

WHAT IS MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY?

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Abstract

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The worldwide management consultancy industry is estimated to be worth over \$300 billion annually. Its importance, in terms of the global economy, cannot be overestimated. But what is management consultancy? The thesis addresses this question by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and applying his diagnostic method to the field of management consultancy knowledge.

Managerial advisory services take place in a variety of operational areas, such as business strategy, human resources, manufacturing, marketing, and finance. But there is a type of knowledge that remains the same for all management consultants, irrespective of the specific operational area in which they work. This knowledge is found in the practitioner literature for management consultants and takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for dealing with managers in the client organization.

Some practitioners have begun to suggest that these prescriptive guidelines can be used by managers as well as consultants. Instead of dealing with their subordinates in the traditional way, managers are now being told to act as 'their own consultants' in relation to their 'clients'. This means that management consultancy knowledge is changing the way we understand the function of modern management.

The thesis brings to light the field of management consultancy knowledge by describing the formation of its objects, concepts, and diverging theories. It also examines the institutional effects of the practitioner literature in terms of the profession of management consultancy. By outlining the relations between knowledge and power, the thesis answers the question of what management consultancy is.

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Introduction

The Question

There are hundreds of books about management consultancy. There are countless more articles in academic and trade journals. Annual conferences are organized around management consultancy. It is taught at universities. It has its own professional associations on national and international levels. Across the world, hundreds of thousands of individuals are employed in its name. Above all, management consultancy is a multibillion dollar, pound, and euro industry. But what is management consultancy?

That is the question. It will take us the best part of six chapters to answer it. But before we begin, this general introduction will first show what this question addresses and how it will be addressed.

Introducing the Question

‘Management consultancy’: what is that? The very fact we are able to ask such a question in the first place suggests that we already have some idea of what it is we are asking after. Management consultancy, in other words, is not a complete mystery to us since we have the ability to identify *something* – however vaguely or imprecisely – as management consultancy. This does not necessarily indicate, however, that the meaning of management consultancy is entirely clear or obvious to us. In fact, it might indicate that management consultancy is hidden or obscured by commonsense ideas. We have all heard it said, for example, that management consultancy is nothing more than ‘giving advice to managers’ or, less generously, that a management consultant is ‘someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time’. But such apparently self-evident assertions should be approached with caution, since they provide off-the-peg answers to readymade questions. They might serve, in the end, to get in the way of finding out what management consultancy really is or how management consultants actually function. Management consultancy, as I will argue during the course of the thesis, is far too complex, even paradoxical, for it to be adequately captured by a hackneyed truism or a well-worn cliché.

Numerous commentators have acknowledged that ‘management consultancy’ is a rather elusive term. Although it is widely discussed in the academic and the practitioner literature,¹ as well as the popular media, management consultancy seems to resist easy

¹ The distinction between ‘academic literature’ and ‘practitioner literature’ will be made throughout the thesis. While this distinction is by no means impermeable (for example, university lecturers may well write industry textbooks and, conversely, management consultants may well read or even write articles in

categorization and straightforward definition (see e.g. Collins, 2004: 554; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 4; Rassam, 2001a: 29; Sturdy, et al., 2009: 3; Wilkinson, 1995a: 1[4]).

One commentator, who directly addresses the question of what management consultancy is, leads himself immediately into uncertainty and confusion:

Is management consultancy a method or a trade, or is it a profession, albeit a ‘young profession’? Or is it simply a real business, an industry with products, standard solutions, commoditization, advertising campaigns and leverage? Or does it have elements of all of these and should the sector split up into well-defined groups of different kinds of professionals, each with their own view of the profession? There are many questions and few answers about the development of the management consultancy profession, even after so many years of discussion. It would be interesting to know why these questions are being asked and why it has proven so difficult to give answers. (De Sonnaville, 2003: 123; see also Lee, 2002: 7)

In this passage, De Sonnaville succinctly expresses the difficulty we face in pinning down the meaning of management consultancy: is it a particular approach to business problems, a profession in its own right, a specific industrial grouping, or a set of disparate commercial activities? Why, moreover, has the meaning of management consultancy remained enigmatic to us, despite innumerable attempts over the years to clarify its proper nature and scope? The thesis hopes, following De Sonnaville, to shed

top-ranked scholarly journals), it will serve as a convenient rule-of-thumb for distinguishing between, on the one hand, texts by and for academics and, on the other hand, texts by and for practitioners.

some light on “why these questions are being asked and why it has proven so difficult to give answers”.

We must be careful, here, not to fall into a familiar trap. Faced with such uncertainty about the meaning of management consultancy, we might be tempted to conclude that it has no real meaning, that it lacks any underlying logic or coherence, that it is simply an umbrella term for a miscellaneous jumble of services. This is an extremely attractive option because it promises to offer an easy solution to De Sonnaville’s query. It could be said, on this view, that it has been so difficult to give answers to questions about management consultancy because this term stands in as a placeholder for a wide range of advisory services in a managerial context, encompassing an array of operational areas such as strategy, marketing, finance, human resources, information technology, etc.

There is, of course, a good deal of truth in this suggestion. As we will see, management consultants are indeed able to provide advice to managers in almost any field of expertise. But it holds equally true that management consultancy has a professional specificity that amounts to more than the sum of these fields and, indeed, extends beyond them. This point is made by one commentator in the practitioner literature: “Although management consulting...is a conglomeration of various skills, there are distinguishing characteristics that bind all [management] consultants together” (Fuchs, 1975: viii; see also Cody, 1986: 71). Despite its apparent diversity, in other words, there is something that remains the same for *all* management consultants, something that is applicable in *every* consultancy engagement, something that allows us to

characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy. It is this ‘something’ that we are asking after in this thesis.

Our first task will be to identify the level at which management consultancy’s ‘distinguishing characteristics’ can be brought to light. We will then consider some of the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives that will serve to guide the thesis as a whole.

Questioning Management Consultancy

It might be said that if we want to find out what management consultancy is, we should begin by asking this question to the people who work as management consultants. This is the level of empirical practice. If we wanted to adopt this approach, we would first need to select a specific company, perhaps one of the large diversified firms, or a medium-sized strategy boutique, or a cross-section of independent practitioners. Once access had been granted, we could then proceed to follow the consultants as they worked on a project in a client organization. Participant observation could be accompanied by lengthy, semi-structured interviews with the consultants before, during, and after the project. We would then be able to find out precisely what management consultants do, how they apply their technical expertise, how they deal with clients, and how they feel about their own work and the industry in general. If we wanted to adopt a ‘critical’ approach, we might add a smattering of philosophy from one of our favourite thinkers to show how consultancy work is exploitative, or

ideological, or panoptical. Such research, conducted over a period of weeks or months, would no doubt provide invaluable insights into a particular area of management consultancy and yield a great deal of relevant data that could easily be turned into a satisfactory, perhaps even first-rate, thesis. Numerous academic articles, indeed, have recently followed this very model (see e.g. Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Case, 2002; Fincham, 2003; Kärreman and Rylander, 2007; Kitay and Wright, 2003; 2004; 2007; Werr and Styhre, 2003; Whittle, 2008).

However, by conducting participant observation in a specific company, or by carrying out lengthy interviews with individual practitioners, we are dealing with a different order of question: not ‘what *is* management consultancy?’ but ‘what do management consultants *do*?’ Such a question is certainly valid on its own terms. But it does not bring us any closer to answering our own question. Indeed, the question ‘what do management consultants do?’ presupposes that the question ‘what is management consultancy?’ has already been adequately answered in advance. After all, we must already know what management consultancy *is* in order for us to be able to identify a management consultant in the first place. While we might choose to accept these firms at face value as ‘management consultancy firms’, we can see some of the difficulties that arise from such a presupposition. For example, is a big accounting house to be considered a part of management consultancy or a part of the accountancy profession? Or again, can an IT company that specializes in computer systems implementation be said to perform management consultancy even though its advisory services are negligible? And where do we draw the line between a ‘management consultant’ and a ‘management guru’? Even if we are sure that we are dealing with a 100 percent proof

management consultancy firm, this will allow us to grasp only an *example* of management consultancy – strategy consulting, IT consulting, HR consulting, etc. – rather than management consultancy *itself*. We seek to find out, in other words, what runs through all these examples and characterizes them precisely *as* types of management consultancy. If we intend to ask ‘what is management consultancy?’, therefore, we cannot direct this question at the level of empirical practice. We need to locate a much broader, and necessarily prior, level at which to address this question.

Towards this aim, we will consider two dialogues in the work of Plato (1997), *Theaetetus* and *The Sophist*. These dialogues are by no means unrelated to our central concern, since they both deal with ‘what is...?’ questions. They will serve to orientate our mode of questioning throughout the thesis.

Theaetetus involves a discussion between the eponymous character and Socrates (with occasional interjections from the geometer Theodorus), albeit recounted by a slave for the benefit of Euclides and Terpsion. It is here that we encounter one of the founding questions of epistemology: what is knowledge? Socrates raises this question and challenges the young and gifted student Theaetetus to give him an adequate answer. Theaetetus replies:

Then I think the things Theodorus teaches are knowledge – I mean geometry and the subjects you enumerated just now [astronomy, music, and arithmetic]. Then again there are the crafts such as cobbling, whether you take them together or separated. They must be knowledge, surely. (146c-d)

Knowledge, Theaetetus says, is those subjects and skills that can be taught and put to practical use. This response seems reasonable enough, even commonsensical. But Socrates is not entirely satisfied:

SOCRATES: That is certainly a frank and indeed a generous answer, my dear lad. I asked you for one thing and you have given me many; I want something simple, and I have got a variety.

THEAETETUS: And what does that mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Nothing, I dare say. But I'll tell you what I think. When you talk about cobbling, you mean just knowledge of the making of shoes?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's all I mean by it.

SOCRATES: And when you talk about carpentering, you mean simply the knowledge of the making of wooden furniture?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's all I mean, again.

SOCRATES: And in both cases you are putting into your definition what the knowledge is of?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But that is not what you were asked, Theaetetus. You were not asked to say what one may have knowledge of, or how many branches of knowledge there are. It was not with any idea of counting these up that the question was asked; we wanted to know what knowledge itself is. (146d-e)

Socrates asked for one thing – 'knowledge' – but received many things from Theaetetus, namely, geometry, astronomy, music, arithmetic, and cobbling. This

betrays the fact that, instead of answering Socrates' original question, Theaetetus has actually answered a very different one: rather than saying what knowledge *is*, Theaetetus has said what knowledge is *of* (knowledge of geometry, knowledge of astronomy, knowledge of music, knowledge of arithmetic, and knowledge of cobbling). This presupposes that the question of what knowledge is has already been adequately answered in advance. Socrates can thus conclude: "So when the question raised is 'What is knowledge?', to reply by naming one of the crafts is an absurd answer; because it points out something that knowledge is of when this is not what the question was about" (147b-c). The question does not ask after *examples* of knowledge; rather, it asks after knowledge *itself*, that which runs through all these subjects and skills and characterizes them precisely *as* types of knowledge. What Socrates demands, in short, is "one single account of the many branches of knowledge" (148d).

In the same way as Theaetetus offers a seemingly reasonable, but ultimately misdirected, answer to Socrates' question, so we will also have answered a different question to the one we initially posed if we ask it at the level of empirical practice. Such a line of inquiry will produce responses about different types of management consultancy: for example, strategy consultants advise managers on long-term corporate planning, IT consultants assist managers with computer systems implementation, and HR consultants help managers deal with personnel issues in the organization. Like Socrates, we will have asked for one thing and received many; we will have demanded something simple but instead got a variety. If we intend to answer our original question, we need to provide a single account of the many branches of management consultancy.

Of course, we all know that Theaetetus and Socrates do not, in the end, find an adequate solution to their problem of what knowledge is. Socrates' intellectual midwifery, in this case, has produced nothing fertile from Theaetetus, only 'wind-eggs' (210b). This does not seem to bode well for us if we intend to find out what management consultancy is. It is, no doubt, an interesting speculative exercise to discuss such 'what is...?' questions. But perhaps they are so far removed from everyday life that they can serve only to lead us, like Thales, to fall down the proverbial well since we were too busy looking up at the sky (174a). We might be tempted, on this basis, to move away from abstract philosophical inquiry and towards more concrete empirical research. At least we can say for sure what management consultants *do*, even if we cannot say what management consultancy *is*.

While *Theaetetus* ends inconclusively, it should be emphasized that this in no way reflects on the nature of 'what is...?' questions. Indeed, elsewhere in Plato's work, we find such questions answered more decisively. One such dialogue is *The Sophist*, in which we find Theaetetus in discussion with an unnamed visitor from Elea, a Greek town in southern Italy. At issue here is the question 'what is sophistry?' or, more accurately, 'what is the sophist?' This can be answered, the visitor says, "by searching for [the sophist] and giving a clear account of what he is" (218c).

In their first attempt to address the question of what the sophist is, the interlocutors find to their surprise that they have given six separate answers: he is a hired hunter of rich young men, a wholesaler and a retailer of learning about the soul, a seller of his own learning, an athlete in verbal combat, and finally a cleanser of the soul of belief that

interferes with learning (231d-e). This leads Theaetetus to note: “But the sophist has appeared in lots of different ways. So I’m confused about what expression or assertion could convey the truth about what he really is” (231b-c). Just as Socrates reprimanded Theaetetus for giving him a variety when he wanted something simple, now Theaetetus remarks that he and the visitor have given many answers when only one was required. This time, however, it is not the case that they have answered an altogether different question; rather, it is the case that the object of their inquiry is proving to be particularly troublesome, as the visitor explains:

Well then, suppose people apply the name of a single sort of expertise to someone, but he appears to have expert knowledge of lots of things. In a case like that don’t you notice that something’s wrong with the way he appears? Isn’t it obvious that if somebody takes him to be an expert at many things, then that observer can’t be seeing clearly what it is in his expertise that all of those many pieces of learning focus on – which is why he calls him by many names instead of one? (232a)

The visitor suggests, here, that the term ‘sophistry’ implies we are dealing with a single form of expertise, and yet it seems to refer to at least six different types of expertise. The sophist, on this view, is a problematic figure who is able to evade easy categorization and straightforward definition (in the same way, perhaps, as the

management consultant).² With this in mind, Theaetetus and the visitor vow to chase the sophist, in his various guises, in order to provide a single account of his expertise, thus hemming him in “with one of those net-like devices that words provide for things like this” (235a-b).

The visitor and Theaetetus proceed to make a second, more successful attempt to answer the question of what the sophist is. Their aim is to “strip away everything that he has in common with other things” until all that remains is “his own peculiar nature” (264e). In other words, they seek to describe what sophistry is by removing everything extraneous and inessential to it that it shares with other activities. Eventually, this approach serves to produce an adequate, decisive answer to their question: sophistry, the visitor concludes, is the “[i]mitation of the contrary-speech-producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance-making kind of copy-making, the word-juggling part of production that’s marked off as human and not divine” (268c-d).

In both dialogues, we find the same kind of question being addressed. The interlocutors, in each dialogue, are concerned with finding out what something *is*. They approach this task, not by listing different types of knowledge or different forms of sophistry, but by describing what remains the same and runs through all types of knowledge and all forms of sophistry. In a similar way, by asking what management consultancy is, we are aiming to find out what remains the same for *all* management consultants and is applicable in *every* management consultancy engagement. Perhaps,

² This is not to say, of course, that the management consultant is a ‘sophist’ in the contemporary understanding of the term. Such a charge is historically inaccurate and neglects the specificity of management consultancy and, indeed, ancient Greek sophistry.

in the end, all we will find is a lacuna, an essential absence, at the very core of management consultancy (although such a conclusion certainly cannot be reached in advance). In any case, the mode of questioning found in *Theaetetus* and *The Sophist* will serve to guide the overall direction of our own questioning in the thesis.

We have seen that we cannot ask the question ‘what is management consultancy?’ at the level of empirical practice, since this provides us only with examples of management consultancy. What level, then, applies to each and every type of management consultancy?

Method and Objective

The thesis will ask the question ‘what is management consultancy?’ in the direction of management consultancy knowledge. It will be argued that this field of knowledge, which is located in the voluminous practitioner literature for management consultants, applies to each and every type of management consultancy. It is therefore not on the level of empirical practice, but on the level of theoretical knowledge that we will be able to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy.

If we wish to examine management consultancy on this level, it is clear that ethnographic research (involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, case studies, thick description, etc.) is an entirely unsuitable mode of engagement for our purposes. Our first task, then, is to clarify some of the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives of the thesis. In other words, how do we intend to examine

management consultancy knowledge, and what do we hope to achieve? While *Theaetetus* and *The Sophist* help to raise our awareness of the importance, indeed necessity, of ‘what is...?’ questions, it should be made clear that we are not concerned with applying Plato’s method of division (see e.g. 219a-221c) to find out what management consultancy is. Instead, the method and objective of the thesis are drawn primarily from the work of Michel Foucault.

At first glance, it might seem somewhat peculiar to discuss the work of Plato alongside the work of Foucault. Whereas Plato is renowned for his analysis of the Forms (i.e. immutable essences), Foucault is well-known for challenging essentialist notions of madness, sexuality, and the subject. To this extent, each philosopher – ancient Greek and modern French respectively – would appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the other. The picture, however, is more nuanced than we might immediately imagine. While Foucault certainly casts some doubt on certain social phenomena we commonly assume to be timeless and unchanging, he is by no means unconcerned with ‘what is...?’ questions. Indeed, his work seeks to examine what something *is* in order to *change* what it is (Foucault, 2007: 118; 2000: 449-50). Accordingly, the thesis draws on Foucault’s method – the archaeology of knowledge – in order to both *describe* and *transform* aspects of management consultancy. But what is the archaeological method, and how does it enable us simultaneously to describe and transform aspects of management consultancy?

The method of archaeology (a play-on-words denoting the ‘archive’ of written statements to which Foucault directs his analysis) works on fields of knowledge in the

human sciences. These fields of knowledge are not strictly 'scientific' in the sense of physics or mathematics, but neither are they entirely contingent or unstructured like types of 'conventional wisdom' or 'tacit knowledge'. Foucault is concerned, rather, with knowledge that is formalized in a body of practitioner literature and displays a certain regularity and coherence as a discourse (or, more accurately, a 'discursive formation') (Foucault, 2002a: 34-43). Examples of discursive formations, in *The Order of Things*, include general grammar, natural history, and analysis of wealth in the classical age (1660-1800) and philology, biology, and political economy in the modern period (1800-1960). These fields of knowledge certainly relate to 'real-life' contexts beyond discourse, and have no doubt been drawn upon and put to use in various ways by linguistics, biologists, and economists. But Foucault makes it clear that the archive of statements belonging to a specific field of knowledge can be studied on its own discursive terms, without reference to its translation from theory into practice. This is because fields of knowledge in the human sciences exhibit their own structure and function, which cannot be reduced to their 'applicability' or 'usefulness'.

Archaeology is concerned with describing discursive regularities (or 'rules of formation') in fields of knowledge (Foucault, 2002a: 34-43). These regularities refer to the way objects are defined, the way concepts are ordered, and the way diverging theories are constructed within a body of practitioner literature in the human sciences. For example, in the *History of Madness* Foucault examines medical reports, clinical examinations, criminal typologies, and penal codes to show how the object of 'madness' is defined in the field of psychopathology; in *The Order of Things* Foucault describes the sequences of statements, modes of describing data, and methods of

systematizing information to show how concepts such as ‘genus’ and ‘character’ are arranged in the field of natural history; and again in *The Order of Things* Foucault identifies the points of diffraction and bifurcation in a discursive formation to show how diverging theories, such as Physiocratic and Utilitarian models for the analysis of wealth, can nonetheless appear in the same field of knowledge without contradiction or outright incompatibility. Foucault seeks to describe the rules of formation for objects, concepts, and theories in order to determine how a field of knowledge construes for itself an entire series of ‘true statements’ that remain valid and reproducible within the field over time. These, then, are the discursive regularities in a body of practitioner literature to which the archaeological method directs its attention; by mapping them out, Foucault is able to say what a specific discursive formation – such as psychopathology, natural history, or analysis of wealth – *is*.

