Doing Value: Exclusion and Inclusion in Management Consultant-Client Interactions

Svensson, Peter

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Peter Svensson

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the value of management consultancy services is socially and discursively accomplished in the social interaction between consultants and their clients. A meeting between a consultant and his potential client is studied in detail, with a particular focus on discursive interaction. It is suggested that value is accomplished as an ongoing interplay between *exclusion* and *inclusion* of consultancy knowledge. The tension between what is included and excluded is related to Georg Simmel's ideas on the geometry of value and the ideal type of 'the stranger', the figure who is both near and far.

Author:
Peter Svensson
Business of Administration, Lund University
P.Box 7080
SE-220 07 Lund
Sweden
Peter.Svensson@fek.lu.se

Introduction

Management consultancy has grown with great speed over the last two decades, much faster than the industry nations' GNPs (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995: 24; Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003: 269), and up to twice as fast as the total world economy (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001: 934). At the same time management consultancy has received strong critique for offering expensive commodifications of common sense knowledge (Guest, 1990) and for being unsubstantial, rhetorical (Legge, 2002; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002) and manipulative (Jackson, 1996). Furthermore, as suggested by Fincham (1999: 341), "consultants also rank among the great folk devils of the business world". The consultant is often seen as "the guy who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is".

This stream of critique is in part rooted in the difficulties for the clients to evaluate the services provided by management consultants (e.g. Løwendahl, 2000; Alvesson 2001; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996b; Starbuck, 1992: 731). Consultancy services are often characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity regarding both the demand (what is needed?) and the supply (what is offered?). The services offered by consultants are framed and marketed as esoteric knowledge in the possession of experts. This framing of management consultancy also provides the main reason for why organisations should hire consultants in the first place.

Moreover, the problems that management consultants set out to solve are often complex in character, involving social processes whose cause and effect relations are difficult to overlook and control (Alvesson, 2001: 869). Tasks such as shaping a creative work environment, increasing market shares or understanding customers buying motivation are virtually impossible to evaluate in terms of observable and measurable effects. Social life and the human psyche are not easily captured in controlled experiment situations. As Alvesson remarks: "Even if something seems to work, it might have worked even better or the cost of the intervention might have been much lower if another professional or organization had carried out the task" (Ibid.).

Glückler and Armbrüster (2003: 270) see these problems as a part of what they refer to as 'transactional uncertainty', which to some extent is an effect of the intangibility of the consultancy services. The client cannot evaluate the service quality before delivery. In effect, the consultancy service, and in particular the definition of the problem and its corresponding solution, is to a substantial extent co-produced in the interaction between the client and the consultant. The client thus becomes a part of what is being subjected to his or her evaluation (Glückner and Armbrüster, 2003: 277). Consequently, Fincham (1999: 342) suggests, the consultant-client relation should be seen as "the immediate context of the consultancy process" (see also Sturdy, 1997; Patriotta and Spedale, 2009). In a similar vein, Glückler and Armbrüster (2003: 276) observe that: "Consulting clients do not purchase ready-made products; instead they contract a consulting firm to perform a service in subsequent cooperation".

In addition to the transactional uncertainty, management consultancy also suffers from 'formal institutional uncertainty', a lack of standardisation and regulation of education, merits and product quality (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003: 271). Management consultants are not seen as professionals in the same way a doctor or psychologist are defined as members of an established and legitimate profession. Anyone, irrespective of education and training, can refer to themselves as 'management consultant', making it hard for clients to base their evaluations of consultancy services on a formal title, legitimate credentials or standardised exams.

The difficulties in evaluating consultancy deliveries lead into another question: that of *value*. Arguably, the experience of value is contingent upon the possibility and capacity to evaluate the products for sale. Value is the result of evaluation. How, then, is the value of management consultancy created when the act of evaluation is fundamentally problematic (Fincham, 1999: 336)? How do consultants "establish (…) the worth of their advice?" (Fincham, 1999: 338) when this is difficult and at times even impossible to evaluate?

Taking seriously the interactional and social nature of the production of management consultancy, in this paper I explore the ways in which the value of a consultancy service is socially and discursively accomplished – how value is *done* – in the interaction between management consultants and clients. The paper is empirically based on a focused social situation: a one hour meeting between a management and a potential client. The assumption undergirding my argument is that more general ways of organising social relations can be fruitfully studied in focused interactional situations (Kärreman and Alvesson (2001). As Boden once put it: "Through the microscope, one can see glimpses of the fine structures of the social universe" (Boden, 1990: 191). Shedding light upon the minute details of social interaction between consultants and clients is key to the understanding of how value is accomplished in regular practices of mundane, everyday life.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section I give a brief review of previous research on the practice and value of management consultancy. After some theoretical and methodological notes, the empirical case – a meeting between a consultant and a potential client – is presented in some detail. In the next section I then analyse the interaction between the consultant and his potential client as an ongoing and mutually accomplished interplay between *exclusion* and *inclusion* of consultancy knowledge. The paper ends with a discussion where I draw upon Georg Simmel and his writings on the geometry of value and the ideal type of the 'stranger', a figure who is simultaneously near and far.

