senior levels consultants control take a more latent position when interacting and the relationships are defined by collaboration.

Findings have shown that the consultants’ roles can be equated with a “personal trainer” on the shop floor, because management consultants often take an expert role but also try to push and work together with the shop floor employees. With the middle managers the consultant role is more illustrated as a “trusted advisory”, who gives feedback and asks questions to develop the client. At the senior level it is important for the consultant to collaborate and the solutions are made together with the client, the role on this level can be seen as a “partner”.

There is a clear difference how the management consultant perceives him or herself between the hierarchical levels within the client organization. This disparity reflects that the client organization cannot be generalized to only one client. If that was the case the consultant role had been the same at all hierarchical levels.