Archaeology provides an eminently suitable method for our own investigation into finding out what management consultancy is. Although the work of Plato drew our attention to the need to ask this question in the first place, the work of Foucault supplies us with our methodological principles for engaging with the field of management consultancy knowledge. In the thesis, we will describe how object of ‘management consultancy’ is defined, how concepts such as ‘analysis’, ‘advice’, and ‘assistance’ are ordered, and how diverging theories such as ‘content-based consulting’ and ‘process-based consulting’ are constructed in the practitioner literature for management consultants. It will be shown that this field of knowledge displays a certain regularity and coherence as a discourse. For example, the practitioner literature conceptualizes the limit to management consultancy’s functional scope in the same way, time and again,

across numerous different textbooks; it instructs consultants to deal with managers in the client organization in precisely the same way; it construes the various phases of the consultancy engagement identically; and it consistently makes the same distinction between the content of management consultancy and its process. By bringing to light these discursive regularities in the body of practitioner literature, we will be able to show how the field of management consultancy knowledge produces for itself an entire series of true statements that remain valid and reproducible over time. In short, following our archaeological analysis, we will be able to say what management consultancy *is*.

But the task of archaeology is not simply one of *description*; it is also one of *transformation*. Certainly, archaeology prompts us to describe the way objects, concepts, and theories are formed in a field of knowledge. At the same time, archaeology also permits us to alter the way we commonly understand this field of knowledge. As Foucault puts it, archaeology seeks to rearrange conventional unities of discourse in order to produce new or modified unities (2002a: 22-33). We can illustrate this point with an example taken from *The Order of Things*. The way objects, concepts, and theories are formed in the work of Linnaeus in the eighteenth century are shown to be different to the way objects, concepts, and theories are formed in the work of Cuvier in the nineteenth century. On the basis of an archaeological description, Foucault is thus able to identify two separate and distinct fields of knowledge, namely, ‘natural history’ and ‘biology’. While it is sometimes assumed that there is a continuous linear progression over the centuries from Linnaeus to Cuvier in this area of the human sciences, Foucault shows that there is in fact a profound historical discontinuity

between them (2002b: 136-9). This means that Foucault *describes* each field of knowledge, by saying what they are, at the same time as he *transforms* them, by changing the way in which they are commonly understood.

In the same way, the thesis proposes to adopt an archaeological approach in order simultaneously to describe and transform aspects of management consultancy. This will involve disrupting some of the conventional unities of discourse at the same time as establishing a new or modified unity. The aim, here, is not to *reject* the field of management consultancy knowledge in its entirety, but to *rework* it into a slightly different shape. For example, it is commonly said that there is a historical continuity, indeed a direct line of provenance, between Taylorist work-design and contemporary forms of management consultancy. This conventional unity, however, will be shown to be erroneous. There is, as chapter 1 will demonstrate, a profound historical discontinuity between these types of knowledge: scientific management and management consultancy, on a basic level, do not share the same epistemological space. While scientific management is often understood as the ‘origin’ of management consultancy, an archaeological description reveals this assumption to be problematic. By describing how its objects are defined, how its concepts are ordered, and how its theories are constructed, we will propose a new or modified unity. It will be shown that this reconfigured field of management consultancy knowledge possesses its own structure and function, which distinguishes it from other fields of knowledge such as Taylorism or, as we will see, management engineering and cost accounting.

But the transformative objective of the thesis does not stop there. Management consultancy is often said to share the same epistemological space as *management itself*. On this view, there is said to be no distinction between consultants and managers in terms of the knowledge base each of them draw on in their work. The thesis will show, however, that the presupposed ‘equivalence’ between management consultancy knowledge and management knowledge is in fact misleading. There is, as we will see, a fundamental distinction between the field of management consultancy knowledge and the field of management knowledge. Since this distinction is considerably more complex than the distinction between Taylorism and management consultancy, much of the thesis will be devoted to revising the conventional unity of discourse that imagines management consultancy and management to share the same epistemological space. It will be shown that while management consultancy and management certainly have in common the same *technical* component (i.e. operational expertise in a specific organizational area), they each possess quite a different *relational* component (i.e. prescriptive guidelines for managing clients in the case of management consultancy knowledge, and prescriptive guidelines for managing subordinates in the case of management knowledge). It is this relational component, moreover, that will eventually allow us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy and thus provide an answer to our guiding question. The precise nature of this distinction, and its far-reaching and paradoxical implications, will concern us throughout chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.

The thesis therefore aims to say what management consultancy *is* at the same time as it hopes to *change* the way we commonly understand management consultancy. In this

respect, the task of the thesis is twofold, involving both description and transformation. We will return in chapter 6 to this twofold task – which we will characterize, following Foucault, as a ‘diagnosis’ or ‘symptomatology’ – in order to reflect at greater length on our methodological assumptions and underlying objectives. For now, it remains for us to specify in more detail what we understand by ‘the field of management consultancy knowledge’.

The Field of Management Consultancy Knowledge

Management consultancy is often characterized as a ‘knowledge industry’ or a ‘knowledge-based service’, consisting of ‘knowledge-intensive’ firms and workers (see e.g. Alvesson, 1993; Engwall and Kipping, 2002; Empson, 2001; Fincham, 2006; Løwendahl, Revang, and Fosstenløyken, 2001; Morris and Empson, 1998; Robertson, Scarbrough, and Swan, 2003; Robertson and Swan, 2003; Sarvary, 1999; Starbuck, 1992). On this view, management consultancy firms are assumed to be adept at staying up-to-date with organizational innovations, generating new managerial techniques, and distributing valuable information to clients (Armbrüster, 2006: 3; McKenna, 2006: 8-25). The role of management consultants within these firms is to act as ‘carriers’ for disseminating a wide range of management knowledge to executives in large-scale corporations (Engwall and Kipping, 2002: 4-5). There appears to be a profound interconnection, then, between the practice of management consultancy and the application of expert knowledge in a managerial context.

We must take care, here, to distinguish between different types of knowledge that consultants draw on in their work. While knowledge clearly plays an important part in the management consultancy industry, it is more accurate to characterize the type of knowledge produced and circulated by management consultancy firms and individuals as ‘management knowledge’ (and not ‘management consultancy knowledge’). After all, such knowledge properly belongs to managers, not consultants, and is said to be useful primarily for managing, not for consulting. As we will see in chapter 2, the functional scope of management consultancy – that is, the range of technical expertise drawn on by management consultants – is exactly the same as the functional scope of management, encompassing strategy, marketing, finance, human resources, information technology, etc. We cannot therefore look to the specialist activities performed by individual consultants in client organizations if we wish to pinpoint management consultancy knowledge. At best, this approach would allow us to identify only an offshoot of management knowledge. This underscores both the difficulty of our task and the necessity of distinguishing management consultancy from management itself: we need to determine a field of knowledge that belongs exclusively to management consultants (i.e. that is not shared with managers), as well as one that applies to each and every type of management consultancy.

We would be equally misguided if we turned away from the formal expertise (or ‘explicit knowledge’) possessed by management consultants and focused instead on their experience-based proficiencies (or ‘tacit knowledge’). A consideration of tacit knowledge in addition to explicit knowledge would allow us to assess not only theoretical models for effective consulting, but also the translation and transference of

these models into practice in client organizations (see e.g. Anand, Gardner, and Morris, 2007; Armbrüster, 2006; Baumard, 2002; Dunford, 2000; Maister, 1993; Morris and Empson, 1998; Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Such an approach would certainly be able to circumvent the difficulty of encountering management knowledge at every turn, and would no doubt shed some light on the way in which consultants make use of their individual talents to offer personalized solutions to organizational problems. But it would not allow us to identify the field of management consultancy knowledge. As we previously said, we are looking for a type of knowledge that remains the same for all consultants and is applicable in every consultancy engagement – in archaeological terms, a body of practitioner literature that displays its own discursive regularities. Tacit knowledge, however, necessarily changes from one consultant to the next since it is acquired through unique personal experience (rather than codified in a body of literature). This approach, moreover, would provide us only with *examples* of tacit knowledge on the level of empirical practice; it is therefore an intrinsically unsuitable level at which to address our guiding question, as we made clear earlier in the introduction.

Leaving aside explicit (managerial) knowledge and tacit (consultancy) knowledge, some commentators have suggested that management consultants do not in fact possess a common body of knowledge. On this view, there is *no* form of expertise that applies to each and every type of management consultancy or belongs exclusively to management consultants. Clark (1995), in particular, makes the point that management consultancy has “no obvious knowledge base” to speak of (1995: 87; see also Clark and Greatbatch, 2002: 161; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 155; Clark and Salaman, 1996b:

175-6; Fincham and Clark, 2002: 7). This does not mean, of course, that management consultants lack knowledge per se. It means, rather, that the type of knowledge possessed by management consultants “lacks the status and authority of other professional knowledge and so does not supply a basis for occupational qualification and certification” (1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 67-8; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89). The implication is that management consultants, as an occupational group, have not been very successful in developing a professional knowledge base, unlike engineers, accountants, or lawyers (Clark, 1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165). Management consultants are said to possess an unstable and ever-changing set of disparate specialisms but this, for Clark, does not constitute “an agreed, accepted, authoritative and relevant body of knowledge” (1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 67; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002: 161). Any attempt to identify something called ‘the field of management consultancy knowledge’, therefore, is bound to fail from the very outset.

This is an important claim, which has gained some currency in the academic literature (see e.g. Alvesson, 2001: 865-6; Armbrüster, 2006: 5; Berglund and Werr, 2000: 635-6; Fincham, 1999: 337-9; Fincham and Clark, 2002: 5-7; Kitay and Wright, 2007; Meriläinen, et al., 2004: 543; Werr, 2002: 93-4). It challenges the very idea that “there are distinguishing characteristics that bind all [management] consultants together” (Fuchs, 1975: viii), and thus poses a serious threat to the mode of questioning adopted in the thesis. We said that it is on the level of theoretical knowledge, and not empirical practice, that we will be able to characterize management consultancy precisely *as*

management consultancy. For Clark, however, management consultancy is simply an umbrella term for a miscellaneous jumble of services provided to managers. This view is seemingly confirmed by the “fashion-led, faddish and ephemeral” nature of much management consultancy work (1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165). If Clark is correct in his view that management consultants do not possess a common body of knowledge, then the very method and objective of the thesis needs to be completely reconsidered. To be sure, it is not possible to conduct an archaeology in the first place if ‘the field of management consultancy knowledge’ proves to be nothing more than an unstable and ever-changing set of disparate specialisms, or a series of fads and fashions, without any regularity or coherence as a discourse.

Such fads and fashions – for example, total quality management, business process reengineering, lean production, etc. – have come to play a significant role in the management consultancy industry over the last few decades and, as we would expect, have been widely discussed in the academic literature (see e.g. Abrahamson, 1991; 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Clark, 2004; Collins, 2004; Fincham and Evans, 1999; Gill and Whittle, 1992; Grint and Case, 1998; Keiser, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 2000; Ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2006; Spell, 1999; Whittle, 2008). At least one commentator, however, has suggested that the emphasis on fleeting trends in management consultancy might, in fact, be misplaced: “Ironically this concern with changeability, faddishness, [and] the cyclical nature of consultant ideas...may distract attention from some long-term patterns in the nature and direction of these ideas, and some underlying tendencies in the consequences of these ideas and programmes” (Salaman, 2002: 253). Salaman suggests, here, that an exclusive focus on fads and

fashions in management consultancy might serve to obscure more enduring epistemological structures. It is precisely these ‘long-term patterns’ in management consultancy knowledge that most commentators have failed even to acknowledge. It will become clear to us, as the thesis progresses, that this is a significant oversight.

We will see that, contrary to Clark’s assertions, management consultants have in fact been successful in establishing control over a distinctive domain of knowledge. This knowledge takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We will outline the precise nature of these guidelines in chapter 3 and 4. For now, it is enough to note that this field of knowledge, which is located in the practitioner literature for management consultants, applies to each and every type of management consultancy. It therefore provides us a suitable level for our archaeological analysis.

But what do we mean by ‘the body of practitioner literature for management consultants’? We have in our sights edited collections such as Kubr, et al.’s *Management Consultancy: A Guide to the Profession* (originally published in 1976 and now in its fourth edition), Sadler’s *Management Consultancy: A Handbook for Best Practice*, Barcus and Wilkinson’s *Handbook of Management Consulting Services*, and Curnow and Reuvid’s *International Guide to Management Consultancy*, as well as individual textbooks such as Schein’s *Process Consultation* (originally published in 1969 and revised in 1988, accompanied by volume 2 in 1987 and volume 3 in 1998), Greiner and Metzger’s *Consulting to Managers*, Block’s *Flawless Consulting*, De Haan’s *Fearless Consulting*, Margerison’s *Managerial Consulting Skills*, and

Markham's *Practical Management Consultancy*. We will pay particular attention to the prescriptive textbooks that are most often cited in the academic literature, notably Kubr, et al., Greiner and Metzger, and Schein (see e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Anand, Gardner, and Morris, 2007; Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Bäcklund and Werr, 2008; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996a; Clark and Salaman, 1996c; David and Strang, 2006; Fincham, 1999; Fincham and Clark, 2002; Kitay and Wright, 2003; 2004; 2007; Werr, 2002; Werr and Perner, 2007; Werr and Styhre, 2003), as well as the ones that are explicitly linked to profession associations for management consultants, notably Sadler's *Management Consultancy: A Handbook for Best Practice* and Curnow and Reuvid's *International Guide to Management Consultancy*. Overall, we will examine more than thirty 'how to' guides for management consultants; taken together, they will serve as the 'raw material' for our archaeological analysis. It is in this body of literature that all the disparate strands of management consultancy work are gathered together, as it were, 'under one roof'. Indeed, such textbooks are not tailored for a specific operational area but, on the contrary, are meant to be applied in any technical field. Whereas the level of empirical practice allows us to grasp only different types of management consultancy – strategy consulting, IT consulting, HR consulting, etc. – without being able to tell us what links them together and makes them all part of the same thing, the level of theoretical knowledge establishes a principle of unity for management consultancy as a whole. The body of practitioner literature thus enables us, like the interlocutors in *Theaetetus*, to give a single account of its diverse forms; by interrogating this literature, we will be able to grasp not mere *examples* of management consultancy, but management consultancy *itself*.

While the practitioner literature for management consultants has not been altogether ignored by academic commentators, it is rarely examined in any detail. Indeed, the practitioner literature is criticized by some for not portraying management consultancy work accurately, particularly in terms of the real-life dynamics between the consultant and the manager in the client organization (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002: 229; Clark, 1995: 92-3; Clark and Salaman, 1995: 68; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 161-2; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89-90). This permits commentators to dismiss the practitioner literature out of hand, without any serious engagement with it. The thesis takes quite a different approach: we will show what happens when we take the practitioner literature seriously and engage with it as a field of knowledge in its own right, yet without studying this literature solely in terms of its ‘applicability’ in a client organization or its ‘usefulness’ for individual consultants. We can assume, of course, that management consultants draw on this field of knowledge during actual consultancy engagements. The nature and extent of this use, however, is quite beyond the scope of the thesis. We are interested in the field of management consultancy knowledge insofar as it displays a certain regularity and coherence as a discourse, such as the way the practitioner literature instructs consultants to deal with managers in the client organization. But how such prescriptive guidelines are translated into concrete applications, or whether there is a shortfall between the theory of management consultancy and its practice, is of no concern to us (although it would no doubt be a valid and fruitful area of research).

This does not mean we are unconcerned with the institutional effects of the practitioner literature for management consultants. Indeed, while chapters 3 and 4 will describe in more detail the field of management consultancy knowledge, chapter 5 will show that

this knowledge in fact plays an important role in management consultants' attempts to professionalize. This link between the field of management consultancy knowledge and the profession of management consultancy is demonstrated perhaps most clearly by the fact that some of the prescriptive textbooks under discussion have been approved by professional associations for management consultancy. To take two previously cited examples, Curnow and Reuvid's *International Guide to Management Consultancy* is endorsed by the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI), the European Federation of Management Consulting Associations (FEACO), and the All-Japan Federation of Management Organizations (Zen-Noh-Ren), while Sadler's *Management Consultancy: A Handbook for Best Practice* is endorsed by the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) and the Institute of Management Consultancy (IMC) in the UK. The body of practitioner literature does not simply have a practical use for management consultants in a client organization; it also plays a role in the collective mobility project of management consultants by enabling them to compete with other occupational groups – such as engineers, accountants, and lawyers – in gaining access to top managerial positions in large-scale capitalist organizations. Just because we are interested in theoretical knowledge, rather than empirical practice, does not therefore mean we are uninterested in the institutional effects of the practitioner literature. We will seek to bring to light some of these effects in relation to the profession of management consultancy in chapter 5.

Having looked at different types of management consultancy knowledge, and specified the body of practitioner literature to which we will direct our attention, it remains for us now to outline the contribution of the thesis to academic knowledge.

Contribution of the Thesis

To the extent that we will use Foucault's archaeological method to diagnose the field of management consultancy knowledge, the thesis is a contribution to the emerging academic area of 'clinical management studies'. Clinical management studies is related to, though distinct from, the more well-known field of critical management studies (CMS). In order to bring into focus the contribution of the thesis, we will provide a brief overview of CMS before comparing it to the clinical approach to management.

Since the publication of Alvesson and Willmott's edited collection *Critical Management Studies* in 1992, there has been a proliferation of scholarship relating to the possibilities and limitations of CMS in terms of its methodological frameworks, theoretical underpinnings, and institutional applicability. Somewhat schematically, it can be said that CMS involves both a negative and a positive task. Its negative task is twofold: on the one hand, CMS criticizes 'mainstream' management studies on the grounds that it acts as a handmaiden to corporate managerialism and, on the other hand, it criticizes corporate managerialism itself on the grounds that it is exploitative and oppressive. Its positive task is also twofold: on the one hand, CMS attempts to establish a different way of studying management with an alternative set of research methods and theoretical perspectives and, on the other hand, it attempts to elaborate a form of (non-corporate) management that is less exploitative and less oppressive. CMS – in the broadest possible sense – can be said to move along these four interconnected axes (see

e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; 1992b; 1996; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005).³

On one level, CMS has proved to be an incredibly successful umbrella term. It has allowed certain forms of heterodox thought to gain a foothold in management departments and business schools. CMS has also served to legitimize modes of research that were previously excluded from the study of management and organizations. This is certainly no mean feat for a disciplinary area that usually prides itself on its pragmatic and instrumental approach to corporate managerialism. In this way, CMS has presented an effective challenge to the institutional and intellectual hegemony of mainstream management studies.

Despite its apparent appeal, however, a palpable sense of disquiet now surrounds the project of CMS. A number of commentators – sympathizers and detractors alike – have made it clear precisely why they are ‘critical of critical management studies’. For example, Parker (2002: 115-6) argues that CMS has not yet made any substantive impact on organizations because it has failed to break out of the confines of academia. For this reason, CMS remains “a glass bead game played by the cognoscenti”. Fournier and Grey (2000: 25), meanwhile, warn that CMS risks becoming co-opted by more mainstream forms of management research. This is demonstrated by the fact that CMS has recently become fully integrated within a number of orthodox management

³ Critical approaches to management and organizations did not, of course, originate with CMS in the early 1990s. Indeed, such studies date back at least as far as Marx’s *Capital*. More recently, critical research into management and organizations gained new impetus following the publication of Burrell and Morgan’s *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* in 1979. Unfortunately, there is no space here to reflect on the development of the paradigm debate (which popularized the term ‘radical organization theory’) and its implications for the emergence of CMS.

conferences. Thompson (2004: 368-70) contends that CMS is little more than a brand identity for a small coterie of scholars whose radical scepticism towards all ‘truth claims’ serves to encourage second-rate research based on theoretical obscurantism. In a similar vein, Ackroyd (2004: 169) suggests that CMS is a sect that pretends to be a church, since it claims to welcome diverse perspectives on management and organizations when it is, in fact, extremely exclusive in its theoretical approach.

Such varied criticisms hint at the extent to which CMS has failed to live up to its own promises, even if the level of cynicism and hypocrisy is at times overstated. Part of this perceived failure no doubt rests on the place of critique within CMS. While some form of critique is obviously intrinsic to the CMS project, the precise nature of this critical element remains frustrating elusive. As Böhm (2006: 20) notes, some commentators view the critical element of CMS as something very specific – for example, Frankfurt School critical theory – while other commentators are happy to work with a very loose and flexible understanding of critique. Academics within CMS, then, seem to be faced with an apparently insuperable dilemma: either one can *pin down* the meaning of critique in CMS (in which case alternative perspectives on management and organizations are liable to be excluded) or one can *open up* the meaning of critique in CMS (in which case radical perspectives on management and organizations are liable to be compromised). All too often, this dilemma serves to neutralize CMS as a coherent philosophical or political project. It thus risks turning ‘critique’ into little more than an empty slogan (2006: 21; see also Böhm and Spoelstra, 2004: 100).