Previous studies of the value of management consultancy

Previous research of management consultancy – a research area that has been described as "largely sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive" (Sturdy et al, 2004: 337) – has offered an array of suggestions of strategies used (or to be used) by consultants in order to overcome both exchange and formal institutional uncertainty and, in doing so, create value for the clients.

In order to compensate for the lack of formal institutional certainty, it has been suggested that management consultants have to rely on experience based trust, i.e. trust based upon personal experience, reputation or recommendations (Amorim and Kipping, 1999; Clark, 1995: 70-71; Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003: 279; Fincham, 1995: 713). According to this literature, a large extent of the value of consultancy services resides in good reputation, fame and familiarity.

Another ilk of management consultancy research has drawn attention to the use of symbolic resources as signifiers of quality and value in order to establish trust in the consultant-client relationship. Glückler and Armbrüster (2003) have aptly referred to these alternative signifiers as 'performance surrogates' whereas Alvesson (1993) uses the term 'rationality surrogates'. The function of these surrogates is to elicit trust and create legitimacy and according to Starbuck it is imperative that consultancy firms acknowledge the worth of this 'symbolic output' (Starbuck, 1992: 731). Examples of symbolic resources – or surrogates – that have been mentioned in the literature include the use of legitimate discursive resources of various kinds (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Bloomfield and Best, 1992), for instance rhetoric (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002: 233; Kieser, 1997) and in particular the rhetoric of technical rationality and science (Starbuck, 1992: 731; Sturdy, 1997: 399). These discursive-rhetorical resources are drawn upon so as to construct

identities and interests, but also in order to define the problems to be solved as well as their solutions.

Another focus in the research on management consultancy has been the ways in which exchange uncertainty is dealt with in the relation between consultant and client. Among the most popular explanations of consultancy success presented in this literature is the use of impression management in client meetings and public settings (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998). Giving the right impression is then seen as a crucial part of value creation in the consultants' encounters with their clients. The metaphors of theatre, drama and storytelling have been used in order to describe consultants' attempts to manage impression in front of their clients (Clark and Salaman. 1995; 1996a; 1998). Accordingly, the value of the consultancy services depends on the quality of theatrical performance, dramaturgical choreography and the calibre of the tales being told.

Though most of the research on management consultancy seems to have been preoccupied with the various strategies employed by consultants in order to secure trust, legitimacy and client value, suggestions of what consultants in effect bring to their clients can also be found in the literature. Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2004), for instance, suggest that management consultants operate in the business of language, introducing new language, terminology and metaphors that produce noise and disorder in the client organisation. In a similar vein, Sturdy (1997: 398) has argued that the value delivered by management consultants is to be found in the nexus between security and insecurity. On the one hand, consultants offer certainty and reassurance to their clients. On the other, they also deliver uncertainty and in insecurity. Thus, Sturdy seems to suggests, the value of the consultancy service is created in this tension between certainty and uncertainty.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this body of literature by means of getting even closer to the fine-grain details of how value is accomplished in and through interactions between consultants and clients. The above-mentioned research has done an important job of drawing attention to some of the "strategies of persuasion" (Fincham, 1999: 339) and symbolic techniques used by consultants. However, the intricate social and interactional dynamics through which value is created in actual consultant-client interactions still need further empirical investigations. In what follows I will suggest that value is not primarily something delivered *by* consultants *to* clients, for instance by means of impression management, storytelling or rhetoric, but rather a social accomplishment that *happens* and *is done* in the recurrent interactions between consultants and clients.

Where It Happens, When it Happens: The Consultant-Client Interaction in the Limelight

The relation between the service provider and the client is of consequential importance for what happens in the process of management consulting (Fosstenløkken et al, 2003; Agar, 1985; Atkinson, 1995; Bergmann, 1992; Boguch and Danet, 1984). Moreover, as aforesaid, the consultancy service is, as such, created in and through this relation. In a sense, the consultancy service *happens* there and then, in the encounter between the consultant and the client.

Researchers in sociolingustics, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have stressed the importance of studying the mundane interactions between professionals and clients, for instance in medical diagnosing (Agar, 1985; Heath, 1992; Maynard, 1991), questioning (West, 1984; Silverman, 1987), doctors' consultation (Atkinson, 1995; Heath, 1982), psychiatry sessions (Bergmann, 1992) and in lawyers' meetings with their clients (Bogoch and Danet, 1984). These mundane interactions give insights into a "privileged domain of everyday existence" (Atkinson, 1988: 452) and represent a 'microcosm' of the distribution of knowledge and power arrangement in society (Atkinson, 1995: 31). Detailed observations and analysis of the fine-grain details of everyday

micro situations can thus provide a peephole into the social dynamics of everyday consultancy work.