Fournier and Grey (2000) echo this concern. At the close of their influential article 'At the Critical Moment', they discuss the predicament in which CMS now finds itself. The way they propose to deal with this state of affairs is instructive:

[I]t may well be that the time has come to leave the temporary home that the CMS label has provided for critique...Witnessing the spectacle of 'critical' being appropriated in ways which are so extensive as to make its meaning indistinguishable from that which was formerly the target of critique, it becomes tempting to regard CMS as defunct as a label. However, and labels aside, for all the difficulties that attend it, we would not wish to give up on critique as a worthwhile endeavour in management. (2000: 27)

Like Böhm, Fournier and Grey are attentive to the way in which the critical element of CMS is open to so many different, and often mutually exclusive, interpretations. This means that CMS loses some of the philosophical and political urgency it might once have possessed. Yet, for all the problems with CMS, Fournier and Grey maintain that critique still has a vital role to play within management departments and business schools. Perhaps, then, it is time to dispense with the ostentatious and counterproductive label of 'critical management studies' while insisting on the need to renew its critical project in relation to corporate managerialism and mainstream management studies.

This is the point at which clinical management studies becomes a viable alternative to certain aspects of CMS. Indeed, a clinical approach to management and organizations is

already beginning to bear academic fruit for a small group of scholars in the UK and Scandinavia (see e.g. Fuglsang, 2007; Kristensen, Pedersen, and Spoelstra, 2008). On the surface, clinical management studies seems to share a great deal with CMS. Certainly, both approaches are at least partly concerned with the work of Foucault and the function of critique. But there are two important differences between CMS and clinical management studies.

The first point of comparison concerns Foucault and the use to which his work is put. The rebuke can already be heard: you go to all the trouble of describing something called ‘clinical management studies’, but in the end you fall back on one of the most popular, one of the most enduring, and – it needs to be said – one of the most *obvious* thinkers claimed by CMS. If there is anyone who represents the academic project of CMS, for better or for worse, then it is surely Foucault (for an overview of Foucault’s reception within CMS, see e.g. Barratt, 2004; Jones, 2002). How is clinical management studies able to establish its own research agenda if it shares with CMS the same familiar and, by now, monotonous theoretical landmarks?

There is little doubt that Foucault has been incredibly influential within CMS over the last couple of decades (see e.g. Burrell, 1988; 1996; Knights, 1992; 2002; Knights and Morgan, 1991; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Townley, 1993; 1994). However, many of Foucault’s concepts – such as ‘discipline’, ‘panopticism’, ‘governmentality’, and ‘power/knowledge’ – have become little more than emblematic motifs for his champions or, in turn, insipid clichés to his critics. Most perniciously, the slapdash application of these concepts within CMS has, on occasion, served to mask a certain

lack of analytical rigour. In other words, it has become all too easy to invoke Foucault and to deploy a handful of his concepts instead of aiming to produce serious and robust scholarship. For this reason, clinical management studies proposes to refrain from using such concepts for the time being. Instead, it draws on Foucault's diagnostic method – the archaeology of knowledge – in relation to forms of management and organization.⁴

The second point of comparison between CMS and clinical management studies concerns the function of critique. It was previously said that CMS is characterized by a certain 'criticality' that, ironically, might sometimes serve to hinder effective and sustained critique. Put simply, the concept of critique within CMS is either too broad or too narrow for it to underpin a coherent academic project. Clinical management studies, by contrast, does not claim for itself a concept of critique that is based on a specific political perspective. It thus leaves open the vexed questions 'critique in the name of what?' and 'critique in the name of whom?' By drawing on Foucault's archaeological method, clinical management studies exercises a certain 'critical attitude' towards the present. This critical attitude prompts one to say what the present *is* at the same time as it urges one to see if it might not be possible to *change* what the present is. In this way, clinical management studies aims neither to reject institutional arrangements entirely nor to develop less exploitative or less oppressive versions of them. Rather, it works at the limits of the forms of managerial and organizational knowledge we accept as valid

⁴ Some commentators within CMS argue that Foucault's 'archaeological period' in the 1960s is superseded by his 'genealogical period' in the 1970s. On this view, Foucault is said to have 'abandoned' or 'dispensed with' the archaeology of knowledge as his diagnostic method (see Burrell, 1996: 653; Knights, 2002: 578). Such commentators stubbornly maintain this position despite the continuing role that archaeology plays in Foucault's work during the 1970s and 1980s (see e.g. Foucault, 1980: 61; 1996: 375; 2003a: 60; 2003b: 10-1; 2006: 238-9; 2007: 61; 113-4).

or true and the relations of managerial and organizational power in which we are currently implicated in order to put these very limits to the test.

Clinical management studies, then, differs from CMS in terms of the use to which it puts the work of Foucault and the function of critique.

It should be said that a number of commentators within CMS have been satisfied with applying a few of Foucault's concepts in relation to management consultancy. This invariably occurs in research conducted on the level of empirical practice (i.e. ethnographic fieldwork). For example, in a case study of computer-telephony consultancy, Case (2002: 103) claims that discussions between delegates at a one-day practitioner workshop "bear witness to the enactment of what Foucault (1980) terms power-knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*) relations, whereby the actors collaborate in the creation of an inequitable and self-defeating moral order". Case goes on to conclude from his fieldwork that "following Foucault...the consultancy discourse is a celebration of self-disciplinary power" (2002: 106). It should be recalled that Foucault never conducted ethnographic fieldwork, nor did he understand conversations or informal discussions as examples of 'discourse' (this term he reserved for fields of knowledge in the human sciences). Bäcklund and Werr (2008) and Meriläinen, et al. (2004) both fall into this same error. While they each claim to take a "Foucault-inspired view on discourse" (Bäcklund and Werr, 2008: 759) and a "Foucauldian-influenced approach to discourse" (Meriläinen, et al., 2004: 544) in relation to management consultancy, this amounts to little more than conducting extensive interviews with individual management consultants (see also Legge, 2002: 86). Other commentators, meanwhile,

speak of Foucault's concept of 'disciplinary power' in terms of the asymmetrical relationship between the consultant and the manager in a client organization (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002: 239). Needless to say, this characterization of the concept of disciplinary power ignores the specific historical and institutional context (i.e. prisons, schools, and barracks in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century) in which Foucault is careful to situate it in *Discipline and Punish*. These, then, are a few examples of the use of Foucault's concepts to discuss management consultancy in CMS.

The thesis proposes to take the study of management consultancy in a new direction and thus contribute to the academic field. We will move away from the level of empirical practice and from the seemingly arbitrary invocation of Foucault's concepts; instead, we will apply Foucault's method on the level of theoretical knowledge. Our aim, rather than criticizing management consultancy for being exploitative and oppressive, or developing a less exploitative and oppressive version of management consultancy, will be simultaneously to describe and transform aspects of management consultancy by using the archaeology of knowledge. CMS (with some noble exceptions) usually deploys the work of a modern Continental philosopher in order to criticize and attack an organizational object, such as Foucault and management consultancy, or Derrida and business ethics, or Deleuze and Guattari and formalistic organizations. The object in question, usually lacking in intellectual nuance and nicety, inevitably withers away in the face of such a philosophical onslaught and CMS can claim yet another managerial scalp. The thesis, however, proposes to use the work of a philosopher not to destroy an organizational object, but to bring it to light (though not, of course, without changing it in the process) by paying close attention to the field of

management consultancy knowledge. Wendy Hollway's *Work Psychology and Organizational Behaviour* (1991) and Roy Jacques' *Manufacturing the Employee* (1996) and are rare examples of studies, in different organizational contexts, that engage with management knowledge on its own terms by drawing on Foucault's methodological tenets rather than his philosophical concepts. Although neither adopts an explicitly 'clinical' approach, each study serves as a useful point of reference for the overall approach of the thesis.

The impact of the thesis on the functioning of contemporary capitalist relations will almost certainly be negligible. The cogs of industry will no doubt grind on ceaselessly and consultants will continue to provide their services to managers with the same aplomb as before. The question 'what is management consultancy?', we must therefore admit, is not a revolutionary one. But neither is it entirely meaningless or impotent in political terms. The fact that the question 'what is management consultancy?' is asked in the direction of management consultancy knowledge serves, at the very least, to reaffirm the possibility of interrogating 'corporate managerialism' – understood as a broad spectrum of economic and political interests – on its own terms, within its own domain, and following its own peculiar logic. It is within the space of this possibility that the thesis is conducted.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first five chapters deal with a different aspect of archaeology: the disruption of historical continuities, the formation of an

object, the arrangement of concepts, the construction of diverging theories in the same field of knowledge, and the institutional effects of the practitioner literature. The sixth and final chapter reflects in greater detail on the archaeology of knowledge and the way it enables us to produce a new or modified unity of management consultancy discourse.

Chapter 1 looks at the various accounts of management consultancy's origin that are found in the business history literature. We will show that these accounts are beset by ambiguities and inconsistencies because they each fail to address the question of what management consultancy is. By describing these accounts, the chapter will seek to disrupt a conventional unity of management consultancy discourse, namely, the historical continuity between scientific management and contemporary forms of management consultancy. We will go on to show that neither management engineering nor cost accounting are continuous with management consultancy, as other commentators have suggested.

Chapter 2 describes how the object of management consultancy is defined in the practitioner literature. We will show that management consultancy is conceptualized in the literature as the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas. We will go on to see if we are able to say what management consultancy is on the basis of its content-knowledge, that is to say, the different types of technical expertise that management consultants provide to managers. It will be shown, ultimately, that the functional scope of management consultancy is identical to management's own functional scope. This highlights the need to distinguish clearly between management consultancy and management itself. By drawing on the

work of management theorist Peter Armstrong, we will see that it is possible to make such a distinction not on the basis of their technical components (i.e. operational expertise in specific organizational areas), but on the basis of their relational components (i.e. prescriptive guidelines for managing clients in the case of management consultancy knowledge, and prescriptive guidelines for managing subordinates in the case of management knowledge). The chapter will conclude by arguing that that management consultancy cannot be understood solely on the basis of its content-knowledge; it must be understood, first and foremost, in terms of its process-knowledge, which takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation.

Chapter 3 describes the arrangement and ordering of concepts in the practitioner literature. It will be shown how concepts such as ‘analysis’, ‘advice’, and ‘assistance’ are distributed in a field of knowledge, across a range of textbooks. This will serve to bring to light the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. It will be seen that these guidelines – which we will call ‘management consultancy process-knowledge’ – provide a framework for the consultant to establish a collaborative relation with the client that is simultaneously equal (since the consultant and the client work together on the same hierarchical level in order to diagnose organizational problems jointly, formulate solutions jointly, and implement solutions jointly) and unequal (since the consultant seeks, throughout the various phases of the consultancy engagement, to minimize the client’s resistance to organizational change). In this way, the relational component of management consultancy will be shown to differ from the relational component of management. Taken together, the prescriptive

guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation will allow us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy, thus bringing us closer to answering our guiding question.

Chapter 4 describes how diverging theories are constructed in the practitioner literature. In particular, we will see how Edgar H. Schein's model of process consultation differs from the conventional model of content-based consulting whilst remaining within the same field of knowledge. It will be shown that the model of process consultation is a 'pure form' of management consultancy, stripped of all technical expertise; it thus draws entirely on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We will see, moreover, that the model of process consultation is said to be useful not only for consultants but also for managers. On this view, managers are encouraged to become 'their own consultants' in their own organization in order to minimize staff resistance to organizational change. This results in a paradoxical situation whereby management consultancy knowledge becomes, in effect, a part of management knowledge.

Chapter 5 describes the institutional effects of the practitioner literature for management consultants. To this extent, this chapter is concerned with the relation between knowledge and power. We will show that management consultants have made a sustained attempt over the years to professionalize on the basis of a common body of knowledge, which takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. Returning to the work of Armstrong, it will be shown that this process-knowledge has enabled management consultants to pursue their own

collective mobility project in relation to other professional groups, such as engineers and accountants. It will be argued that process-knowledge allows consultants to situate themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies at the same times as it frustrates their attempt to occupy this senior executive level in a decisive way. This means that process-knowledge provides the source of management consultants' professional power at the same time as it threatens to undermine the very basis of this power.

Chapter 6 examines the work of Foucault in more detail in order to reflect on what the thesis has achieved. It will be argued that, by drawing on the archaeology of knowledge, we have sought to diagnose the symptoms of management consultancy. Foucault wrote about his methodological approach the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) only after he had completed the *History of Madness* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *The Order of Things* (1966); this provides an important precedent for discussing the method and objective of the thesis in its final chapter. Only after our main task has been completed – namely, describing the field of management consultancy knowledge according to its objects, concepts, and diverging theories – will we be able to say precisely what we have achieved in the thesis.

The conclusion, finally, summarizes the thesis as a whole and points to future directions for research.

Chapter 1

Origin of Management Consultancy

Introduction

If we want to know what something is, its origin is the most obvious place to begin. It is at their origin that all things emerge as they are, in their own unique and singular identity. This origin is where things are most 'themselves', containing nothing inessential to their own being and as yet uncontaminated by other things that will later become attached to them, confused with them, and perhaps eventually mistaken for them. It would therefore make sense, if we are interested in finding out what management consultancy is, to locate its own origin. Since we said in the previous chapter that a certain ambiguity surrounds the term 'management consultancy' owing to its wide functional scope, it would be wise to try and see what management consultancy meant at the very moment of its birth, before its true nature became so unclear to us.

A number of attempts have been made, over the years, to describe management consultancy's historical emergence. There is, however, some disagreement in the

business history literature about the exact place and time of management consultancy's origin. Although most commentators in both the academic and practitioner literature concur that management consultancy has its origin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with advice to managers on industrial production processes, this is by no means a unanimous view. Christopher D. McKenna, for example, argues that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on top-level bureaucratic organization. Michael Ferguson, meanwhile, argues that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on financial information systems. We will now examine these three accounts – scientific management, management engineering, and cost accounting – to see if it is possible to find out what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin.

It will be argued, ultimately, that it is not possible to say what management consultancy is on this basis because each account of its origin contains serious ambiguities and inconsistencies. However, this does not mean these accounts are entirely useless for the purposes of our investigation. By disrupting some of the conventional unities of management consultancy discourse – namely, the historical continuity between scientific management, management engineering, and cost accounting on the one hand and contemporary forms of management consultancy on the other – we will show that the accounts of management consultancy's origin nonetheless raise a series of important questions. For example, are all advisory services in a managerial context to be called 'management consultancy'? Or, in addition to management consultancy, are there other advisory services that also take place in a managerial context? If so, then how are we to distinguish between management consultancy and these other advisory

services? These questions, it should be emphasized, will have a bearing on the rest of the thesis, particularly in terms of demarcating the limits of management consultancy's functional scope and the crucial distinction between management consultancy and management itself.

Scientific Management

A number of commentators have said that management consultancy originated in the mythical past. This usually takes the form of a biblical story. For example, Block (2000: 307), in the second edition of his book *Flawless Consulting*, says that “[t]he first consultant was the Serpent in the Garden of Eden”. Markowitz (2001: 82), writing in Block's *Flawless Consulting Companion and Fieldbook*, likewise suggests that ‘precedents’ of management consultancy can be traced “at least as far back as the Bible”. In a similar vein, Wilkinson (1995a: 1[9]) asserts that “[m]anagement consulting has its origins in biblical times”. Bell and Nadler (1979c: 114) also draw on the Bible in *The Client-Consultant Handbook* to show that “Moses’ working relationship with his father-in-law, Jethro, represents one of the earliest references to consultation”. Wren (2005: 17) goes so far as to call Jethro “the first known management consultant”. It is unclear whether ‘the Bible’ and ‘biblical times’ refer to the same period in history (do they mean when the Bible was written or when the events that are described in the Bible actually took place?), but any such discussion misses the point. By invoking a biblical scene, such commentators are affirming the

mythical origin of management consultancy; the matter of its *historical* origin is irrelevant.⁵

Despite their apparent popularity, accounts of management consultancy's mythical origin are often criticized. Commentators argue that management consultancy is understood erroneously in such accounts. We are therefore misled not only about the origin of management consultancy, but also about its nature. For example, Hyman (1961: 8) writes:

Consulting the oracle was popular among the ancient Greeks and it seems likely that before them the earliest hunters and agriculturalists were blessed with wise men who were always willing to tell them how to do their work. The witch doctor and the priest seem to have been concerned with economic advice in most stages of history and to have possessed some of the characteristics of the consultant. But if the mere presence of external advisors were taken as symptomatic of the existence of the management consultant, the term would be stretched so widely as to be almost useless.

Hyman suggests that management consultancy is something much more specific than those general advisory activities that are depicted in the accounts of its mythical origin.

For Hyman, not every consultant is by definition a *management* consultant and not

⁵ Accounts of management consultancy's mythical origin are not exclusively biblical. In a more secular tone, Metzger (1993: 1) suggests that management consultancy "probably dates back to when Mog was sitting in the cave and asked Grog, the best flint maker in the tribe, for help flaking flint stones. Mog certainly had to pay Grog with a piece of meat or a half dozen arrowheads or whatever, but consulting was born!". Along similar lines, Biswas and Twitchell (1999: 16) note that "consultants probably have been offering their services since the dawn of human civilization".

every form of consultancy is by definition *management* consultancy. It is wrong to say that management consultancy originates in the far distant past because it possesses a very specific, and very recent, history.

What is this history? Hyman goes on to say that management consultancy originated with “[t]he development of engineering science, the ‘scientific management’ movement from the end of the nineteenth century and the broader search for efficiency and ‘rationalization’ after the first world war” (1961: 9). On this view, management consultancy is said to emerge from an entire set of organizational and industrial changes over the last hundred years.

Higdon (1969: 113) makes a similar point:

Han Fei Tzu, founder of the so-called legalist school of ancient Chinese philosophy and advisor to the emperor, has been called the first consultant...But to attempt to identify management consultants much beyond the present century is to stretch a point. Only after mass production became fairly common toward the end of the nineteenth century did a number of industrial engineers begin to pioneer the use of scientific management principles. They used stopwatches to gauge the efficiency of work, and the label ‘efficiency engineers’ still gets hung erroneously on consulting firms and consultants today.

Like Hyman, Higdon dismisses the idea that management consultancy has an antiquated lineage: this would be to stretch its definition to breaking point. Instead,

management consultancy is said to originate with the innovations in the field of industrial engineering at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. More recently, Fombrun and Oriesek (2004: 9) write: “The Advice Business is as old as mankind. However, most experts trace the roots of ‘management consulting’ to the industrial revolution and to the rise of the era of ‘scientific management’”.

Management consultancy, then, is most commonly said to have originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with advice to management on industrial production processes, that is to say, scientific management. On this view, Frederick W. Taylor is one of the first management consultants, along with Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, Harrington Emerson and Charles D. Bedaux. This version of management consultancy’s origin is found throughout both the academic and the practitioner literature (see e.g. Cody, 1986: ix; 24; Czerniawska, 1999: 5; Fincham and Clark, 2002: 3; Fuchs, 1975: vii; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 9; Moore, 1984: 6; Rassam and Oates, 1991: 2; Tisdall, 1982: 14-15).

The present section will examine this account of management consultancy’s origin as it is found in the work of Matthias Kipping. Arguably one of the most influential business historians in the field, Kipping has written extensively on the history of management consultancy in academic journals as well as practitioner-oriented books (see e.g. 1996; 1997; 1999; 2002; 2003; Kipping and Amorim, 2003; Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2007; Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005). For Kipping, the professional development of management consultancy involves three distinct, though at

times overlapping, 'waves' or phases: scientific management (exemplified by Taylor, Emerson, and Bedaux at the turn of the twentieth century), organization and strategy (exemplified by Arthur D. Little, Booz Allen & Hamilton, and McKinsey from the 1930s onwards), and finally communication and information (exemplified by the largest accounting and IT firms from the 1970s onwards) (2002: 30-8; 2003: 22-8; for a slight variation on this model, see Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2007: 168). In what follows, we will pay particular attention to Kipping's description of the first 'wave', scientific management, since this is where we find an account of management consultancy's origin. It will be shown that Kipping gives two slightly different accounts of this origin in his work. We will deal with each account in turn.

In the first account, found in his article 'Consultancies, Institutions and the Diffusion of Taylorism in Britain, Germany and France, 1920s to 1950s', Kipping (1997: 67) admits that "[t]he origins of consultancy activities remain relatively obscure". Nonetheless, he is able to assert that

independent experts began to offer their advice to companies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They came from different backgrounds and included, for example, advertising agents, auditors and engineers. On a larger scale, however, consultancy activities developed only with the emergence and diffusion of scientific management during the first decade of the twentieth century and especially after the First World War. (1997: 67-8)

Kipping says here that external advice from independent specialists was a feature of the business environment from the late nineteenth century, but management consultancy became more widespread with the emergence of scientific management at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the second account, found in his book chapter ‘The Evolution of Management Consultancy: its Origins and Global Development’, Kipping (2003: 22) offers a near-identical description of management consultancy’s origin:

The large-scale managerial enterprise originated with the second industrial revolution in the last half of the nineteenth century...Almost from the outset top managers in these enterprises asked for outside advice. A number of different actors, including bankers, advertising agents, auditors and engineers provided such services – initially on an ad hoc basis. Consulting to managers became a clearly recognizable business activity carried out for financial gain with the development of scientific management.

Kipping says here that external advice was demanded by top management from the late nineteenth century, but management consultancy became a distinct commercial activity in its own right with the emergence of scientific management at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The two accounts of management consultancy’s origin are virtually indistinguishable in content. But there appears to be a slight (though perhaps significant) discrepancy

between them. In the first account, Kipping says that management consultancy developed ‘on a larger scale’ with the emergence of scientific management. In other words, advisory services in a managerial context became more widespread.⁶ This isn’t actually an account of management consultancy’s origin at all; it is an account of its expansion and development. It suggests that management consultancy could be recognized as such *before* the emergence of scientific management. In the second account, meanwhile, Kipping says that management consultancy became a ‘clearly recognizable business activity’ with the emergence of scientific management. In other words, management consultancy came to be seen as a distinct commercial activity in its own right.⁷ This is now an account of management consultancy’s origin and *not* an account of its development and expansion. It suggests that management consultancy could be recognized as such only *after* the emergence of scientific management.

So, there is an unexplained discrepancy between the two passages: management consultancy is said to originate both before *and* after scientific management. We have two slightly different versions of management consultancy’s origin. It should be said in Kipping’s defence that he explicitly discusses management consultancy’s origin only in these very short passages. He does not attempt to provide a full account of its historical

⁶ This view is echoed in Kipping’s 1999 article in the academic journal *Business History Review*: “In the last quarter of the nineteenth century independent experts from the fields of engineering, accounting, and advertising began to offer their advice to companies. However, the first organized *growth* of the consultancy industry – and its first wave of international *expansion* – was linked to the emergence of scientific management in the United States around the turn of the century” (1999: 195; emphasis added).

⁷ This account is repeated almost word-for-word in Kipping’s 2002 book chapter in the edited collection *Critical Consulting*: “The large-scale managerial enterprise originated with the second industrial revolution in the last half of the nineteenth century...It appears that, almost from the outset, the managers in these enterprises asked for outside advice. Such services were provided, initially on an ad hoc basis, by a number of different actors, including bankers, advertising agents, auditors and engineers...However, consulting to managers only became *a clearly recognizable business activity*, carried out for financial gain, with the development of scientific management” (2002: 30; emphasis added).

formation because he is more interested in charting its professional development throughout the twentieth century. I could therefore be accused of engaging in a particularly specious form of academic pedantry. Indeed, the apparent discrepancy between the two accounts might just be a simple and honest mistake on Kipping's part. This is probably true. But I would argue that it is a mistake that tells us something important about how management consultancy is understood by Kipping.

In each passage, management consultancy is understood *in a different way*. In the first account, management consultancy is understood as all advisory services in a managerial context, whether they are 'ad hoc' or not. Advertising agents, auditors, engineers – these are all 'management consultants' according to the first account. In this case, the emergence of scientific management marks the point at which management consultancy simply becomes more widespread. The second account, meanwhile, seems to suggest that not all advisory services in a managerial context can be called 'management consultancy'. Management consultancy is understood as only those advisory services in a managerial context that are no longer 'ad hoc'. Advertising agents, auditors and engineers cannot be called 'management consultants' so long as their advisory services remain 'ad hoc'.⁸ In this case, the emergence of scientific management now marks the point of management consultancy's origin (and not the point at which it becomes more widespread). Management consultancy, then, is understood by Kipping differently in each passage.

⁸ It should be noted that Kipping does not explain what 'ad hoc' means in this context; nor he does he say why it is important for viewing management consultancy as a 'clearly recognizable business activity'.

Kipping's work, then, does not enable us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin. If management consultancy is, in one account, said to originate *before* scientific management and, in another account, said to originate *after* scientific management, then it is not entirely clear what Kipping is speaking of when he uses the term 'management consultancy'. Indeed, Kipping's work raises more questions than it is able to answer. For example, are all advisory services in a managerial context to be called 'management consultancy'? Or, in addition to management consultancy, are there other advisory services that also take place in a managerial context? If so, then how is management consultancy to be distinguished from these other advisory services? At stake in all of these questions is the central issue: what is management consultancy? Kipping, who is undoubtedly one of the most thorough and diligent business historians in the field, is unable to divest management consultancy of its ambiguity.

The following sections will outline two alternative versions of management consultancy's origin found, respectively, in the work of Christopher D. McKenna and Michael Ferguson. We will see if either of these accounts enables us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin.

Management Engineering

Most commentators in the practitioner and academic literature, as we previously noted, agree that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on industrial production processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some business historians, however, have questioned this approach. Most significantly, McKenna's

1995 article ‘The Origins of Modern Management Consulting’, published in the academic journal *Business and Economic History*, presents a direct challenge to the conventional account of management consultancy’s origin.⁹ McKenna is very clear on this point. He asserts that “historians have wrongly assumed that management consulting arose directly out of Taylorism” (1995: 51). He continues:

The proponents of scientific management, Frederick Taylor, Henry Gantt, Morris Cooke, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, and Harrington Emerson, consulted with nearly 200 businesses on ways to systematize the activities of their workers through the application of wage incentives, time-motion studies, and industrial psychology. Naturally, then, historians of Taylorism have assumed that they could describe contemporary practitioners of ‘industrial engineering’, ‘production engineering’, ‘consulting engineering’, and ‘efficiency engineering’, as early management consultants...But Taylorists and management consultants actually had very different professional and ideological origins. (1995: 51-2)

This is an unambiguous rejection of the most common version of management consultancy’s origin. The origin of management consultancy, for McKenna, has nothing to do with scientific management or Taylorism. Management consultancy originated elsewhere.

⁹ McKenna (2006: 26-50) restates this challenge in his book *The World’s Newest Profession*. Kipping’s work is cited as an example of the conventional account of management consultancy’s origin, albeit a “nuanced” one (2006: 266[n2]).

What is this origin? McKenna makes a strong claim upfront. He says that “Taylorists were largely concerned with industrial relations while early management consultants focused on *problems of bureaucratic organization*” (1995: 52; emphasis added). He elaborates on this in the same paragraph:

[P]rofessionally-trained accountants and engineers, often with backgrounds in law or banking, founded the early ‘management engineering’ firms to offer advice to executives on *the organization of their boardrooms*, not on the efficiency of their shop floors. (1995: 52; emphasis added)

McKenna claims here that management consultancy did not originate when Taylorists began to provide advice to managers on industrial production processes. Rather, it originated when management engineering firms started giving advice to managers on top-level bureaucratic organization.

McKenna is making an important claim here. He does not say that advice on top-level bureaucratic organization originated *before* advice on shop-floor efficiency. This would challenge the conventional account of management consultancy’s origin on the basis of historical chronology: one form of advisory service in a managerial context would simply predate another. Instead, McKenna makes a much stronger claim. He says that management consultancy did not originate with advice on shop-floor efficiency because advice on shop-floor efficiency *is not management consultancy*. In other words, management consultancy did not originate with Taylorism because Taylorists cannot be called ‘management consultants’. Early management consultants provided advice on

top-level bureaucratic organization, not advice on shop-floor efficiency. Taylorists and management consultants are occupationally distinct; they have, as McKenna puts it, “very different professional and ideological origins” (1995: 52).

McKenna presents us with an interesting innovation. He is drawing a distinction here between management consultancy (in this case, advice on top-level bureaucratic organization) and other advisory services that also take place in a managerial context (in this case, advice on shop-floor efficiency). Needless to say, this view runs contrary to much of the practitioner and academic literature. It does, however, promise to give management consultancy a professional specificity, which we found lacking in Kipping’s work.

On what basis, then, does McKenna make this distinction between management consultancy and other advisory services in a managerial context? How does he support his strong claim that Taylorists cannot be called ‘management consultants’? Unfortunately, the only apparent justification McKenna offers for this claim is the following statement, which directly follows on from his comment that “Taylorists were largely concerned with industrial relations while early management consultants focused on problems of bureaucratic organization”:

While Harrington Emerson’s firm of ‘efficiency engineers’ did survive as a very small consulting firm through the 1980s, and the British ‘management consultancies’ founded in the 1930s were undoubtedly Taylorist, none of the

large modern American management consulting firms have Taylorist origins.
(1995: 52)

McKenna says here that although a few British management consultancy firms have a Taylorist background, no American management consultancy firms can trace their lineage back to the scientific management movement. But this passage does not actually provide any justification for McKenna's claim that Taylorists cannot be called 'management consultants'. It does not allow us to understand the basis on which McKenna makes the distinction between management consultancy (in this case, advice on bureaucratic organization) and other advisory services in a managerial context (in this case, advice on shop-floor efficiency). It is in fact tautological: McKenna asserts that Taylorists cannot be called 'management consultants', and he explains this by saying that US management consultancy firms are not Taylorist. Matters are further complicated by the fact that some British management consultancy firms founded in the 1930s apparently *are* Taylorist, which seems to contradict McKenna's strong claim that Taylorists and management consultants are occupationally distinct. The puzzling scare quotes around "British 'management consultancies'" remain unexplained.

Nowhere else in the article does McKenna attempt to provide any justification for his strong claim that Taylorists cannot be called 'management consultants'. Even if it is true that advisors on top-level bureaucratic organization "came out of a different intellectual traditional than the shop management movement from which Taylor made his reputation" (1995: 52), McKenna does not explain *why* the former can be called 'management consultants' while the latter cannot. He thus fails to provide a clear

distinction between management consultancy and other advisory services in a managerial context (even though he insists on making such a distinction in the first place). As a result, his account of management consultancy's origin is somewhat arbitrary and his understanding of management consultancy is rather unclear.¹⁰ McKenna's promise to resolve some of the questions raised by Kipping's work remains, therefore, unfulfilled. McKenna's work, in other words, does not enable us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its *origin*.

Let us now turn to our final account of management consultancy's origin.

Cost Accounting

In his 2002 book *The Rise of Management Consulting in Britain*, Michael Ferguson tries to make it clear, from the very outset, what management consultancy is. Despite the fact that the boundaries of management consultancy are always widening, Ferguson says, it is nonetheless possible "to provide an outline definition of a management consultant, identifying the core elements of the role through an acceptance of the evolving service base and the levels within the firm to which it is applied" (2002: 3-4). Even though management consultants operate in a variety of operational areas, he implies, there is nonetheless something remains the same in every single technical field

¹⁰ McKenna does, in fact, provide a brief definition of management consultancy in a footnote, which he borrows from the Association of Management Consultants (ACME) in the US: it is "a service provided for a fee by objective outsiders who help executives improve the management, operations, and economic performance of institutions" (1995: 51[n2]). Curiously, there is nothing in this definition to suggest that Taylorists cannot be called 'management consultants', even though this is McKenna's central argument.

and allows us to characterize management consultants precisely *as* management consultants.

What is this definition? Ferguson begins by suggesting that a management consultant is “a specialist provider of services in support of management in exchange for a fee” (2002: 4). Such services include forms of advice that are “concerned with all the elements of management and would fit the broad areas of strategy, policy, markets, organisation, and procedures and methods at the various levels within the firm” (2002: 4). But this is not all. Ferguson continues:

As a consequence of their involvement in an organization consultants develop a plan determined through some form of analysis, and having made recommendations are at the point in the series of events for which those engaged in a purely advisory capacity would have completed the task. This is the point, in definitional terms, which separates management consultants from those providing services of an advisory nature whose responsibility ends with the presentation of their recommendations. From here on, to be a consultant, part of the role is to provide assistance in the execution of the recommended plans where such assistance is required. The management consultant is, therefore, more than a provider of advice on payment of a fee. The consultant is responsible for ensuring that solutions are fully effective, only handing over the remaining portion of responsibility to the client at the conclusion of the assignment. (2002: 4-5)

Ferguson is distinguishing, here, between management consultancy and other advisory services in a managerial context. Unlike Kipping and McKenna, however, Ferguson actually says *how* he makes this distinction. Whereas these other (unspecified) advisors offer their services to managers in a ‘purely advisory’ capacity, management consultants analyze organizational problems, advise managers on how to remedy these problems, and assist with the implementation of their proposed solutions in the client organization. This, then, is how Ferguson defines management consultancy: analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas. It should be said that Ferguson did not come up with this definition himself. As we will see in the next chapter, it is found throughout the practitioner literature for management consultants. On this view, Ferguson is simply invoking the most common understanding of management consultancy. Let us now see how this definition relates to Ferguson’s account of management consultancy’s origin.

Like Kipping, Ferguson suggests that the origin of management consultancy is relatively obscure. He begins his book by suggesting that writing its history is like

completing a jigsaw puzzle in which a number of the important pieces are missing. One major piece of this particular puzzle, and the one that has proved the most elusive, is identifying that point in time when management consulting first became established as a form of service in Britain. (2002: 1)

Ferguson is aware of the problems involved with writing the history of management consultancy, particularly in terms of giving an account of its origin. One of the main

difficulties for Ferguson is the fact that documentation about early management consultancy activities (i.e. before the emergence of British management consultancy firms in the 1920s) is not readily available to researchers (2002: 1). Nonetheless, Ferguson has trawled through the archives to uncover this documentation. This allows him to chart the early history of management consultancy and to describe its origin.

What is this origin? Ferguson argues that “there is little evidence to suggest that the first management consultants provided services in relation to improvements to productivity and the control of labour” (2002: 26). Like McKenna, then, Ferguson rejects the idea that management consultancy originated with scientific management. Unlike McKenna, however, Ferguson does not disqualify Taylorists from being called ‘management consultants’. He simply says that the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers on how to systematize the labour process was a later development in management consultancy (2002: 26). The earliest form of management consultancy, rather, can be found in the field of cost accounting. As Ferguson puts it, “[t]he available evidence has suggested that management consulting services were first provided to give financial information on the operational aspects of the business through the development of costing methods tailored to meet the clients’ needs” (2002: 26).

Ferguson does not simply identify the first type of management consultancy (namely, advice to managers on financial information systems). He goes one further. He actually identifies *the first management consultant*. It is worth paying close attention to Ferguson’s claim:

The emphasis on the financial aspects of businesses...causes problems in identifying early pioneers of management consultancy because both professional accountants and management consultants offered services in relation to the financial dealings of firms...[T]he first identified occurrence of an activity that fits within the definition of management consulting occurred in the period 1869-1870. The individual concerned was Montague Whitmore, a chartered accountant, of Clerkenwell Green, London, who employed techniques in costing and management accounting. The main difference between Whitmore and his accountant colleagues was that even though some of the additional services provided by accountants could possibly have been described as consulting, they were ad hoc in nature. Whitmore was a full-time consultant with a background in accountancy; having developed a service specifically concerned with consulting in respect of cost recording and review. (2002: 23-4)

There are a number of points to be made here. First of all, Ferguson says that it is difficult to chart the early history of management consultancy because both management consultants and professional accountants provided financial services in client organizations. Despite this difficulty, Ferguson's definition of management consultancy – the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers – enables him to distinguish between management consultants and professional accountants. Montague Whitmore, on this basis, is said to be the first management consultant because he was the first person to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to

managers.¹¹ Whatever else a professional accountant might have done in the period 1869-1870, they did not provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers (otherwise they would simply be called a ‘management consultant’, on Ferguson’s view, rather than a professional accountant).

Towards the end of the passage, however, Ferguson distinguishes between management consultants and professional accountants on a different basis. This is the point at which Ferguson’s account of management consultancy’s origin becomes somewhat problematic. It is worth recalling the entire sentence: “The main difference between Whitmore and his accountant colleagues was that even though some of the additional services provided by accountants could possibly have been described as consulting, they were ad hoc in nature”. Ferguson is distinguishing here, once more, between management consultants and professional accountants. But this time, the distinction is no longer based on his definition of management consultancy. He now says that some of the services provided by professional accountants might, in fact, be described as ‘management consultancy’. This means that professional accountants *did* provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers. But these professional accountants cannot be called ‘management consultants’ because, Ferguson now says, their provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers was “ad hoc in nature”. This implies that management consultancy originated with Whitmore not because he was the first person to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers (as Ferguson previously

¹¹ To support this claim, Ferguson discusses a letter published in *The Engineer* in December 1870 which describes Whitmore’s activities in a client organization. The letter indicates that Whitmore’s activities included, in addition to financial advice, the evaluation of his client’s requirements and the installation of a costing and review system (2002: 24).

claimed), but because he was the first person to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers *that was no longer “ad hoc in nature”*.

We are left with two alternatives. *Either* management consultancy originated with Whitmore because he was the first person to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers (in which case, it still needs to be explained how “some of the additional services provided by accountants could possibly have been described as consulting”). *Or* management consultancy originated with Whitmore because he was the first person to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers that was no longer “ad hoc in nature” (in which case, it still needs to be explained what ‘ad hoc’ means and how it relates to Ferguson’s definition of management consultancy). Ferguson does not provide us with any explanations; both alternatives are equally problematic. Like Kipping and McKenna, Ferguson’s account similarly raises more questions than it answers.

Ferguson complicates matters further by examining advisory services in a managerial context that took place “before the birth of [management] consultancy” (2002: 20). He gives two examples of such ‘forerunners’ to management consultants: ‘development engineers’ in manufacturing and ‘coal viewers’ in the mining industry. Let us cite Ferguson in full:

It was at that time [namely, before the birth of management consultancy] that advisory services were established by individuals external to the manufacturing or operating firm itself; specifically as a consequence of the development of

specialised equipment, for examples in spinning and weaving, or through the invention of water and steam power. The inventors of these equipments were the early development engineers, some of whom provided services in addition to direct installation. Such services included giving guidance and assistance to clients with regards to the proper and effective method of their use. In addition to these development engineers, others also became specialists in specific forms of equipment and provided a similar range of services, for example within the collieries where steam power increased the volume of materials extracted and was used to pump out water from the mines. Some within the first group, however, also provided services in relation to techniques for the efficient operation of the business. For example, advising on factory layout, definitive modes of operation (forms of work-study), costing methodologies, and so on. *These were just the forms of advice that were subsequently provided by the early management consultants.* (2002: 20; emphasis added)

Ferguson says here that management consultancy was predated by certain other advisory services in a managerial context. Development engineers not only designed and installed machinery and other equipment in factories but also advised and assisted their clients with factory layout, operating processes, and costing methods. Coal viewers, meanwhile, not only implemented water-pump systems in a client's colliery but, as Ferguson goes on to say, also set up wage systems, managed stock controls, organized human resources, and developed costing methods (2002: 21).

This raises an important question. If these services “were just the forms of advice that were subsequently provided by the early management consultants”, then why are development engineers and coal viewers not called ‘management consultants’? In other words, if their services fit Ferguson’s definition of management consultancy – the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers – then in what way are development engineers and coal viewers ‘forerunners’ to management consultants rather than actual management consultants? The only explanation Ferguson gives is his suggestion that “the provision of advice and assistance [provided by development engineers and coal viewers] were incidental to their primary roles” (2002: 21). It is not specified by Ferguson, however, precisely what their ‘primary roles’ were if not analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in manufacturing and the mining industry. We cannot fail to hear the echo, here, between “incidental to their primary roles” in terms of development engineers and coal viewers and “ad hoc in nature” in terms of professional accountants. In both cases, Ferguson distinguishes between management consultancy and other advisory services in a managerial context. On each occasion, however, this distinction is not made on the basis of Ferguson’s own definition of management consultancy but on another basis altogether that remains unexplained. It is unclear, then, why management consultancy is said to originate with the practice of cost accounting in the period 1869-1870 (whether with Whitmore or with his professional accountant colleagues), rather than with development engineering or coal viewing in the eighteenth century. Bearing these ambiguities in mind, it would appear that Ferguson’s work, like Kipping and McKenna’s, does not enable us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin.