In this paper, particular attention is paid to the *discursive* interaction between consultants and clients. This is in line with Clegg, Kronberger and Rhodes' (2004: 36) assumption that "consulting is first and foremost a linguistic activity – a discursive practice through which realities are enacted". More specifically, my argument draws on a social psychological and discourse analytical understanding of language and practice (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Shotter and Gergen, 1994), according to which language use does:

> *not merely reflect or mirror objects, events, and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively construct a version of those things. They do not just describe things; they do things. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 6)*

Language, and in particular language in interaction, accomplishes things and creates what we often treat as pre-given objects in the social world (Potter, 1996). Thus:

> *the assumption of an already stable, well-firmed, systematic reality "behind appearances," full of things identifiable independently of language, awaiting discovery by the appropriate methods, must be replaced by another reality of a more social and more historical kind: that of a vague, still developing, still only partially specified, unstable, contestable reality, "furnished" and "furnishing" a two-sided fore-structure of understanding, open to further specifications as a result of human, communicative activity. (Shotter and Gergen, 1994: 14 f.)*

Thus, a phenomenon such as the value of consultancy services is accordingly understood as a social and discursive artefact that is created, reproduced, challenged as well as subverted in everyday social interaction.

In the next section, I will take the reader through a meeting between a marketing management consultant, Anders, working at B&B Consultancy Agency, and a potentially new client of his: DigitalTV. The empirical material used here is a part of a larger study of professional marketing work reported elsewhere (Svensson, 2004).

The methodological approach opted for is the one Alvesson and Deetz (2000) refer to as 'situational focus', according to which:

> *A particular situation – a meeting, a job interview, a spontaneous encounter, an event, a decision process, a problem or a task delimited in time and space – rather than stable behaviour patterns, attributes or traits is the focus of the study. (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 201)*

Concentrating the interpretative efforts to a single situation involves a relatively close-up and detailed examination of the empirical material, wherein serious attention is paid to details such as symbols, choice of words, order of speaking, grammar and metaphors.

The meeting was observed by me assuming the role of what Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 96) labelled 'observer-as-participant'. In other words, I did not participate in the meeting as such, but intervened only when I was addressed directly by the other meeting participants. As the clients did not give their permission to me, tape-recording the discussion, this could unfortunately not be

done. However, extensive field notes were taken by me during the one and a half hour-meeting, notes that were transcribed once more immediately after the end of the session.

DigitalTV was a one-year old company that at the time of the meeting had just finished the development of a so-called 'TV-portal' that would enable interactive TV-viewing. The time had now arrived to release the product, and in due order a market plan was to be put together. One day, Susanne Andersson, employee at DigitalTV, read an article in the paper 'Business Magazine' that managed to capture her interest. The article carried the headline: 'This is why the e-commerce companies fail: Too much focus upon Internet and too little on the customers'. The article described a study co-conducted by B&B and a local Business School. 1400 individuals, between the ages of 18 and 65, were according to the article text interviewed in this study. One of the conclusions that were drawn was that customers tend to be neglected when the e-commerce companies place too much a focus upon the technology without taking into account the needs of the customers. Susanne suspected that this could perhaps be something of relevance for DigitalTV and their forthcoming product release, and decided to send a mail to B&B. This is where our story begins.

The Client Meeting

Participants
Anders, a marketing consultant at B&B consultancy agency
Mary, a project manager at DigitalTV
Susanne, an employee at DigitalTV
Ann, an employee at DigitalTV
Karin, another employee at DigitalTV

(1) After a couple of rounds of e-mail correspondence between B&B and DigitalTV, wherein Susanne had expressed her interest in letting Anders come to DigitalTV and present the study referred to in the magazine article, as well as talk about at B&B could offer DigitalTV, a meeting was scheduled.

Quarter to nine, the taxi car halted next to a large office building. Anders, smartly dressed in a black, immaculate suit, a white shirt, a discreet, yellow tie and elegant black shoes, exited the vehicle and went in through the main entrance of DigitalTV's office buildning. After having been greeted by Susanne, he was shown in to a conference room where he was introduced to the rest of the meeting participants: Mary, Ann and Karin.

Mary then gave a presentation of DigitalTV. It started just one year ago, she informed Anders, by three persons. Today the company employed some sixty persons, and the next year, Mary continued, not without a glimpse of pride in her voice, the staff would amount to about eighty persons. The product that was going to be introduced and marketed was a certain kind of box which could be connected to a plain TV-set, and if done properly, would enable interactive TV-viewing.

We are targeting the households that today only have access to channel 1, 2 and 4', Mary explained, 'and we have formulated a rather high goal: 100 000 boxes sold this year. Honestly I doubt that we will be able to reach this goal this year. In any case, our plan is to release a first version of the TV-box this November. Important when doing so is that our product doesn't mirror the Internet, but reflects what our end-consumers want and demand. We don't know yet; we are not there now. We are setting up a market plan at the moment.'

Anders was next on the speaker list, and he embarked on his presentation of B&B and the study, that in fact was the main reason for his presence today.