Conclusion

Perhaps is not even possible, in the first place, to locate the true origin of anything. Management consultancy, on this view, would not be a special case; the origin of management, accounting, marketing, and strategy would be equally difficult to locate. At the root of things, rather than finding an essential purity, we would instead encounter nothing more than a series of chance events and fortuitous accidents out of which, bit by bit, things are produced. As Foucault (2000: 317-2) writes, speaking of Nietzsche's genealogical approach to history: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of its origin; it is the dissension of other things". From this perspective, the true nature of management consultancy – or indeed any other phenomenon – is not revealed, complete and fully formed, at the moment of its inception; what we find, in place of this original identity, is instead difference and disparity.

Even so, the various accounts of management consultancy's origin are not completely useless in terms of our own investigation. Indeed, they raise a number of questions that will serve to orientate our discussion in the following chapter. For example, are all advisory services in a managerial context to be called 'management consultancy'? Or, in addition to management consultancy, are there other advisory services that also take place in a managerial context? If so, then how are we to distinguish between management consultancy and these other advisory services? At stake in these questions, as we previously said, is the central issue: what is management consultancy? Since the accounts of management consultancy's origins in the business history literature are clearly unable to bring us any closer to answering this question adequately, we must

now turn elsewhere: the practitioner literature. We do so in the hope of divesting management consultancy of some of its ambiguity and finding out, as far as it is possible, precisely what it is.

Chapter 2

Content of Management Consultancy

Introduction

This chapter describes how the object of management consultancy is defined in the practitioner literature. We will show that management consultancy is conceptualized as the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas. This tells us that management consultancy, broadly understood, spans numerous technical fields; indeed, the wide functional scope is one of management consultancy's most characteristic traits. But even if we acknowledge that management consultancy has, by definition, a wide functional scope, this does not exhaust its meaning. In fact, it serves to raise further questions. For example, can management consultants provide managers with services in *any* operational area, or are they restricted to providing services in a *limited* number of fields? If so, what are these limits to the functional scope of management consultancy? These questions are important because they seek to discover whether management consultancy is a unique and coherent object, with its own specific identity, or whether it is, like the business historians imply, an inherently

vague and indeterminate object that serves merely as a convenient heuristic. The present chapter will address these questions by asking after the content of management consultancy, by which we mean the different types of technical expertise that management consultants are said to provide to managers in a variety of operational areas. We will then be able to see whether such content-knowledge allows us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy.

It will be argued, ultimately, that it is not possible to say what management consultancy is according to its content-knowledge. This is because management consultancy's functional scope is identical to the functional scope of management. This points to the necessity of distinguishing clearly between management consultancy and management itself. We will draw on the work of management theorist Peter Armstrong to show that it is possible to make this distinction not on the basis of their technical components (i.e. operational expertise in specific organizational areas), but on the basis of their relational components (i.e. prescriptive guidelines for managing clients in the case of management consultancy knowledge, and prescriptive guidelines for managing subordinates in the case of management knowledge). Such a distinction, in the end, holds the key to the entire thesis.

Defining Management Consultancy

Some commentators have noted that it is difficult to pin down management consultancy to a single, stable definition. Rassam (2001a: 29) writes: "There are almost as many definitions of consultancy as there consultants...In recent years, consultancy has

become such an all-embracing pursuit, for a variety of reasons, that it is impossible to define consultancy as precisely as we would wish". Wilkinson (1995a: 1[4]) makes the same point even more forcefully: "The term *management consulting* is so broad that its definition has defied the efforts of management consultants themselves. In fact, a committee of management consultants...recently concluded that the term cannot be defined" (emphasis in original). Put simply, management consultancy is "a slippery and an elastic concept" that evades easy definition (Collins, 2004: 554; see also De Sonnaville, 2003: 125; Sturdy, et al., 2009: 3).

This is no doubt the case because management consultancy work takes place in a wide range of industrial and commercial settings, in both the private and the public sector. Any attempt to define management consultancy will inevitably encounter this obstacle. As Fuchs (1975: vii) notes: "It is difficult to explain management consulting because it includes some one hundred areas of competence". Or, more recently, as Toppin and Czerniawska (2005: 63) put it: "There are probably more ways to segment the consulting industry than there are to skin that infamous cat". Clark (1995: 23) points out that even the VAT trade classification for 'management consultancy' does not allow us to grasp management consultancy in its entirety: some small consultancy firms do not qualify for VAT, whereas others offer advisory services to management on a secondary basis and so fall into another VAT category altogether. One commentator even compares management consultancy to the proverbial elephant touched by blind men, each of whom picture the creature differently (Higdon, 1969: 105). While it might seem that no aspect of contemporary organizational life is impervious to the apparently irresistible charms of management consultants, perhaps this is a mere epiphenomenon

arising from the fact that management consultancy, as a “nebulous form of professionalism” (Cody, 1986: viii), covers so many service areas. As a result, it becomes virtually impossible to define management consultancy in any consistent way. This is certainly true to some extent. Management consultancy, as we will see, seems almost to defy straightforward characterization owing to its wide functional scope. Nonetheless, it should be said that management consultancy is defined consistently throughout the practitioner literature as *the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas*.

This conceptualization of management consultancy appears in the practitioner literature from as far back as the 1930s. In one early article, Dean (1938a: 223) states that management consultancy involves “investigatory surveys, installations, continuing counsel, and temporary administration”. Although there is some debate about whether or not temporary administration is, in fact, a proper function of management consultancy (1938a: 224; see also Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 7; Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005: 107), the three remaining functions correspond to analysis (‘investigatory surveys’), advice (‘continuing counsel’), and assistance (‘installations’) in a managerial context. Dean suggests, moreover, that these functions overlap to a greater or lesser extent and cannot, therefore, be separated from each other (1938a: 224). Dean goes on to describe the type of services provided by consultants:

Some consultancies specialize in a particular kind of management problem such as production, marketing, finance, personnel, industrial relations, records and control methods, or administrative organization. Others restrict themselves to a

particular industry or type of institution. For example, there are consultants who specialize in transportation, in banking, in merchandising, in governmental organizations, etc. Others concentrate on a particular form of consulting service, such as surveys, installation of systems, continuing advice, or temporary administration. Some large firms...cut across these lines of specialization and have on their staff experts on various kinds of management problem. (1938a: 219-20)

Although Dean provides us with a few examples rather than a complete inventory, we can see that management consultants offer technical expertise in a variety of operational areas. Even in the 1930s, then, the functional scope of management consultancy was already extremely wide ranging.

In another early article, Donham (1940) conceptualizes management consultancy in a similar way. He suggests that all management consultancy work is composed of “analysis (sizing up the situation), planning and advising on a course of action [and] aiding in putting the plan into effect” (1940: 33). These services, Donham continues, are provided by consultants in a number of technical fields: “He may be an individual acting as personal advisor to one or a few concerns; he may be part of a large organization serving clients in numerous industries and localities. He may be a specialist in procedure, function, or industry; he may be a general practitioner” (1940: 33). Donham thus understands management consultancy as analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas.

This same conceptualization of management consultancy is repeated throughout the practitioner literature over the next seventy years (see e.g. Bell and Nadler, 1979a: 1-2; Biech, 1999: 2; Biswas and Twitchell, 1999: 7; Cody, 1986: 5-6; Kinard, 1995: 2[10]; Schaffer, 1997: xii-xiii; Tatham, 1964: 17; Tisdall, 1982: 3). Most textbooks for management consultants now feel the need to include a formal definition, or a selection of formal definitions, of management consultancy. Greiner and Metzger (1983: 7), for example, provide the following in their influential book *Consulting to Management*:

Management consulting is an advisory service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons who assist, in an objective and independent manner, the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, recommend solutions to these problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions.

In addition to providing analysis, advice, and assistance on managerial problems in client organizations, the consultant is now also expected to be ‘specially trained and qualified’ as well as ‘objective and independent’ (these traits will be discussed later in the thesis). Wilkinson (1995a: 1[4]) offers a near-identical definition in the edited collection *Handbook of Management Consulting Services*:

Management consulting is an independent and objective advisory service provided by qualified persons to clients in order to help them identify and analyze management problems or opportunities. Management consultants also

recommend solutions or suggested actions with respect to these issues and help, when requested, in their implementation.

Kubr, et al. (2002: 10) provide a variation on this definition in the fourth edition of the classic textbook *Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession*:

Management consulting is an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes.

This same definition is also put forward by professional associations for management consultants. The International Council of Management Consulting Institutes – the umbrella organization affiliated with some forty-five professional associations across the world – describes management consultancy as

[t]he service provided to business, public and other undertakings by an independent and qualified person or persons in identifying and investigating problems concerned with policy, organization, procedures and methods, recommending appropriate action and helping to implement these recommendations. (cited in Curnow and Reuvid, 2003: 17)

Management consultancy, then, is defined throughout the practitioner literature in much the same way: the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety

of operational areas. But this definition does not quite answer the question of what management consultancy is. We know that consultants provide services to managers in a variety of operational areas, but we now need to ask *what* these areas are. In other words, we need to inquire into the functional scope of management consultancy. This will allow us to see if consultants are able to provide managers with services in *any* technical field or, conversely, if they are restricted to providing services in a *limited* number of fields. We will then be able to say whether management consultancy is a unique and coherent object or a vague and indeterminate one.

Functional Scope of Management Consultancy

The practitioner literature, in addition to formally defining management consultancy, also offers extensive lists of the technical fields in which consultants are said to operate. These inventories provide us with an indication of management consultancy's functional scope. Block (2000: 2), for example, says that consultants "function in any organization by planning, recommending, or advising" in such areas as:

Personnel

Financial analysis

Auditing

Systems analysis

Market research

Product design

Long-range planning

Organizational effectiveness
Safety
Human resource development

Margerison (2001: 7) provides a similar list in *Managerial Consulting Skills*:

Corporate law
Financial planning
Accounting
Marketing
Health and safety
Training and development
Public relations
Scientific research
Engineering planning
Operations management
Recruitment and selection

Margerison goes on to note: “This is an incomplete list, but it gives an idea of how widespread the managerial consulting role is” (2001: 7; see also Wilkinson, 1995a: 1[12]). This is the key point about Block and Margerison’s lists. They are not meant to be thorough and meticulous categorizations of management consultancy’s functional scope, but serve simply to demonstrate the sheer breadth of management consultancy work.

A more exhaustive inventory is compiled by Fuchs (1975) in his book *Making the Most of Management Consulting Services*. Here, Fuchs identifies no less than ninety-nine separate activities that are divided under ten broad 'areas of competence' (see appendix). Fuchs notes: "At this stage in its development, the field of management consulting extends over many disciplines. It is involved in virtually all activities engaged in by a commercial or industrial enterprise" (1975: 14-5). While Fuchs' scheme of classification aims to be comprehensive, it should be said that, some ten years later, Greiner and Metzger admit that "[e]ven this list is probably out of date" since management consultancy's functional scope has continued to expand (1983: 11; see also Kinard, 1995: 2[13-4]). This points to the fact that, while the definition of management consultancy has remained fairly constant, the nature of management problems has changed over the years. Management consultants, in other words, provide analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas, but these areas have been subject to considerable variation.

This variation is seen even more clearly if we compare a list of activities drawn up by the same organization at different points in time. In 1948, the British Institute of Management compiled a 'Register of Management and Industrial Consultants'. This Register, which sought to gather together different types of managerial advisory services under a single rubric, provided the following list of activities:

Organization structure

Factory layout

Manufacturing method and process development

Production control, including programming and material control

Time and motion study

Wages structure, incentives and payment by results

Inspection and quality control

Stores and purchasing organization

Office layout, organization and method

Financial and statistical control and costing

Internal and external transport

Maintenance of buildings and plant

Distribution, including market research, and sales organization

Personnel management

(cited in Hyman, 1961: 20)

By the early 1960s, the British Institute of Management had expanded this functional scope. Its Register now focused less on industrial engineering aspects of management and, divided into a series of subcategories, encompassed a much wider set of organizational activities:

General Management (including organization)

Production

Layout

Planning and control

Stores and purchasing

Methods and processes

Material handling

Inspection and quality control

Maintenance

Work study

Financial and Office Management

Clerical planning and methods

Office layout

Costing and cost control

Communication and records

Marketing

Market research and planning

Sales organization and methods

Publicity

Packaging and dispatch

Transportation

Wholesale and retail selling

Personnel Management

Selection

Training

Remuneration and incentives

Industrial relations

Physical working conditions and employee services

(cited in Hyman, 1961: 27)

The BIM's Register was discontinued in 1980 after the Institute of Management Consultants (now the Institute of Business Consulting) had established its own Register in the previous year (Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 454-5; Tisdall, 1982: 93). Nonetheless, professional associations such as the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes continue to provide lists of activities that attest to the ongoing expansion of management consultancy's functional scope (see Curnow and Reuvid, 2003: 16-7).

We will discuss these professional associations for management consultants in more detail in chapter 5. For now, it is enough to note that the snapshots of management consultancy's functional scope provide an important insight into one of the reasons why management consultancy has been so difficult to pin down and why it is, as we previously said, a "slippery and elastic concept". While management consultancy is consistently defined throughout the practitioner literature over the last seventy years as the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas, the functional scope of management consultancy has fluctuated considerably during this same period. It is difficult, as a result, to see how management consultants are able to possess any professional or occupational specificity if the content of their work is subject to such variation. On the basis of its ever-shifting functional scope, we are tempted to conclude that management consultancy is not, in fact, a unique and

coherent object but a vague and indeterminate one. On this view, the term ‘management consultancy’ serves as little more than a placeholder for an array of disparate specialisms.

This is certainly the conclusion reached by a number of commentators. Holtz (1985: 13) suggests, for example, that management consultancy, as an umbrella term, has become “so broad as to become almost meaningless”. He continues:

By its indefinite and rather vague nature it offers a ‘license’ to the management consultant to profess an extremely broad range of claims to expertise. Management consultants...offer a range of services extending almost to infinity.

Holtz argues that management consultancy involves too many fields of technical expertise and takes place in too many operational areas for it to be classified as a distinctive profession in its own right. Weiss (2003: 3) echoes this point: “Most professions have a clear definition. They require formal certifications and have specific, enforceable limitations...But there are no such constraints on the consultant. Anyone, at any time, and virtually anywhere can be a consultant”. Management consultancy does not appear to possess any professional or occupational specificity: its functional scope is said to be arbitrary, variable, and limitless, to the extent that any service provided to managers, it seems, can be called ‘management consultancy’ (see Biech, 1999: 2; Czerniawska, 1999: 8; Kinard, 1995: 2[2]; Kubr, et al., 2002: 131; Lee, 2002: 7; Muzio, Ackroyd, and Chanlat, 2007: [n1]27). The sheer diversity of content-knowledge

possessed by management consultants, then, appears to undermine any claims they might have to professional unity or occupational distinctiveness.

We thus find ourselves at an impasse. Instead of providing a satisfactory answer to the question of what management consultancy is, our investigation has so far shown only how uncertain and confused matters are in this respect. It does not seem possible, in other words, to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its content-knowledge.

Limits of Management Consultancy

Defeat, however, will not be conceded so easily. We should recall, at this point, our discussion of *The Sophist* in the general introduction to the thesis. In the dialogue, the sophist appears to the interlocutors in lots of different ways, although the term ‘sophistry’ implies a single form of expertise. Just as Theaetetus and the visitor from Elea vow to chase the sophist in his various guises in order to grasp his own peculiar nature, so too must we track down the management consultant in order to provide a single account of their expertise, similarly hemming them in “with one of those net-like devices that words provide for things like this” (235a-b).

Despite the diversity of management consultancy content-knowledge, most commentators in the practitioner literature acknowledge that not just *any* service provided to managers can be called ‘management consultancy’. There is something, then, that distinguishes management consultancy from *other* services provided to

managers. Greiner and Metzger (1983: 6), for example, suggest that they “know of many types of consulting, but the modifier ‘management’ gives it special meaning”. Biswas and Twitchell similarly suggest that although there are consultants in numerous industries – such as graphic design consultants, wedding consultants, fashion consultants, and career consultants – management consultancy is distinct from these other services (1999: 6-7; see also Czerniawska and Toppin, 2005: 4). There are certain *limits*, then, to management consultancy’s functional scope. These limits will now be examined in order to bring to light the ‘special meaning’ of management consultancy

What operational areas are excluded from management consultancy’s functional scope?

Kubr, et al. (2002) compare management consultancy with other professional service areas, such as accounting, tax advice, corporate legal services, consulting engineering, investment banking, information technology, management development and training, executive search and recruitment, and market research. The implication is that management consultancy is separate and distinct from these other service areas. The services provided to managers by accountants, engineers, lawyers, and bankers are not a part of management consultancy; they fall under the functional scope of different occupational categories. Kubr, et al. suggest that the range of management consultancy services has, in fact, evolved as a direct result of management consultants’ interaction with accountants, engineers, lawyers, and bankers: “When a new market for professional services starts emerging, firms from several professions may claim that this market is primarily within their province” (2002: 54-5). In other words, different occupational groups may compete with each other in order to establish their jurisdiction

over a particular field of expertise. This serves to explain, at least in part, the variability of management consultancy's functional scope over several decades. Accounting is perhaps the most significant case in point in this respect, as we will see in chapter 5.

Having made this distinction between management consultancy and other professions, such as accounting, engineering, law, and banking, Kubr, et al. go on to say that the boundaries are not always so clear cut (2002: 53). For example, accountants may inadvertently step into management consultancy territory during the course of a statutory financial audit: "Auditors who express an opinion on the client's financial records and reports or recommend an improvement...act as consultants whether they call themselves consultants or not" (2002: 55-6). The same can also be said for consulting engineers, information technology consultants, and management trainers: the services provided by other occupational groups might, at times, extend into management consultancy's own functional scope (2002: 56-7). The overall picture, then, is still somewhat confused: management consultancy is, on the one hand, said to be separate and distinct from other professional service areas while it is, on the other hand, also said to overlap with them.

Greiner and Metzger (1983: 7) likewise attempt to draw a boundary around management consultancy by describing the kind of activities that fall outside its functional scope: "Some clear examples of non-management consulting are technical engineering on new products or machinery, the continuous performance of actual management or employee duties, and the conduct of clerical functions". Whoever performs such duties cannot be called 'management consultants', although it is not

altogether clear, on Greiner and Metzger's account, *why* these activities are excluded from management consultancy's functional remit. Perhaps they feel that such activities are too close to existing functions in an organization and so do not require outside expertise: "A management consultant is not an engineer, an executive, or a secretary" (1983: 7). In any case, the fact that Greiner and Metzger draw a boundary around its functional scope means that they can attach a 'special meaning' to management consultancy in relation to other services provided to managers. Management consultancy's functional scope, then, obeys certain limits; management consultants possess a degree of occupational specificity, even if it is not yet entirely clear what this specificity involves.

Intriguingly, Greiner and Metzger go on to say that there are, in addition to engineering, clerical, and temporary managerial activities, other services that also fall outside management consultancy's functional scope. These include "the conduct of training programmes, the installation of computer systems, the performance of outside activities such as accounting or library research studies, the giving of informal advice to managers, and the 'head-hunting' activities of executive searchers" (1983: 7). However, the distinction between these services and management consultancy is, as Greiner and Metzger acknowledge, less clear cut and more ambiguous. They write:

We prefer not to view these activities as management consulting...*unless they have resulted from a broader analysis and plan prepared by a management consultant*. Otherwise, such efforts accept the problem and facts as given by the

client and are merely ancillary services for decisions already taken or predetermined by the actions of management. (1983: 7; emphasis added)

This is a significant admission. It means that the boundary between management consultancy and other services to managers is not, in the end, as straightforward as we initially thought. Accounting, executive search, training, or information technology are excluded from management consultancy's functional scope if such services are commissioned and controlled entirely by managers, without the participation of the service provider. But these same services become a part of management consultancy if the service provider is, on the contrary, actively involved in identifying a need for and planning the implementation of such services. In other words, one and the same activity can be included or excluded from management consultancy's functional scope. What is important is how the activity is performed, rather than the nature of the activity itself. This provides us with the first clue that management consultancy is not only about the type of *expertise* provided by consultants to managers; it is also about the type of *relation* that is established between consultants and managers.

This view is also found in Bell and Nadler's (1979a: 2) introduction to their edited collection *The Client-Consultant Handbook*:

If someone is contracted to run a training program for an organization, we would not call such an activity consulting. If, on the other hand, a person was hired to help solve a problem and if a diagnosis revealed that a training program was a solution, we would be more likely to label the activity consulting.

What is at issue, for Bell and Nadler, is not whether training per se is included or excluded from management consultancy's functional scope. At issue, rather, are the conditions that allow training to be *either* excluded from *or* included within its scope. As Bell and Nadler suggest, management consultants are not simply contracted or outsourced by the client organization; rather, management consultants collaborate with managers in the client organization. What matters, then, is the type of relation established between the consultant and the client, not the type of services provided by the consultant to the client.

Weiss (2003: 4) makes a similar point:

Some trainers are *also* consultants, and some professional speakers *also* consult, just as some computer programmers *also* consult on programming applications. But merely being a programmer or speaker or trainer does not de facto make one a consultant any more than being a consultant makes one a trainer, a speaker, or a programmer. (emphasis in original)

Being a trainer, a professional speaker, or a computer programmer does not automatically make one a management consultant; but a management consultant might provide services to managers based in the field of training, professional speaking, or computer programming. Once again, we find that one and the same activity falls either within or outside of management consultancy's functional scope. What is important is not so much the consultant's technical expertise but their knowledge about how to deal

with the client on an interpersonal level, that is to say, “an understanding of process as opposed to content” (2003: 6; emphasis removed).

This opens up another, more fruitful direction in which to address the question of what management consultancy is. The next chapter will examine what kind of relation is required between the consultant and the client in order for a service to be classified as ‘management consultancy’. For now, however, let us remain within the question of limits and try to show why we must move away from questioning management consultancy solely on the basis of its content-knowledge.

It does not appear, so far, that any degree of consensus has been achieved in the practitioner literature regarding the limits to management consultancy’s functional scope. It is clear, at least, that this functional scope it is not *limitless*; not just *any* service provided to managers can be called ‘management consultancy’. There is *something*, then, that serves to distinguish management consultants from other occupational groups. But this ‘something’ – management consultancy’s ‘special meaning’, in Greiner and Metzger’s terms – has not yet been found. At present, the limits to its functional scope seem somewhat arbitrary: the same activity is included by one commentator but excluded by another, or even simultaneously included and excluded by the same commentator. Most commentators, it should be said, simply do not discuss these limits in any detail; it is assumed that we already know in advance what management consultancy is. On top of this, the previous section showed that management consultancy’s functional scope has continued to expand over the last seventy years to include a great number of technical activities in a variety of

operational areas. Must we accept that the picture is inherently confused? Must we conclude that, although there certainly are limits to management consultancy's functional scope, they remain obscure and indeterminate? How, in such a state of affairs, are we to proceed?

The fact that management consultancy's functional scope has changed over time provides us with a crucial insight into the nature of management consultancy. Indeed, it points towards the fundamental interconnection between management consultancy and management itself. Management consultancy's functional scope runs directly parallel to the functional scope of management; the services performed by management consultants, in a variety of operational areas, are those traditionally performed by managers in various departments and at different hierarchical levels. Put simply, all the activities we have so far described as management consultancy activities are, first and foremost, *managerial* activities.

This fact has not gone unnoticed. Some commentators, in both the practitioner and academic literature, are already aware of this intimate relation between management consultancy and management. Kipping (2003: 21), for example, suggests that "the evolution of the consulting industry and of its pre-eminent firms is closely linked to the development of management practice and ideology". This means that management consultancy is nothing more than "a reflection of prevailing managerial problems" and, as a result, "ultimately dependent on the evolution of management" (2003: 21-2; see also 2002: 29). Kubr, et al. (2002: 39-40) expand on the nature of this dependence:

The range of services provided by management consultants mirrors the development of management and business...Today's management consultants may be asked to assist with any type of management problem in any sort and size of organization, virtually in any sector and part of the world...The consultants' service portfolio is extremely wide and diversified, and evolving fast.

Management consultancy's functional scope, then, swells or contracts according to management's own functional scope; the development of the former is thus wholly reliant on the development of the latter. The services provided by management consultants change over time because the services performed by managers themselves also continue to change. As Cody (1986: 4) puts it: "Consulting is only a reflection of management, and what management believes its functions and needs to be" (emphasis removed). Such is the nature of the fundamental interconnection between management consultancy and management itself (see Ferguson, 2002: 3; Fuchs, 1975: 46; Hyman, 1961: viii; Kipping, 2002: 29; Tatham, 1964: 6; Tisdall, 1982: 14; Wickham, 1999: 4).

But the fact remains: management consultancy is *not* management. Management consultancy must therefore be distinct from management in some way. Despite the fact that the functional scope of management consultancy entirely mirrors management's own functional scope, the practitioner literature insists on this crucial distinction. Greiner and Metzger (1983: 7) affirm that, whatever else it is, management consultancy is *not* "the continuous performance of management or employee duties". Rassam (2001a: 30) likewise says that, whatever else they do, the management consultant

“never actually manages” (see also Rassam and Oates, 1991: 7). In a similar vein, Block (2000: 4) draws a strict dividing line between the work of management consultants and the work of managers in the client organization:

When you [the management consultant] act on the behalf of or in the place of the manager, you are acting as a surrogate manager...The attraction of the surrogate manager role is that, at least for that one moment, you assume the manager’s power – but you do the manager’s job, not yours.

Block suggests here that as soon as one performs managerial tasks, one has stepped across the limit of management consultancy and into something else entirely, namely, management. Management consultants thus find themselves in a precarious position within client organizations: there is a danger that, every time they perform their *own* functions, consultants are in fact performing *managerial* functions. This is noted by Brown (1943: 186) in an early article when he writes that the transition from being a management consultant to becoming a full-time member of staff is a very “slippery road” indeed. Along similar lines, Bell and Nadler (1979d: 164) note that the consultant faces the danger of turning into a manager if they become too closely involved with the client organization: “The consultant and client should recognize that if this happens, the former can no longer effectively function as a consultant but has in reality become a part of the system” (see also Markham, 1997: 53). Likewise, De Haan (2006: xiv) suggests that management consultancy is “at constant risk of losing itself” by becoming absorbed into something other than itself, that is to say, management.

There is a fundamental interconnection between management consultancy and management, but there is also an irreducible difference between them. We do not yet know, however, wherein this difference lies. Certainly, it is not on the level of technical expertise or content-knowledge: management consultancy's functional scope is the very same as management's own functional scope. There must be another level, then, at which the work of management consultants and the work of managers are separate and distinct.

As we previously said, the essential distinction between management consultancy and management holds the key to the entire thesis. The remainder of this chapter will deal with this issue by examining the work of management theorist Peter Armstrong, which will ultimately serve to guide the direction of our questioning throughout the rest of the thesis. We have, therefore, reached a turning-point of sorts in our overall investigation.

Technical and Relational Components of Management

To bring to light the distinction between management consultancy and management, we first need to examine more closely what *management* is. It might seem, however, that we have already said what management is. After all, we described the functional scope of management consultancy and then we said that it follows the contours of management's own functional scope. When we thought we were discussing management consultancy, we were in fact discussing management itself. Why, then, do we need to raise further questions about what management is?

We need to ask this question because the meaning of management is not exhausted by its functional scope. While managers perform operational tasks as part of their work, they also need to manage the relation with their subordinates. This implies that management, as a body of knowledge, involves two components: technical and relational. Moreover, the latter, relational aspect of managers' work has, over the course of the twentieth century, come to gain precedence over its technical component to the extent that the term 'management' is now virtually synonymous (at least in the context of the US and the UK) with the general task of coordinating, commanding, and controlling subordinates in a commercial organization.

This point is made most forcefully by Armstrong (1987; 1991; 1992; 1996), who examines the distinction between the technical and the relational components of management from a historical perspective.¹² Armstrong notes that, for some of the earliest proponents of management theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the right and ability to manage was inextricable from technical expertise. In Frederick Taylor's view, for example,

¹² There are, of course, different ways to study the social phenomena of management and managers. Indeed, Grey (1999: 563) points out that "there are competing claims about what management is and should be" (see also Willmott, 1984). Some commentators, from Mintzberg onwards, have attempted to say what management *is* according to what managers *do* – often coming to very different conclusions from each other as well as from classic management theorists such as Fayol and Drucker (see e.g. Carroll and Gillen, 1987; Hales, 1986; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973; Watson, 1994; Whitley, 1989). Other commentators, meanwhile, have argued that the task of managing has, in fact, become far more diffused throughout organizations with the shift from a 'command-and-control' model to a 'facilitate-and-empower' model (see e.g. Barker, 1993; 1999; Drucker, 1988; Ezzamel, Lilley, and Willmott, 1994; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Sewell, 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). This argument is extended even further by some commentators, who suggest that the ideology of management has seeped out of the workplace and into our non-working lives (see e.g. Dale, 2009; Grey, 1999; Hancock and Tyler, 2004; 2008; Parker, 2002). The merit in Armstrong's approach, for our purposes, lies in his attention to the historical development of management knowledge as a whole (rather than focusing on the – necessarily piecemeal – empirical practice of managing in organizations and beyond). This allows him to bring to light certain regularities in management discourse, although he does not state it explicitly in these terms.

the *core* of managerial expertise was the knowledge of productive processes which enabled the industrial engineer to redesign them so as to eliminate ‘waste’ effort. Indeed, Taylor considered the possession of such knowledge to be the sole legitimate basis on which management could claim authority over the workforce. (1992: 44; emphasis in original)

Control over labour, according to Taylor, is secured by the application of mechanical engineering design principles to the production process (i.e. analyzing and altering factory workers’ physical movements to achieve maximum efficiency). Technical expertise, from this perspective, is not separate from managerial practice; the two go hand-in-hand. This means that, for Taylor, “[m]anagement, as a body of knowledge and code of behaviour, remained industry-specific” (Armstrong, 1991: 247). Underlying Taylor’s ‘principles of scientific management’, moreover, is the claim that engineers are inherently more suited to the task of managing capitalist organizations than any other professional group. This claim, as Armstrong points out, has been repeated – though with considerably less success than Taylor, at least in a British and American context – throughout the twentieth century (see 1987a).

Beginning in the 1920s, however, the technical and relational components of management come to be separated. Whereas previously management was conceptualized as practical knowledge of the production process in a particular industry, now management starts to be discussed as an abstract, universal set of skills that is detached from any specific operational area and therefore applicable in every industry (1991: 246-55; 1996: 275-88). As Armstrong puts it, management is now

conceptualized as “a set of techniques which stand in an additive relationship to the technical elements of real-life managerial work” (1991: 247). These managerial techniques are not rooted in any particular commercial setting, but are located on the broader level of agenda-setting, decision-making, and control over subordinates (1989a: 310-1; 1992: 45). Sufficiently generalized, managerial techniques remain the same for *all* managers, irrespective of the specific operational tasks that they perform, their place in the organizational hierarchy, or the particular industry in which they work. In this way, management is conceptualized as “always and everywhere the same in essence” (1991: 247; see also 1996: 279).

Such a conceptualization of management is outlined, for example, in Fayol’s *General and Industrial Management* (1949), first published in the original French in 1916 and translated into English in 1929. Although Fayol worked as a mining engineer, he emphasizes that managerial skills, in addition to technical expertise, are required in all types of commercial organization. He gives the example of a manager in an engineering firm:

For a divisional engineer managerial ability is as important as technical ability. This fact may be surprising but is easily explainable thus: the manager of a metallurgical division, for instance, blast furnaces, steel works, rolling-mills, has not for some years been exclusively concerned with metallurgy – or even with a limited section of metallurgy. All details learnt at college about mines, railways, construction, are no longer any more than vaguely useful for him, whereas handling of men, planning, in a word, elements of management, are

constantly taking up his attention. At the particular level of authority which he has reached the services which he will subsequently be able to render and his own advancement will most likely turn far more on his managerial than on his technical ability. (1949: 83)

Fayol makes a clear distinction between knowledge about how to control the production process and knowledge about how to control subordinates, that is to say, the ‘handling of men’. For Fayol, unlike Taylor, ‘technical ability’ and ‘managerial ability’ do not go hand-in-hand; the former is divorced from, and secondary to, the latter. This means that the relational component of management – forecasting, planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling (Fayol: 1949: 5-6; see also Armstrong, 1991: 246-8; 1992: 44-5; 1996: 278-9) – is understood as the *properly managerial* aspect of managers’ work whereas the technical component of management is, in turn, understood as the *non-managerial* aspect of managers’ work.

By the time of Drucker’s (1989) influential book *The Practice of Management*, originally published in 1954, this conceptualization of management was perhaps no longer as surprising as it had seemingly been for Fayol’s readers. He writes:

Every manager does many things that are not managing. He may spend most of his time on them. A sales manager makes a statistical analysis or placates an important customer. A foreman repairs a tool or fills in a production report. A manufacturing manager designs a new plant lay-out or tests new materials. A company president works through the details of a bank loan or negotiates a big

contract...All these things pertain to a particular function. All are necessary, and have to be done well.

But they are apart from that work which every manager does whatever his function or activity, whatever his rank and position, work which is common to all managers and is peculiar to them. (1989: 337)

Drucker says that managers spend a good deal of time on operational tasks that cannot be called 'management' in the strict sense, although they are necessarily part of a manager's job. The nature of these tasks will be determined by the particular department the manager works in and the level they inhabit in the organizational hierarchy. But there is something that links all these different types of managers together, despite their apparent dissimilarity. This is the properly managerial aspect of managers' work, which involves setting objectives, organizing, motivating and communicating, measuring job performance, and developing people (1989: 337-8; see also Armstrong, 1992: 45-6). In this way, the specific *technical* component of management is detached from, and made secondary to, the more general *relational* component of management. This understanding of management, Armstrong notes (1996: 293-5), is now firmly established in both the practitioner literature for managers and the educational textbooks for students of management.

A number of consequences follow from this conceptualization of management.

First, the separation of the technical component from the relational component of management results in a clearer distinction between productive and unproductive

aspects of management labour. Armstrong reminds us that, in Marxist terms, productive labour is the part of labour that creates surplus value whereas unproductive labour is the part of labour that serves, among other functions, to direct and control productive labour in order to extract surplus value from it. In broad terms, productive labour refers to workers who “produce a greater value in good and services than is represented by their wages” while unproductive labour refers to “all of the tasks within the administrative apparatus [that have] replaced the functions once carried out by the primordial individual capitalist” (1987a: 426). Management, along Taylorist lines, is by definition both a part of productive labour (since managers perform operational tasks in the production process) and a part of unproductive labour (since managers direct and control their subordinates in the organizational hierarchy) (1991: 241-4). It becomes possible to separate these types of labour, however, once the technical component of management is divorced from, and made secondary to, the relational component of management. If the former component is viewed as non-managerial aspect of managers’ work, and the latter as the properly managerial aspect, then it is not difficult to see how management can be detached *entirely* from productive labour and come to be situated *exclusively* on the level of unproductive labour (1987a: 429). A manager no longer requires any technical knowledge whatsoever; all they need is knowledge about how to deal with their subordinates, regardless of the operational area in which they work.

This brings us to a second consequence: the division between different levels of management in the organizational hierarchy. While middle and lower managers continue to perform specific operational tasks in a particular department within the

organization (marketing, finance, IT, human resources, etc.) in addition to their general managerial tasks of coordination and control, top managers are concerned exclusively with the overall direction of the organization and its members. Put simply, the labour of middle and lower managers will still be productive whereas the labour of top managers will be almost entirely unproductive. As Armstrong notes, it is the latter group that serves as the “model for managerial excellence”:

Thus, in the same breath as it celebrates its universality, ‘management’...comes to identify itself exclusively with the administration of the capitalist enterprise and denies the title of management to authoritative expertise within the productive process. (1987a: 428)

The ideal type of management, in other words, is now wholly identified with the function of agenda-setting, decision-making, and control at the broadest organizational level, completely disconnected from specific technical expertise. Such a predicament, of course, would have been unthinkable for Taylor. It only becomes possible once the relational component of management is separated from its technical component, and once the unproductive element of management labour is divorced from its productive element.

Finally, a third consequence: the question of professionalization. If management is now viewed as a set of abstract, universal principles that is totally disengaged from the vagaries of productive labour and the particularities of technical expertise, then it becomes possible to establish management as a profession in its own right, based on a

unique body of knowledge. This, as Armstrong tells us, was certainly the ambition of British management theorists like Urwick (1991: 250-5; 1996: 279-84). Moreover, such a project of managerial professionalization serves to undermine the claim made by engineers that they are more capable of managing an organization than any other professional group. Since performing an operational task is now secondary to dealing with a hierarchical relation, engineers are accordingly relegated to a position that is subordinate to 'managerial specialists' (1987a: 432; 1991: 258). The dilemma is clear: engineers, as Armstrong puts it, are able to "demonstrate their eligibility for senior positions [only] by renouncing any claim which they might make on the basis of their distinctive expertise as engineers" (1987a: 430). By the same token, the collective interests of managers, as a professional group, are made more secure if management is understood in terms of its abstract principles, its universal applicability, its unproductive character, and its ability to coordinate and control the organization at the top-most level.

All this has significant consequences for our present investigation into management consultancy. In particular, the foregoing analysis raises three questions that will serve to guide the following three chapters. First, have management consultants, like managers, also been able to detach their work from the operational tasks of productive labour? Second, have management consultants also been able to position themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies? Third, have management consultants also been able to secure their collective interests as a professional group? These questions already provide us with a number of clues about the nature of management consultancy. But before we can turn to these questions, we first need to see if it is

possible to distinguish management consultancy from management on the basis of our preceding discussion.

Management and Consultancy

At first glance, it does not seem that we are able to use Armstrong's analysis to make a clear distinction between management consultancy and management. Indeed, when Armstrong does specifically refer to management consultancy in his work, it features only as an extension or an offshoot of management, rather than as a counterpoint to it. For example, he notes in parenthesis that the attempt to establish management as a profession in its own right, complete with a unique body of knowledge, "could, incidentally, lend credibility to the activities of peripatetic management consultants who lacked engineering expertise" (1991: 243). Armstrong goes on to suggest that that Urwick's claim that "management could be a profession of universal application" provided, at one and the same time, "the rationale of the peripatetic management consultant (such as the partners of Urwick Orr and Company)" (1991: 255). The suggestion, here, is that management consultants possess precisely the same kind of abstract knowledge as managers, that is to say, prescriptive guidelines for dealing with subordinates in any given operational area. Indeed, if management is understood as essentially the same activity at all hierarchical levels and in all organizational contexts, then this, according to Armstrong, enables "management consultants...to offer essentially the same service to whomsoever is willing to pay" (1992: 47). There is, on this view, no palpable difference between management consultancy and management.

Armstrong implies in these brief and marginal comments that management consultancy, like management, is to be understood not primarily in terms of its technical component but, rather, in terms of its relational component. This means that the functional scope of management consultancy is secondary to a more important aspect, namely, abstract knowledge about how to coordinate, direct, and control subordinates in the organizational hierarchy. We thus find ourselves escaping from one problem – the arbitrary and ambiguous limits of management consultancy’s functional scope – only to stumble into a new, even more intractable one: the fact that, according to Armstrong, management consultancy’s relational component is *exactly the same* as management’s own relational component. It does not seem possible, on this view, to distinguish management consultancy from management in any way, neither in terms of its technical component nor in terms of its relational component. All roads, as it were, appear to lead to management.

This view, I want to suggest, is mistaken. For Armstrong, management consultancy is interesting only insofar as it permits itinerant ‘management specialists’ such as Urwick to provide services to managers in any type of organization. As such, it marks a chapter in management’s own professional development. But this is to overlook efforts to establish management consultancy as a profession in its own right and, correlatively, the attempt to elaborate a body of knowledge that is common to consultants (and not to managers). This fact alone suggests to us that management consultancy is something separate and distinct from other professions; it tells us that management consultancy, whatever it is, is *not* exactly the same as management.