(2)   By means of monitoring a new power point image on the wall, Anders kicked off his presentation. The image carried the headline 'B&B's view of totality':

INSIGHT-----CHOICE OF PATH-----IMPLEMENTATION

Anders commented on the picture. 'The projects where we have been allowed to take part all the way along, those are the projects that have worked out the best. Sometimes, we are only entitled to take part *here* [he pointed at "insight"], and now and then we are only allowed to implement. The very best results are achieved when we can participate all the way.'

(3)   The next image displayed on the whiteboard behind Anders summarised the areas of interests that DigitalTV had expressed in the initial e-mail correspondence. 'This is what you wished to know'. Anders said. 'I will help you somewhat on the way there. The study is very broad, deals with buying behaviour in general, and I would never make use of the conclusions from this study on your specific customer. Then things can go very wrong.'

Karin barged in: 'How large was the study?'

Thank you for that pass', Anders replied rapidly and showed the next power point picture.

This is how we did it...
Three qualitative studies
Quantitative study: 1400 phone interviews with people, 18-65 years old
Internet experience without importance
Questions concerning buying behaviour today and in the future

'In other words', Anders said, 'we didn't take into consideration whether or not they were on the Internet, and we asked about attitudes.'

(4)   'Did the study deal with what they [the consumers, my remark] lacked?', Karin wondered.

Anders hesitated: 'Hmm, you know, we as consumers are very complex. This is really a complex matter. You as a consumer behave differently. That is why it is important for companies to find out what precisely *your* customers want. You should not be interested in everybody.'

With a short step forward, Anders approached the computer, pushed the enter button, and continued: 'Here is a quotation that we have used since the eighties'. On the wall we read, as Anders read out aloud:

A bloody inconvenience...

In too many organisations the customer has become a bloody inconvenience, whose unpredictable behaviour destroys minutely worked out strategic plans...and who is stubborn enough to insist that the products that have been bought should work

Freely after Lew Young, *Business Week*

The four women laughed vividly after Anders had concluded his verbal performance.

'This is exactly what Boo.com fell short of', Anders added. 'But, of course, the customer doesn't always know what it wants.'

(5) Karin, displaying a clear sense irritation, wondered: 'But, did you find any pattern or anything? Otherwise, it is of no use.'

'Yes, absolutely. We found several patterns. There is more than one pattern you see; this is a very complex matter.'

Almost as if it were anticipated by Anders, the next image carried the title "We are all different". The picture showed a crowd of people, photographed in the street, and six arrows pointing at six different persons. Each of the arrows was assigned a label connoting what Anders referred to as "consumer types": "price hunters", "lonely", "spontaneous", "picky", "planned" and "conservative".

'We have identified six types of consumers in Sweden', Anders explained. 'At this point I usually show this Mr. Bean-video. You know, the one when he is shopping in the store. Have you seen it?'

'I have', Ann replied. 'That is so funny.'

'Yes, isn't it?', Anders agreed. 'In that movie, Mr. Bean is all the six types, isn't he? He is walking around in the store, comparing frying pans and stuff. What type do you think is the one purchasing on the Internet?'

'Spontaneous', Ann guessed.

'Price hunters', was Karin's suggestion.

'I think all of them', Ann put forward.

'The question is really who is doing it most frequently, isn't it', Karin said, whereupon Anders showed his consent, nodding enthusiastically:

'Yes, exactly. And where the money is.'

(6) The next picture was assigned the title "It is a long way to behaviour change":

Want Internet	89%
Will get Internet	75%
Use the Internet regularly	56%
Will get Internet in order to pay their bills	47%
Carry out their first purchase	30%
Satisfied with the purchase	18%
Changed consumption behaviour	17%

Anders let his audience study the figures for a while before he started to provide his comments upon them. 'Only 18 % of those carrying out the first purchase are satisfied. That is a problem. That is very serious. I remember one focus group interview we did, where a person who hade bought pillows at Boo.com had to wait for two months for the delivery. Her reaction was "well, then I have to wait until Christmas, as a Christmas present". That is the strange thing; that the customer wasn't dissatisfied. The new users are very forgiving, very

condoning. In a way they act a bit like children, a bit curious. But this will not always be the case.'

Ann then shared her story about when she once bought a dress on the Internet. 'I recognise that. I bought a dress once, and it lasted very long before I got it. I will never purchase on the Internet again.'

'What do you mean?', Karin wondered. 'You mean in general? Or only that particular service?'

'Well, I don't know', Susanne replied.

Anders regained the word. 'The consumer behaviour is different for different products. For instance, it is not always the price that determines the behaviour.' Anders turned around and faced the picture displayed behind him. 'If you are satisfied, your behaviour changes. Internet commerce is not dead, although many say so today. The thing is that many people enjoy shopping live.'

'Yes, I think many of us think it is fun to go shopping', Ann said.