There has been considerable debate in the practitioner literature about the possibility of establishing management consultancy as a profession. Hyman (1961: 89), writing in the early 1960s, suggests that management consultancy lacks a unique and coherent body of knowledge and, for this reason, cannot presently be called a 'profession':

So far as a body of established knowledge is concerned, there can be little doubt that management consultancy fails to satisfy the test...Whilst there is considerable knowledge about management, however anecdotal and unscientific it may be, there is an almost complete absence of established knowledge about the theory and practice of management consultancy...The published work of consultants about their activities are few and seldom go beyond elementary descriptions. To achieve professional status, this published knowledge would have to be widely extended and would have to include a detailed analysis of the consultant's procedure and the relationship between the consultant and the client.

Hyman suggests that, unlike managers, consultants do not yet possess a body of knowledge of their own. As a result, management consultancy is unable to become a profession in its own right. On the face of it, this seems to confirm Armstrong's assumption that management consultancy, in terms of its abstract knowledge, is not significantly different from management. But Hyman does not rule out the possibility that consultants might, one day, acquire such a professional status. This, he notes presciently, would involve the development of a common body of knowledge about how to deal with the consultant-client relation.

Some fifteen years later, Fuchs (1975) expresses his frustration at the fact that management consultants have not been able to develop their own body of knowledge and, as a consequence, have failed in their attempt to establish management consultancy as a proper profession. He says that

the consulting field as presently constituted lacks any unique expertise that it can claim as solely its own, because the consultant's efforts are expended on a well-staked-out domain of existing business functions.

Although this condition has not affected the consultant's ability to serve as a sort of counsellor-at-large, it is nevertheless incumbent on members of this profession to reappraise their role, narrow their sights, and develop a character that brings with it an exclusive franchise. This profession does have strict codes of ethics for its members to abide by, but its full recognition as a profession will only come when consultants can lay definite claim to a unique body of knowledge. (1975: 21)

Along similar lines to Hyman, Fuchs outlines the task ahead for the profession of management consultancy. At present, he says, management consultants do not possess a unique and coherent body of knowledge, for the simple reason that the functional scope of management consultancy follows management's own functional scope (or, as Fuchs puts it, the 'domain of existing business functions'). He notes that the absence of such a body of knowledge has not in any way impeded consultants in providing services to client organizations. But it has served to hinder the attempt to establish management consultancy as a proper profession. To remedy this situation, Fuchs

advocates developing “a body of knowledge that is decidedly and primarily within the talents and scope of the management consultant” (1975: 22). This body of knowledge, we might add, must necessarily be separate and distinct from management’s own body of knowledge.

Over the next thirty years, the practitioner literature will no longer discuss this body of knowledge as something that needs to be developed in the future, as something that still awaits formalization; it will now be discussed in such a way that implies it already exists. This finds expression in terms like ‘consulting skills’, ‘consulting competencies’, and ‘consulting techniques’. One example of this can be found in the *Handbook of Management Consulting Services*. Wilkinson (1995b: 3[2]) notes that, in the context of the US, several professional associations “have developed frameworks relating to a requisite body of knowledge” for management consultants. He then goes on to provide his own “composite body of knowledge” based on a number of these frameworks. While this body of knowledge encompasses technical expertise in operational areas such as marketing, finance and accounting, human resources, information systems, as well as ‘general management’, it also includes skills that are specific to management consultants. These skills refer to the “[p]rinciples and practices of management consulting, including techniques for data collection, problem definition, and solution development” (1995b: 3[5]). As we will see in the following chapter, such techniques – in essence, the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation – allow us to identify management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy. This is no doubt what Hyman had in mind when he suggested that management consultancy could professionalize only if its knowledge base involved “a

detailed analysis of the consultant's procedure and the relationship between the consultant and the client".

We can find allusions to a common body of knowledge for management consultants elsewhere in the practitioner literature. Cockman, Evans, and Reynolds (1999), for example, introduce their textbook *Consulting for Real People* by saying that, beyond the diversity of management consultancy content-knowledge, there is another set of skills that remains the same for all management consultants. Consultants, on this view, "are presumed to have sufficient expertise in their own discipline, accounting, social science, health and safety, training and development, systems analysis, learning methods or teaching. What they have in common is *an extra competence in the process of consultation*" (1999: 7; emphasis added; see also Block, 2000: 6; Cherrington, 1995: 4[1]; Cody, 1986: 28; Kubr, et al., 2002: 5-6; Margerison, 2001: 7; 9). Alongside their technical expertise in a specific operational area, consultants also possess an additional form of expertise. It will be the task of the next chapter to describe precisely what this 'extra competence in the process of consultation' involves. For now, it suffices to say that such a body of knowledge demonstrates that management consultancy is not simply a placeholder for an array of disparate specialisms but that it is, in fact, something quite specific and distinct (although, as we will see, something also quite paradoxical).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we described how the object of management consultancy is defined in the practitioner literature. We showed that management consultancy is conceptualized as the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers in a variety of operational areas. By examining the range of technical expertise drawn on by management consultants, we found that management consultancy's functional scope ebbed and flowed according to the functional scope of management itself. This pointed to the fact that any analysis of the former necessarily involves an analysis of the latter. But while there is a fundamental interconnection between management consultancy and management, we also said that there is an irreducible difference between them. This led us on to a discussion of Armstrong's work, which deals with the changing meaning of management during the twentieth century. Although Armstrong did not appear to make any meaningful distinction between management and management consultancy, his work nonetheless provided us with a way to differentiate the one from the other. His analysis showed us that the relational component of management – namely, how to deal with subordinates in any operational area – is widely regarded as the *properly managerial* aspect of managers' work, whereas its technical component is largely understood as the *non-managerial* aspect of managers' work. Management consultancy, as it will become clear, is to be understood in similar terms. Like management, management consultancy also has two components, technical and relational. On the one hand, consultants are said to perform certain operational tasks that involve specific technical expertise. The nature of this activity differs from one consultant to the next. On the other hand, consultants are said to maintain a certain relation to their clients in the client organization. The nature of this relation remains the same from one

consultant to the next. Moreover, the operational task that consultants perform is the *non-consultancy* aspect of their work, whereas the relation that consultants maintain with their clients is the *properly consultancy* aspect of their work. It is this relation component, moreover, that characterizes management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy. What is important for our purposes, therefore, is not so much management consultancy *content-knowledge* (technical expertise in a specific operational area) but management consultancy *process-knowledge* (how to deal with clients in any operational area). It is on this basis – their respective relational components – that we will be able, finally, to distinguish clearly between management consultancy and management.

Chapter 3

Process of Management Consultancy

Introduction

This chapter will describe the arrangement and ordering of concepts in the practitioner literature. We will pay particular attention to how identical sequences of statements appear across a range of textbooks and how concepts such as ‘analysis’, ‘advice’, and ‘assistance’ are laid out in exactly the same way in an entire field of knowledge. This will allow us to bring to light the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation, which instruct consultants how to deal with managers in the client organization during the various phases of the consultancy engagement. It will be shown that such process-knowledge provides a framework for the consultant to establish a collaborative relation that is with the client that is simultaneously *equal* (since the consultant and the client work together on the same hierarchical level in order to diagnose organizational problems jointly, formulate solutions jointly, and implement solutions jointly) and *unequal* (since the consultant seeks, throughout the various phases of the consultancy engagement, to minimize the client’s resistance to

organizational change). In this way, the relational component of management consultancy will be shown to differ from the relational component of management. Taken together, the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation will allow us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy, thus bringing us closer to answering our guiding question.

We said in the general introduction to the thesis that some commentators, such as Clark (1995), have argued that management consultants do not possess a common body of knowledge. This does not mean that management consultants lack knowledge *per se*, only that the type of knowledge possessed by management consultants “lacks the status and authority of other professional knowledge and so does not supply a basis for occupational qualification and certification” (1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 67-8; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89). Clark says that management consultants possess an unstable and ever-changing set of disparate specialisms but this, we will recall, does not constitute “an agreed, accepted, authoritative and relevant body of knowledge” (1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 67; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002: 161). The implication is, of course, that management consultants, as an occupational group, have not been very successful in developing a professional knowledge base, unlike engineers, accountants, or lawyers (Clark, 1995: 90; see also Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 165).

Because they are assumed to lack a common body of knowledge, some commentators in the academic literature have focused instead on how management consultants create

and sustain demand for their advisory services. It is said that consultants must use a range of persuasive strategies and rhetorical techniques to sell their products to organizations and to demonstrate their value to clients (Clark, 1995: 64-5; Clark and Salaman, 1996b: 173-4; Clark and Salaman, 1998: 18-9; 21-2; Fincham and Clark, 2002: 8-9; see also Alvesson, 1993: 1011; Armbrüster, 2004: 1248; Berglund and Werr, 2000: 635-6; Fincham, 1999: 337-9; Werr and Styhre, 2003: 48-9). Clark elaborates on this point:

In the absence of a clearly delineated and defended formal body of knowledge, consultants' success is determined by their ability to appear authoritative via their manipulation of a knowledge base that is ambiguous, tacit and constantly under threat. In the face of competing knowledge bases consultants have to appear authoritative by convincing prospective clients that their expertise is worth buying. Therefore, their skill lies in presenting themselves as experts and convincing clients that they provide the most relevant solution. They must persuade clients of their definition of the situation and persuade them to collaborate on the basis of this analysis. The creation, management and regulation of impressions and images is therefore a central feature of consultant work. (1995: 91-2; see also Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 166)

Clark suggests that, in the absence of a common body of knowledge, management consultants must present themselves as experts in order to persuade clients about the value of their advisory services, which are faddish and thus liable to change. Lacking a stable knowledge base, Clark says, management consultants must convince their clients

to accept their analysis of the organizational problem and induce them to collaborate in order to implement an appropriate solution. We can study how management consultants manipulate their clients by examining the interaction between them, that is to say, “what actually happens when clients and consultants meet and ‘work’ together” (1995: 92; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 68; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 167; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 90). The aim, for Clark, is to understand how the consultant-client relation is managed during the course of a consultancy engagement in a client organization. This call has certainly been heeded in the critical academic literature: the relation between the consultant and the client has now been studied empirically in a number of different organizational contexts, such as telecommunications, corporate strategy, human resources, operational efficiency, product design, executive search, accounting, public sector project management, the banking industry, and the IT sector (see e.g. Berglund and Werr, 2000; Fincham, 1999; 2003; Kitay and Wright, 2003; 2004; Sturdy, et al., 2009; Werr and Styhre, 2003; Wright, 2002).

The present chapter takes issue with a single (though central) claim in the critical academic literature, namely, that management consultants lack a common body of knowledge. It is my contention that, contrary to Clark’s assertions, management consultants have been successful in establishing control over a distinctive domain of knowledge. This is verified by the fact that the textbooks for management consultants do not only contain industry-specific content-knowledge, that is to say, disparate functional specialisms; these textbooks also contain universally-applicable process-knowledge, that is to say, prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client

relation. Such process-knowledge, it should be emphasized, remains the same for *all* management consultants and is applicable in *every* consultancy engagement.

Before we describe this knowledge in detail, let us first note the irony of the situation. The critical academic literature argues that consultants must manage their relation with the client because they cannot, like other professionals, draw on a stable or distinctive knowledge base. But, as it will be shown, consultants are in fact able to draw on a unique and coherent body of knowledge, which takes the form of a set of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. Consultants, then, do not manage their relation with the client because they *lack* a common body of knowledge, as the critical academic literature suggests; rather, consultants are able to manage their relation with the client because they *possess* a common body of knowledge. We are thus able to cast some doubt on Clark's central claim that "the key to consultancy success lies more in the consultancy activity as a process of construction of meaning and impression management than in the mastery of any esoteric theory that might underlie it" (1995: 93; emphasis removed). As we will see, it is precisely the 'esoteric theory' underlying the work of management consultants that establishes a framework for constructing meaning and managing impressions in the first place.

We said in the general introduction to the thesis that Clark dismisses the practitioner literature because, he says, it does not accurately portray the true dynamics of the consultant-client relation as it takes place in the workplace (1995: 92-3; see also Clark and Salaman, 1995: 68; Clark and Salaman, 1996a: 161-2; Clark and Salaman, 1996c: 89-90). But this is to misunderstand the function of the practitioner literature: its

purpose is not to *describe* how the consultant-client relation *is* managed, but to *prescribe* how it *should* be managed.¹³ With this in mind, what is at stake in this chapter is not so much how management consultants and clients actually work together during a consultancy project, but rather how the practitioner literature prescribes guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We can assume, of course, that management consultants draw on this process-knowledge during actual consultancy engagements. But, as we previously said, the nature and extent of this use is quite beyond the scope of the thesis. Regardless of how management consultants interact with managers in client organizations, we can study the consultant-client relation as it is construed in the practitioner literature, on its own singular terms, by describing the regular formation of concepts in a field of knowledge.

We can now proceed to the main task of the chapter. We will first show that management consultancy process-knowledge is no less important than management consultancy content-knowledge. We will then go on to show how the practitioner literature instructs consultants to deal with managers in the client organization during the various phases of the consultancy engagement.

¹³ Most recently, Boltanski and Chiapello (2007: 58) make a similar point about the practitioner literature for managers: “[M]anagement literature...is not composed only of practical recipes for improving the productivity of organizations as one improves the performance of a machine. It simultaneously has a high moral tone, if only because it is a normative literature stating what should be the case, not what is the case...Their orientation is not constative, but prescriptive”.

Process of Management Consultancy

The importance of establishing and maintaining an effective consultant-client relation is affirmed throughout the practitioner literature. The consultant-client relation is described variously as “the keystone of the consulting project” (Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005: 205), “the heart of good consultation” (Janov, 2001: 127). “[t]he most critical component...of consulting services” (Barcus, 1995: 9[1]), and even “the essence of consulting” (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 28). Indeed, the very success of a consultancy engagement is said to depend on the quality of the interaction between the consultant and the client, over and above the actual content of management consultancy services (Rassam and Oates, 1991: 31). Kubr, et al. (2002: 61) explain:

Quite independently of its technical relevance and quality, the consultant’s advice may or may not be understood and accepted by the client. The consultant can upset people and hurt their feelings in many different ways. Rejection can take many forms. The history of consulting contains thousands of excellent reports that have been buried in managers’ desks and never implemented, although they were formally accepted. Many consultants terminate their assignments with feelings of bitterness and frustration. They are absolutely sure that they have provided excellent advice, yet the clients do not follow it. This underlines the critical importance of creating and maintaining *an effective consultant-client relationship*. (emphasis in original)

The success of a consultancy engagement does not depend solely on the quality of the analysis, advice, and assistance provided to managers. Its success also depends on the

quality of the relation between the management consultant and the client. Whereas the former is determined by the application of content-knowledge, the latter is determined by the application of process-knowledge. As Schein (1993: 653) puts it: “Content is the actual problem that is being solved, whereas process is the manner in which the relationship with the client is structured, and how the service is delivered”. An effective consultant-client relation is necessary, then, because it ensures that problems are diagnosed accurately, recommendations are proposed appropriately, and solutions are implemented properly. This is what Curnow and Downs (2003: 184) mean when they say that consultant-client relations are “the conduits through which know-how is transferred from consultant to client, through which joint problem solving and imaginative solutions can be created and planned change programmes implemented effectively”. This underlines the importance of managing the consultant-client relation during the course of a consultancy engagement (see also Bell and Nadler, 1979a: 1; Cody, 1986: 145; Curnow and Downs, 2003: 180; Markham, 1997: 3; Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005: 17).

The content/process distinction appears, in various guises, throughout the practitioner literature. Block (2000), for example, says that management consultants possess three sets of skills: technical skills, interpersonal skills, and consulting process skills. Technical skills denote forms of expertise gained by specialist training in a specific operational area. Interpersonal skills denote the ability to listen, talk, and offer support to others, which is central to dealing with people in a client organization. Consulting process skills, finally, denote the ability to manage the consultant-client relation during the various phases of the consultancy engagement. Block states that these consulting

process skills are “an essential part of consulting over and above technical expertise and interpersonal skills” (2000: 6), thus affirming the necessity of process-knowledge in addition to content-knowledge.

Cherrington (1995), writing in the *Handbook of Management Consulting Services*, makes a similar distinction between technical skills, interpersonal skills, and consulting process skills. Technical skills, he says, refer to training in “a technical discipline – such as computer data processing, marketing, engineering, or organizational behaviour – that qualify and individual to be considered an expert” (1995: 4[1]). Interpersonal skills, meanwhile, refer to “personal attributes that make an individual amiable to people and effective in accomplishing desirable objectives through people” (1995: 4[1]). Lastly, consulting process skills refer to knowledge about “the step-by-step approach used by a management consultant to (1) determine the cause of problems or inefficiencies, (2) identify alternative solutions, (3) select the most desirable alternative, and (4) implement the chosen solution” (1995: 4[1]). Like Block, Cherrington suggests that technical expertise must be accompanied not only by interpersonal abilities but also by knowledge about how to manage the consultant-client relation during the various phases of the consultancy engagement.

Although neither Block nor Cherrington say it explicitly, the categorization of ‘technical skills’ and ‘interpersonal skills’ can easily be interpreted as the two aspects of management we outlined in the previous chapter, namely, its technical dimension and its relational dimension. ‘Consulting skills’, on this view, introduces an additional ingredient to the mix that allows them to distinguish between management and

management consultancy. This tripartite division between technical skills, interpersonal skills, and consulting process skills, however, is abandoned by the majority of commentators in the practitioner literature, who conflate the latter two skills into one. This results in a clearer distinction between, on the one hand, the content of management consultancy and, on the other, the process of management consultancy (although, as we will see in the next chapter, the distinction between management consultancy and management becomes, as a result, significantly less clear). Kubr, et al. (2002), for example, say that management consultancy necessarily has two dimensions: a 'technical dimension' (content-knowledge) and a 'human dimension' (process-knowledge). The technical dimension involves advice to managers, based on competence in a specific area of operational expertise, about organizational systems and structures. The human dimension, by contrast, concerns "interpersonal relationships in the client organization...and the interpersonal relationship between the consultant and the client" (2002: 5). The human dimension, however, does not replace the technical dimension so much as complement it (2002: 6).

This distinction between content and process is what Mulligan and Barber (2001: 83) have in mind when they describe the artistic 'yin' and the scientific 'yang' of management consultancy:

Consultancy as a science provides knowledge, models to enhance understanding, diagnostic and measurement tools. Consultancy as an art is a relational process, an expression of belief and values, and an act of emotional

exploration within the bounds of a social relationship. The art and the science of consultancy represent its yin and yang nature.

An adequate balance must be struck, then, between management consultancy as a problem-oriented science and management consultancy as a people-centred art. This is another way of saying that content-knowledge should not be prioritized at the expense of process-knowledge during a consultancy engagement. As Curnow (2003a: 189) puts it: “No amount of technical expertise or functional experience can make up for a deficiency in relationship capability” (see also Cody, 1986: 57; Margerison, 2001: 7; 9; Markham, 1994: 155; 1997: 207; Schaffer, 1997: 8; 40).

Management consultancy knowledge, then, has two aspects: content and process. These correspond to the two aspects of management that we identified in the previous chapter: its technical component and its relational component. Just as the technical component of management is the *non-managerial* aspect of managers’ work, so the content of management consultancy is the *non-consultancy* aspect of consultants’ work; analogously, just as the relational component of management is the *properly managerial* aspect of managers’ work, so the process of management consultancy is the *properly consultancy* aspect of consultants’ work. We now see why it is necessary, for the purposes of the thesis, to examine the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation in the practitioner literature. Such process-knowledge remains the same for all management consultants and is applicable in every consultancy engagement, thus providing the organizing principle for management consultancy as such. This allows us to distinguish between management consultancy and management

in a fundamental way. We have therefore found what we were looking for, but failed to find, in the previous chapter: management consultancy knowledge. The following section will examine how the practitioner literature prescribes guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. In doing so, we move closer to answering our central question of what management consultancy is.