(7) A new picture, delineating a bell-shaped curve, a so called "diffusion curve for innovations", emerged on the whiteboard. The curve was divided in the following segments:

Five consumer groups identified:

Innovators	5%
Early adopters	16%
The fast majority	31%
The late majority	37%
Laggards	11%

'I have a friend who is an innovator', Anders said, letting his knuckles knock lightly on the whiteboard behind him. 'When the Internet arrived he was there in the front, surfing although the net didn't contain anything. The first day he got access to the Internet, he sat up surfing all night although there was hardly anything on the net, and although it was rather tricky. I believe that this model (once more he knocked on the monitored curve behind him) applies to the Internet. I am, myself, an early adopter. I enjoy new stuff rather much, but I am not as brave as the innovators are.

'This first group will push the button immediately', Mary said.

'But early adopters are more loyal', Karin added.

Anders carried on his reasoning. He pointed at the segment labelled "laggards". 'This group doesn't matter very much. They aren't big and they have no influence.'

'So, one should change the products along these different phases'. Ann asked Anders and pointed in the direction of the displayed picture.

'Yes. Or the message.'

'Yes! Vary the marketing', Karin said excitedly.

'Yes, the communication', Anders filled in.

A continued discussion then followed as to the different features of the segments delineated in the curve, posing questions such as "how fast is the fast majority" and so forth. Anders told us that the most important thing was the experience of added value for the customer.

'But we want to approach those who *don't* use the Internet', Karin pointed out.

Anders turned to the image. 'Yes, they are *here*'. He pointed at the segments "late majority" and "fast majority".

'You think a focus on these groups is needed if our business plan is to work?', Mary wondered.

Anders nodded. 'Yes. You cannot shoot broadly. History has shown that that doesn't work. You must decide whom you want to serve.'

(8) A new picture was presented by Anders, a picture describing the, within basic marketing textbooks and courses so frequently referred to, AIDA-model.[1] The AIDA-model presented here at this meeting, however, also included the letter "S", that most probably signified "sale". The headline of the power point creation had been formulated as "Prominent barriers", which referred to the thresholds that according to Anders existed between the different phases in the buying process.

'Have you ever seen this?', a subtly smiling Anders asked his audience and nodded in the direction of the image on the wall:

Prominent barriers

	Innovators	Early majority	Laggards	
A			X	Insecurity must be removed
I			X	Clear value
D		X	X	Must be simple
A	X	X	X	Channel mix is often necessary
S	X	X	X	Must keep one's promises

Everyone save for Susanne had on some occasion been exposed to the AIDA-model. Anders briefly explained to Susanne what the model aimed at delineating. 'In any event, this is the buying process', he concluded his mini lecture, after which he turned to the rest of the assembly. 'Here we have studied three groups; how far they have come within the AIDA. Speaking of driving forces, I have a partner at work who attended a dinner once. During the dinner a lady told him that she had made some purchases on the Internet recently. The very first thing my partner did, when arriving at work the next day, was going out on the net to do some shopping. Just to be able to take part in the conversation. So, there are many things driving the consumption behaviour. It is very complex.'

Keeping the AIDA-model image as the background, the discussion then entered the subject of different types of human beings with corresponding different consumption behaviours, values and attitudes. Karin had an idea concerning the relation between demographics and human being types. 'If you for instance', she started. 'If you for instance look at Malmö, then you can draw conclusions about the profile of the people living in the outskirts of Malmö; this so since people living in adjacent neighbourhoods tend to be similar types of persons.'

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[1] AIDA is a marketing communication model, developed in the 1920's (Strong, 1925, The Psychology of Selling referred to in Kotler, 2000: 555), depicting four steps in the sales process: attracting attention, gaining interest, creating desire and evoking action (e.g. Peter and Olsen, 1992).

Anders did not argue against Karin's theory, and they thereby continued to the next matter for discussion: what are the largest barrier as to Internet commerce and digital television? Anders and the four potential clients of his agreed on the conclusion that insecurity, or the *felt* insecurity as Anders preferred to put it, was one of the primary problems as to the ability to transform the Internet and consumption behaviour among the consumers.

Anders tried a hypothesis. 'Maybe people need to make a phone call and check whether the order has gone through or not.' He went on. 'The added value, this means, must not only be *communicated* by you. It must be *experienced* by the customer. Otherwise nothing will happen. It must also be simple. Take travels as an example. If I for instance enter Travel Inc.'s homepage, wanting to order a trip, then the first question I must answer is "what part of the world?" and "what country?". Then I have to go through the whole chain, perhaps only to get the message "Sorry, this trip is sold out". And then I must go the entire way all over. Maybe this time only in order to find out that this trip is 7737 Swedish crowns. "Is this really the cheapest alternative?" "Will it be cheaper next week?" "Is another hotel cheaper?" I don't know that, so I have to go through the whole chain every time. I don't feel like that, so I go to the shop, get a catalogue, and sit down by the kitchen table at home and have a look instead. It must be simple. Their site is situated here (Anders pointed at the letter "S" behind him on the white wall. The site is constructed for the purchase only.' Anders caught his breath for a moment, maybe two, before he continued. 'And then you must keep your promises. That is important. To be able to do so, you have to know what promises the customer experiences that you have made. The best thing is to exceed the expectations, to never do less than the expectations.'

(9) Anders, being steamed up at the moment, continued to talk about customer value. 'Let us return to Mr. Bean. Why did he buy all these things he did in the movie? Did you notice the way in which he flashed his American Express card all the time? He was proud of it, compared it with other people in the line. What drove him to that purchase? I think it was the American Express card.' Anders paused.

'Ok. Back to the Internet again. The reason to shop there is that it *is possible* to do so. It is hence not only the rational reasons. You have to understand your customer, so you won't do the same mistake as FACIT. They produced the best typewriters in the world, and most likely they still do, but no one wants typewriters any longer. That is: you have to understand what customer value is. At a focus group interview I conducted once, there was this guy who answered the question "why do you do your purchases on the Internet?" like this: "To get a parcel".' The DigitalTV team members jointly nodded towards Anders and between each other. 'Yes, precisely', someone in the DigitalTV group said,

Anders continued. ' "What do you mean?", I said. "You know what is inside, don't you? It is not like it is the greatest surprise in the world, is it?" I mean, it is like opening a package you have packed yourself. But when I started to ask the rest of the group it appeared that everybody agreed. People started to nod around the table. There is a childish amusement related to the opening of parcels, and I understand it...I really do.'

A delighted humming spread around the table. Mary and Karin nodded calmly. The meeting was then rounded off with some further discussions of what Anders thought DigitalTV had learnt from his presentation and what he reckoned they might need to know in the future, in some kind of collaboration with B&B. He shook hands with the tree DigitalTV-representatives before heading for the taxi waiting outside the DigitalTV-building.

Exclusive and Inclusive Knowledge

A lot of things can undoubtedly be said about the meeting described above. However, I will delimit the discussion to the accomplishment of value of the consultancy services offered by B&B. I will argue that value is constructed primarily through two discursive mechanisms: those of *exclusion* and

inclusion of knowledge, more specifically of knowledge concerning consumer behaviour on the Internet.

Exclusion

'Exclusion' refers here to the construction of knowledge as something out of reach for the clients, the potential ones in this case to be more precise, something that is not in their possession, but can be so, if and only if the consultancy firm is hired.

This kind of exclusion is accomplished by means of Anders, indeed together with his audience, obscuring the knowledge generated from the study, that is to say hiding (parts of) it from his potential clients (cf. Power, 1997). One example is the continuous references made to the complexity of consumer behaviour, e.g. 'we as consumers are very complex' (4) and 'we are very different' (5). Despite his audience's eager attempts to provoke a concise ideal-model of consumer behaviour (on the Internet), Anders frequently returns to this notion of complexity. In doing so, the clients have to find themselves excluded from the mysteries of consumer behaviour, at least until a contract is signed with B&B.

Another kind of exclusion is the result of what may be referred to as the *scientification* of the knowledge in question. The focus of the meeting, as well as the very reason for its existence, is the study undertaken by B&B together with the business school that Susanne had come across in the magazine. The content of this study, the knowledge that DigitalTV seems interested in, is constructed in a very certain mode that highlights its 'scientific' and 'academic' qualities. It is for instance rather an extensive and ambitious research design that is presented by Anders. '1400 phone interviews' (3) can offer a scientific legitimacy by virtue of a realist ontology combined with the empiricist assumption that 'the more cases the closer to truth one gets'. The presentation of statistical data further fortifies this scientification of the knowledge offered by Anders and B&B (6, 7), as does the drawing upon (psuedo)academic models, such as AIDA (8) and the diffusion curve (7). Constructing the knowledge as 'scientific' renders it exclusive and out of the clients' reach.

A third version of exclusion, albeit partly overlapping the above mentioned, is accomplished by means of emphasising the esoteric character of the knowledge possessed and (potentially) offered by the consultancy firm. In the initial part of Anders' presentation (2), the so called 'B&B's view of totality' is brought to the fore. The very content of the 'view' hardly gives rise to any heavy excitement, but what is more intriguing here is perhaps the possessive claims laid by B&B, through Anders, to the sequence 'Insight----Choice of path----Implementation'. It is thus not *any* view that is displayed on the whiteboard; it is B&B's view. Consequently, this kind of claims excludes the audience (clients) from the body of ideas, views and knowledge that constitute B&B Consultancy Firm, and to which limited access is granted only insofar as a future contract is signed. The scientification of knowledge afore mentioned also carries with it esoteric effects. The study is large. Very large, according to Anders. There is hence much more where the few numbers, statistics and observations that are actually presented come from, but this is obtainable only within B&B, by B&B.

The argument I am advancing here is that exclusion contributes to the construction of value regarding the consultancy services offered by Anders and B&B, by means of portraying the knowledge concerning consumer behaviour on the Internet as something outside the reach of the clients, something that is obtainable only if access to the B&B bank of knowledge is paid for and granted. By way of excluding the potential clients from this field of knowledge, through rendering the latter obscure, scientific and esoteric, the consultancy services become exclusive and rare, and thus: valuable.

Inclusion

'Inclusion' is, in contrast to exclusion, here referred to as the construction of knowledge as something shared and common, a form of collective possession, familiar and well-known for the clients as well as the consultant. As did exclusion, inclusion comes in a variety of forms.

One of which is through Anders' use of examples gathered from everyday, mundane world, from a reality the clients are likely to recognise and with which they may identify. In section (6), Anders shares a story about a woman he has met once, who in his view was of a very forgiving nature, although she:

> had to wait for two months for the delivery. Her reaction was "well, then I have to wait until Christmas, as a Christmas present". That is the strange thing; that the customer wasn't dissatisfied. The new users are very forgiving, very condoning. In a way they act a bit like children, a bit curious.

This is apparently a situation recognised by Ann, who moreover contributes to the example provided by Anders. It is my suggestion that this kind of 'tales from everyday life' functions as an invitation, from Anders to his potential clients, to a *terra cognita*, as it were, of knowledge about Internet consumer behaviour. As we have seen, Ann is not late to respond to and confirm this inclusion.

Furthermore, in section (7), Anders offers another story from real, mundane life, a story about his innovator friend. This too, can be interpreted as an invitation to, an inclusion in, a sort of collective body of experiences and insights as to Internet use.

A second and quite similar form of inclusion is the drawing upon public knowledge. A case in point can bee seen in section (4), when the quotation from *Business Week* is presented:

> A bloody inconvenience...

> "In too many organisations the customer has become a bloody inconvenience, whose unpredictable behaviour destroys minutely worked out strategic plans...and who is stubborn enough to insist that the products that have been bought should work"

> Freely after Lew Young, Business Week

The reaction from the audience is contemptuous laughter. My suggestion is that this derision includes the clients in what can be regarded as public or common sense knowledge about fundamental assumptions and values of marketing thinking, namely that of market or customer orientation. From a mainstream marketing management point of view, as it is presented in dominant marketing textbooks, conceiving of one's customers as an inconvenience borders an oxymoron. Within the community of management and marketing practitioners, the hegemonic norm is that all business conduct should departure from customers' needs and demands. The presentation of, and response to, the *Business Week*-excerpt thus puts the consultant and the clients on the same side: the marketing professional side.

A third type of inclusion activated in the meeting is through Anders' use of popular culture as illustrations and clarifications, in particular the references made to Mr. Bean in (5) and (9). This figure of fiction seems to offer a meeting point, a common ground, for a mutual understanding between the consultant and his clients to be. Through the familiarity and shared experiences in

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popular culture, Mr. Bean hence reduces the obscurity of the consultants' knowledge, and becomes an invitation for the clients to enter the field of consumer behaviour knowledge.

My argument is that value is in the meeting between B&B and DigitalTV constructed, not only by way of excluding the clients from the domain of consumer behaviour knowledge, but also, and quite to the contrary, through making the clients members of the very same knowledge community. Referring to a shared set of everyday and public knowledge as well as popular culture is a mode of signalling to the clients that the knowledge offered is not particle physics or rocket science, but firmly rooted in common sense. This mode of constructing the consultancy knowledge as a valuable good is, this I will argue for in the section that follows, part and parcel of the geometry of value characterising the services of management consultancy.

Discussion: The Geometry of the Value of Management Consultancy

One interpretation of the client meeting explored above, the one I wish to advance, is that Anders here seems to undertake a balance act between, on the one hand, mystifying and obscuring the knowledge of Internet consumer behaviour and, on the other, presenting it as not *that* distant from what the clients already know.

Hence, in order to secure a revisit to DigitalTV, Anders endeavours to offer but a brief glimpse of the study, not revealing too much, leaving some of the information for later meetings, meetings that presumably will be billed. Anders continuously emphasises that consumers are not to be regarded as a homogeneous category, but as individual and unique beings whose uniqueness must be taken into account when a market plan is to be designed. These frequent allusions brought to the fore by Anders, as to the heterogeneity of the consumers, can be seen as contributions to the construction of his product, i.e. marketing expertise and knowledge, as somewhat esoteric and mystical, as something that DigitalTV must import. However, the knowledge for sale cannot be too far beyond the clients pre-understanding of their future customers and market. The knowledge, so it seems, must make some extent of sense. It must be, to some extent, recognised by the ones supposed to pay for the bill.

My contention is that it is right here, in the pendulum between distance and closeness, that value is done. If the knowledge is too remote, too obscure and exotic, it becomes too difficult too obtain, which in turn diminishes its value in the clients' eyes. If the knowledge is too close and familiar, on the other hand, it becomes too easy to get a grip of, too easily obtainable, and thence less valuable for the actor in question. As Simmel writes:

> *Wild fruit picked without effort, and not given in exchange, but immediately consumed, is no economic good. (Simmel, 1900: 587)*

Wild fruit, publicly available and easily picked, are obviously hard to put a price tag on. In order to do so, the fruit must assume the status of an exclusive (i.e. not inclusive) possession, remote and distant, without the reach of immediate satisfaction.

Thus, a discursively produced version of the geometry of value seems to be at hand here. Value then becomes the outcome of a spatial relation of distance, i.e. of closeness and distance, as a result of the strategies of inclusion and exclusion investigated above. The product offered, consultancy knowledge about consumption on the Internet, is in other words valuable only insofar it is obtainable, that is, comprehensible, being so however with some degree of effort and struggle. As also observed by Simmel:

> *We desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment; that is, to the extent that they resist our desire. (Simmel, 1990: 66)*

Above I have tried to show how this is a logic, a geometry, in action also in the production of consultancy services as it takes place the interaction between consultant and client. Here, the knowledge that constitutes the very foundation of the consultancy service, is constructed as Simmel's (1950) ideal type 'the stranger', as one who is "near and far at the same time" (p. 407):

> *The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. (Simmel, 1950: 402)*

The knowledge offered by B&B cannot be a part of the clients body of knowledge, already at hand, but must transcend the latter without leaving it entirely behind. The knowledge is hence simultaneously known and alien. This resonates somewhat with Sturdy's (1997) suggestion, that management consultants deliver certainty and uncertainty, reassurance as well as insecurity, to the clients. Tension between the certainty and uncertainty embraces both nearness and distance.

It should be noted that the geometry of value discussed in this paper is anything but exclusive for the production of consultancy services. Quite to the contrary, according to Simmel (1990), the co-existence of nearness and distance is in action whenever value of any kind is to be determined. Nonetheless, the aforementioned character of professional services, i.e. the problems concerning the evaluation and its interactional, situational and immaterial nature, makes them a particularly interesting case in point in its own right. This so since the distance is something that needs to be constructed and reproduced repeatedly in the everyday interaction between the consultants and the clients. Given this, distance is unstable in character, and can be challenged and ultimately subverted by clients, who, in doing so, put into question the value of the services offered. The value of consultancy services is thus a phenomenon in need of incessant maintenance, within and through the relation between consultants and clients.

Furthermore, as for management consultancy in particular, in relation to other professional service industries, the lack of authoritative and professional status, enjoyed by for instance doctors and lawyers, may call for a more balanced proportion of nearness and remoteness. This is to say: too obscure and esoteric knowledge – i.e. constructed in such a mode – may be less valued than knowledge that to some extent is recognised by the client.

Conclusion

In this paper, my aim has been to contribute to the knowledge of the advice industry, management consultancy in particular, by means of exploring the discursive interaction between a consultant and his client. In doing so, I have focused on the accomplishment of value in this interaction in order to highlight the *relational*, *interactional* and *social* nature of the value of management consultancy.

The relational aspect of value has been acknowledged in two ways in this paper. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, value appears and is expressed in the relation between two states, e.g. demand and supply, need and fulfilment, questions and answers – between nearness and distance. Value does not stand on its own but is always dialectically constituted in some sort of tension between a problem and a solution. Secondly, the value of the services offered by management consultants is accomplished in and through the relation between the consultant and the client. Arguably, this

relation is primarily defined and legitimised in terms of the value that renders it meaningful and holds it together.

I have also tried to show how the value of management consultancy is not something *brought to* the meeting between the consultant and client, but rather *done* during the course of the meeting. In interactions, actors relate and respond to each other's acts, and during these interactions definitions of problems and solutions are constantly negotiated and reconstructed.

Value is not only relational and interactional. It is also a social and shared phenomenon. Herbert Blumer has referred to the social character of society as 'joint action' (Blumer, 1966: 540). Joint actions make up the fundamental anatomy of society and "are constituted by the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants" (Ibid). Thus, social facts are the ongoing results of joint actions taking place in mundane, everyday interactions (Atkinson, 1978; Coulon, 1995; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Examples of joint actions include "a trading transaction, a family dinner, a marriage ceremony, a shopping expedition, a game, a convivial party, a debate, a court trial, or a war" (Ibid). These actions require actors adjusting their actions to each other in appropriate ways. "Society" and its sub-realms, such as value and "the market", are thus accomplished from within social situations. Value is done in joint action.

It should be noted that the accomplishment of value does not end in a single meeting between a consultant and a client such as the one studied in this paper. Problems, solutions, roles and relations are done throughout the entire process of a consultancy project. Moreover, and perhaps needless to say, the relational, interactional and social accomplishment of value is not restricted to management consultancy. On a more general level, I would like to see this paper as an example of the project of a *micro sociology of the market* in which markets and market relations are studied as joint actions undertaken on a daily basis rather than as macro structures and institutions situated outside and above specific social interactions. Close up studies of the ways in which market relations are socially and discursively done in everyday life would shed light upon the social character of markets, which, arguably, is key to understanding the social psychological anatomy of contemporary market society and capitalism.

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