Managing the Consultant-Client Relation

The practitioner literature makes it clear that the consultant-client relation must be managed in a specific way in each phase of the consultancy engagement. Although the precise number of phases may sometimes vary, the practitioner literature construes them in essentially the same way. For example, Bell and Nadler (1979a: 3) describe four phases through which the consultant-client relation passes: 1) entry, 2) diagnosis, 3) response, and 4) disengagement and closure. Mulligan and Barber (2001: 90), meanwhile, describe five phases: 1) contact, 2) orientation, 3) identification, 4) exploration, and 5) resolution. Kubr, et al. (2002: vi-vii) also describe five phases: 1) entry, 2) diagnosis, 3) action planning, 4) implementation, 5) termination. Similarly, Block (2000: 6-7) outlines five phases: 1) entry and contracting, 2) discovery and dialogue, 3) feedback and the decision to act, 4) engagement and implementation, and 5) extension, recycle, or termination. Eggert and Van der Zeil (1995: 25) outline six phases: 1) entry, 2) contract, 3) options, 4) solutions, 5) action, and 6) exit). Schein (1969: 78), finally, outlines seven: 1) initial contact, 2) defining the relationship, 3) selecting a setting and a method of work, 4) data gathering and diagnosis, 5) intervention, 6) reducing involvement, and 7) termination. Despite the minor variations

between these schemes of classification, there is a certain regularity to the phases of the consultancy engagement. There is an *introductory phase* (entry, contact, contracting, defining the relationship); an *analysis phase* (diagnosis, data gathering, orientation, discovery and dialogue, options, selecting a setting, selecting a method of work); an *advisory phase* (response, identification, feedback and the decision to act, solutions); an *assistance phase* (exploration, engagement, implementation, action, intervention); and, finally, a *concluding phase* (disengagement, closure, resolution, extension, recycle, exit, termination). While we can already see points of overlap between each phase, as a whole they provide a relatively coherent framework for managing the consultant-client relation:

- 1) Introductory phase
- 2) Analysis phase
- 3) Advisory phase
- 4) Assistance phase
- 5) Concluding phase

This classificatory scheme remains within the definition of management consultancy that we examined in the previous chapter: the provision of analysis, advice, and assistance to managers. The vital difference is that now we are no longer asking *what* is contained in the analysis, advice, and assistance (content-knowledge); we are now asking *how* this analysis, advice, and assistance should be provided to managers (process-knowledge).

We will now examine how the practitioner literature prescribes guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation in each phase of the consultancy engagement. The following five subsections will be, for the most part, unencumbered by detailed commentary and shorn of rhetorical embellishment. Borrowing once more from Foucault's (2000: 369) description of Nietzsche's genealogical method, our ensuing discussion will be similarly "grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary". This will, as it were, permit management consultancy knowledge to speak for itself.

1. Introductory Phase

The introductory phase marks the entry of the management consultant into the client organization and the first stage of the consultancy engagement. It is concerned with establishing two things: the *substance* of the consultancy engagement and the *relationships* that make possible the transference of this substance from consultant to client (Mooney, 1999: 31). In other words, consideration must be given to both the type of content and the type of process that will characterize the engagement. These two elements are dealt with, respectively, by a *formal* contract and a *psychological* contract.

The formal contract is either a verbal agreement or a written document, legally-binding in the case of public agencies, that describes the nature of the services that the management consultant will provide to the client organization. This contract serves to establish the methods, objectives, timetable, fees, and billing arrangements (see Block, 2000: 60-6; Hussey, 2001: 111; Kubr, et al., 2002: 174-7; Schein, 1969: 84-5). The

formal contract thus determines the type and scope of the content-knowledge that will be applied during the course of the consultancy engagement.

But this formal contract is not enough:

[T]he initial phase of the consulting process [has] to achieve considerably more than the definition of terms of reference and the signature of a contract. The foundations of successful assignments are laid at this very early stage by establishing mutual trust and empathy, agreeing on the ‘rules of the game’, and starting the assignment with shared optimism and a vision of what can be achieved. (Kubr, et al., 2002: 153)

The ‘terms of reference’ of the consultancy engagement, then, must be accompanied by the ‘rules of the game’. In other words, alongside the formal contract, there is another contract to be considered: the psychological contract. This contract “is not codified in any document and is not easy to describe” (Kubr, et al., 2002: 178). The psychological contract is of an altogether different nature to the formal contract. Moreover, the psychological contract is arguably more important than the formal contract since it “cannot be replaced by even the finest legal document” (Kubr, et al., 2002: 178).

But what is the psychological contract?

The idea of a ‘psychological contract’ is commonly used, outside of a management consultancy context, to describe the largely implicit set of mutual obligations between employers and employees that supplements the formal work contract (for an overview,

see Andersen and Schalk, 1998). In terms of process-knowledge, the psychological contract determines how the consultant and the client will work together during the consultancy engagement. De Haan (2006: 3) describes the psychological contract as “a mutual commitment by client and consultant to work towards improvement”. Kubr, et al. (2002: 178) characterize it as the condition “under which the consultant and the client cooperate in an atmosphere of trust and respect, believing that the approach taken by the other party is the best one to bring the assignment to a successful completion”. Schaffer (1997: 107) also emphasizes the need to establish a contract that goes beyond content-knowledge and, moreover, takes into account the relation between the consultant and the client: “The fundamental consideration in creating a contract should be how well the client and consulting team can work together to accomplish results, not how competent the consultants are in any given technical area”. The psychological contract, then, refers to the mutual expectations held by the consultant and the client in terms of interpersonal relations, rather than the obligations they are required to fulfil for each other in terms of operational improvements (Schein, 1969: 84; Cash and Minter, 1979: 26).

We can see how this psychological contract functions in relation to the formal contract. The formal contract sets the consultant and the client over and against each other in terms of their rights and responsibilities: the consultant is obliged to provide analysis, advice, and assistance to the client, whereas the client is obliged to remunerate the consultant for these services. The psychological contract, meanwhile, serves to bridge this divide by establishing a collaborative relation between the consultant and the client: they are now expected to work together on the same hierarchical level in the

client organization. The psychological contract ensures that the consultant does not play the role of a *vendor* (as a provider of managerial services) and that the client does not play the role of a *customer* (as a purchaser of managerial services). Instead, the psychological contract allows the management consultant and the client to become *equal partners*.

This equality, however, is deceptive. Certainly, the consultant and the client work on the same hierarchical level, collaborating with each other to diagnose problems and implement solutions in the client organization. But the terms of this collaboration are entirely regulated and delimited by management consultancy process-knowledge. This means that the consultant-client relation is, at one and the same time, both equal (since the consultant and the client collaborate with each other) and unequal (since this collaboration is ultimately governed by the consultant and not the client). Such is the double-edged nature of the consultant-client relation.

One final point needs to be made. Although the introductory phase is, by definition, a preliminary stage in the consultancy engagement, the activity of contracting – in both a formal and a psychological sense – continues throughout its remaining phases. Barcus (1995: 9[9-10]), for example, notes: “Successful client-consultant relationships endure beyond the first [phase]. The relationship-building process occurs during the project and during implementation of the results” (see also Kubr, et al., 2002: 177-8; Schein, 1969: 78). This means that the consultant-client relation is not established, once and for all, during the introductory phase; its frontiers, rather, are always under negotiation and

are continually being redrawn throughout the various phases of the consultancy engagement.

2. Analysis Phase

Analysis is the second phase of the consultancy engagement. This phase is often called ‘diagnosis’ in the practitioner literature.¹⁴ It involves examining the organizational problem in a client system by collecting and analyzing data with the aim of identifying the cause of the problem (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 263; Kubr, et al., 2002: 179; Markham, 1997: 35; Rassam, 2001b: 131). The organizational problem, and the type of data that needs to be collected, will be determined by the particular operational area under investigation and the specific technical expertise possessed by the management consultant: “A financial person will select questions about financial information and control; a personnel person will ask questions about compensation, attitudes, and climate” (Block, 2000: 190). The skills for diagnosing this problem and for collecting the data, however, remain the same for *all* management consultants and are applicable in *every* consultancy engagement. Thus we encounter here, once again, the crucial distinction between industry-specific content-knowledge (*what* data to collect, *what* problems to identify) and universally-applicable process-knowledge (*how* to collect data, *how* to identify problems).

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, the analysis phase is better characterized as an etiology (the search for causes) rather than a diagnosis (the study of signs). The medical notions of etiology and diagnosis will be returned to, albeit in a slightly different context, in chapter 6.

Before any consultancy engagement begins, executives in a client organization who have the authority to hire a management consultant will have already conducted a preliminary diagnosis of an organizational problem. This preliminary diagnosis produces a 'presenting problem', that is to say, the particular issue that a member of the client organization presents to the consultant as a problem to be resolved (Block, 2000: 180; Kakabadse, 1986: 29; Moore, 1984: 66). The presenting problem may not necessarily be clearly defined by the client; indeed, it might be no more than a sense "that all is not well or that things could be better" (Schein, 1969: 4). But some kind of organizational problem must be perceived to exist before a management consultant is asked to intervene in a client organization. As Block (2000: 179) puts it: "Consulting projects get started because managers feel pain". The presenting problem thus serves as the catalyst for the client organization to hire a management consultant in the first place.

We are told in the practitioner literature, however, that the client's preliminary diagnosis is never entirely accurate. Either the client was looking at a false problem and the real problem lies elsewhere, or the client did not get to the underlying cause of the problem. There is also a danger that a problem might be defined by the client as narrow and specific when, in reality, it is more widespread and generalized throughout the client organization. The problem identified by the client, then, is not always the same problem that is subsequently identified by the consultant. This does not mean that the presenting problem should be dismissed out of hand: "A management consultant should neither reject nor accept the client's initial description [of the problem] too readily" (Turner, 1982: 123). This initial description or preliminary diagnosis is unlikely to be

completely wrong or inaccurate, but it is rarely ever able to reveal the precise nature or true cause of the organizational problem. There is, as Bell and Nadler (1979b: 77) put it, an “unsolved residue” that remains in the preliminary diagnosis that must be brought to light with the consultant’s help. As Kets De Vries and Balazs (2005: 12) suggest, “the original, stated problem is very often not the real problem, but only a signifier of other, deeper problems. The consultant knows that the present[ing] problem often covers up something far more complicated”. The consultant should not entirely disregard the presenting problem, but treat it instead as a superficial explanation of a more complex problem. Greiner and Metzger (1983: 263) elaborate:

Typical symptom statements by the client are ones that make reference to ‘lack of communication’, ‘high turnover’, ‘bad morale’, ‘low productivity’, and ‘poor motivation’. [These] are rarely the cause of the problem – they are more likely the tip of an iceberg that has much hidden beneath the surface.

Whereas the client will usually bring to light only the *symptoms* of an organizational problem, the consultant seeks to uncover the *cause* of an organizational problem. This, it should be said, is one of the most prevalent themes in the practitioner literature (see Barcus, 1995: 9[7]; Block, 2000: 179-80; 197-8; Curnow and Downs, 2003: 186; Dean, 1938b: 453-4; Kakabadse, 1986: 29; Kubr, et al., 2002: 13; 63; Margerison, 2001: 46-7; Markham, 1997: 35; Moore, 1984: 66; Rassam, 2001b: 127; 131; Togo, 1995: 10[9]).¹⁵

¹⁵ From a sociological perspective, Bloomfield and Best (1992: 543) have examined “how client problems become *translated* such that they are deemed tractable in terms of consultants’ solutions” (emphasis in original; see also Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994; 2002). This is clearly the case in terms of the translation of the client’s problem into a mere ‘symptom’ of a deeper problem.

The consultant must conduct an additional diagnosis in the client organization that goes beyond the client's preliminary diagnosis. But the consultant does not undertake this diagnosis alone; he or she works in tandem with the client to produce a *joint* diagnosis of the organizational problem. Too much diagnosis on the client's side might result in the identification of an erroneous or inaccurate organizational problem. But too much diagnosis on the consultant's side might also prove detrimental. It is not the case, however, that the consultant is likely to misdiagnose the problem. Rather, it is said that the consultant will face increased *resistance* if the client is not fully involved in this process (De Haan, 2006: 58; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 278; Kubr, et al., 2002: 208; Schein, 1969: 7; Togo, 1995: 10[15]). Bell and Nadler (1979c: 116) state this bluntly: "Central to managing resistance is the consultant's playing his or her role in a manner which gives the client little to resist. By causing the client to experience psychological kinship with the consultant, the need to resist will be reduced". The analysis phase thus requires a collaborative relation between the consultant and the client, not because their combined skills will produce a more accurate diagnosis of the organizational problem, but because the client will be more likely to accept a diagnosis that is (or is at least seen to be) produced by *both* parties rather than just the consultant. At stake, here, is the 'ownership' of the problem: the client must feel that the problem belongs to them, even though it is perhaps a very different problem from the one that they initially presented to the management consultant (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 278-9; Kubr, et al., 2002: 13; Rassam, 2001c: 146).

The analysis phase, then, is characterized by a peculiar relation between the consultant and the client. The client does not sit back and let the consultant diagnose the problem, setting the former over and against the latter. Rather, the consultant and the client diagnose the organizational problem jointly. But this 'collaboration' is revealed to be double-edged, like the psychological contract in introductory phase: the consultant-client relation is simultaneously equal (since the consultant and the client work together to diagnose the organizational problem) and unequal (since the consultant rejects the client's preliminary diagnosis of a presenting problem and seeks to minimize the client's resistance to the new diagnosis). Process-knowledge, once again, serves to prevent the consultant from becoming a mere vendor of managerial services and the manager from becoming a mere customer of these selfsame services.

Finally, we should note that the analysis phase overlaps with other phases in the consultancy engagement. Bell and Nadler (1979c: 114) write:

The precise beginning and ending of the diagnosis phase is blurred and elusive. While still in entry, the consultant is gathering data which will form a part of diagnosis. At the other end of the diagnosis phase, the data-gathering action is itself a response in that it intervenes into the client culture and precipitates some change.

Diagnosis takes place during the introductory phase, since the management consultant collects and analyzes data about the client organization from the very moment of initial contact (Kubr, et al., 2002: 159; 186). But the very act of diagnosis also gives rise to

some form of organizational change since “[e]very decision to observe something, or to ask a question, or to meet with someone constitutes an intervention into the ongoing organizational process” (Schein, 1969: 97; see also Kets De Vries and Balazs, 2005: 12; Kubr, et al., 2002: 180). The analysis phase, like the previous introductory phase, intersects with other phases in the consultancy engagement to the extent that no phase is entirely free from joint problem diagnosis.

3. Advisory Phase

The advisory phase involves the formulation and presentation of recommendations that are intended to solve an organizational problem in the client organization. Although this evokes the archetypal image of the management consultant as a ‘business counsellor’, the advisory phase is not simply about giving advice to managers. Such advisory services may, in fact, play a relatively minor role, or no role at all, in the consultancy engagement (De Haan, 2006: xxi; Petter, 2003: 65; Schein, 2002: 21). The advisory phase is as much about setting up the conditions to implement a solution to an organizational problem as it is about advising managers. This is why Kubr, et al. (2002: 213) call this phase ‘action planning’, since it involves “developing possible solutions to the problem diagnosed, choosing among alternative solutions, presenting proposals to the client, and preparing for the implementation of the solution chosen by the client”. As with the diagnosis of the problem, the type of solution that is recommended will be determined by the specific organizational area in which the problem is located. But the skills for identifying, choosing, and preparing a solution for implementation remain the

same for all management consultants, regardless of the specific organizational area in which the problem is located.

The practitioner literature tells us that the consultant-client relation must be managed particularly vigilantly during this phase because it is here that the consultant is likely to encounter the most resistance from the client. This resistance takes a number of forms: asking the consultant for too much information, providing the consultant with too much detail, intellectualizing, moralizing, nay-saying, sabotaging, maintaining silence, verbally attacking the consultant, or even being excessively compliant (Block, 2000: 141-8; De Haan, 2006: 58; Greiner and Metzger, 277-9). None of these forms of resistance, however, are to be taken at face value. They are not conceptualized, in the practitioner literature, as expressions of valid and rational concern from the client about the direction of the consultancy engagement. Instead, these forms of resistance are understood as invalid and irrational responses by the client to positive organizational change. This means that client resistance is never a sign that the consultant's recommendations are wrong or impracticable. Such resistance is, on the contrary, simply a sign that the consultant's recommendations have provoked an emotional reaction within the client, one that is, moreover, an entirely normal and expected part of the consultancy engagement. Block (2000: 139) writes:

The key to understanding the nature of resistance is to realize that resistance is a reaction to an emotional process taking place within the client. It is not a reflection of the conversation we are having with the client on an objective, logical, rational level. Resistance is a predictable, natural, emotional reaction

against the process of being helped and against the process of having to face up to difficult organizational problems.

Resistance to change is thus said to result from the client's own feelings towards the recommendations, rather than the actual content of the recommendations themselves (see also De Haan, 2006: 58; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 277). Resistance to change, then, is about the 'heart' and not the 'head'; it cannot be reasonably discussed, so it must simply be surmounted. The management consultant, when dealing with client resistance, does not therefore have to question the recommendations or their suitability for the client organization on the level of content-knowledge (Block, 2000: 161). Since such a response is seen to be question of human emotion rather than one of technical expertise, the consultant is able to deal with resistance by maintaining a certain type of relation with the client. This, then, is the function of process-knowledge during the advisory phase.

How, then, must the consultant-client relation be managed in this phase in order to minimize client resistance? Like joint problem diagnosis in the analysis phase, the consultant must involve the client in joint solution formulation in the analysis phase. This collaboration will serve to increase the client's commitment to the proposed recommendations, as Rassam (2001c: 146) explains: "If the client has played an active role in the process, it will contribute to the recommendations' authority and ultimate effectiveness. If the client has not been involved in the process of reaching solutions, they are less likely to feel a commitment to them" (see also De Haan, 2006: 58; 73; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 278; Kubr, et al., 2002: 227; 214). At stake here, once

more, is the question of 'ownership': the client must feel that the solution to the problem, as much as the problem itself, properly belongs to them. The client is less likely to resist a solution in the advisory phase if the conditions for its implementation have been set up collaboratively by the consultant and the client.

The consultant does not therefore propose a solution to the client, who, in turn, decides whether or not to implement it. Instead, the consultant and the client are obliged to work together to formulate a solution jointly. The prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation ensure, once again, that the consultant does not play the role of a vendor (as a provider of managerial services) and that the client does not play the role of a customer (as a purchaser of managerial services). Needless to say, this collaborative relation is both equal (since the consultant and the client work together on the same hierarchical level in order to formulate a solution jointly) and unequal (since the consultant discredits and diminishes the client's resistance by characterizing it as an emotional, rather than a rational, response to the proposed recommendations).

It remains for us to point out that the advisory phase overlaps with the other phases of the consultancy engagement. While this phase primarily seeks to prepare the ground for solving problems, it may also serve to bring additional problems to light (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 267; Kubr, et al., 2002: 213; Moore, 1984: 69). Moreover, the very activity of advice inevitably leads to some form of organizational change (Kubr, et al., 2002: 180). The advisory phase thus overlaps with both the previous analysis phase and the following assistance phase.

4. Assistance Phase

The assistance phase, on the most basic level, is about implementing a solution to the organizational problem in the client system. It involves “developing a work plan, establishing controls over the implementation activities, selecting and training needed personnel, installing needed physical facilities, developing standards and documentation, testing the solution being implemented, and following up and evaluating the implemented solution” (Cosman, 1995: 13[1]). The content of this phase is, of course, determined by the specific operational area in which the consultant and the client are presently working. But the process of giving assistance – as with the provision of analysis and advice – is determined by prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation.

The assistance phase is said to be the most crucial stage of the engagement because it marks “the culmination of the consultant’s and the client’s joint effort” (Kubr, et al., 2002: 229). The consultant and the client, here, draw on the outcome of diagnosis and recommendation in order to implement a solution to the organizational problem, thus bringing “to fruition the results of prior efforts in data gathering and problem analysis” (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 270). Moreover, if there is no implementation, then the entire engagement will have failed. The management consultant is hired to enact or at least provoke some kind of organization change, and if this does not occur then analysis and advice are worthless: “Without implementation, the most elegant consulting solution is of little value” (Obolensky, 2001: 155; see also Block, 2000: 247; Cody, 1986: 57). This emphasis on implementation is by no means a recent development, as some commentators would have us believe (Toppin and Czerniawska, 2005: 4; 112;

Curnow 2003b: 228; Kets De Vries and Balazs, 2005: 13; Schaffer, 1997: 7; Sturdy, et al., 2009: 3). It has, in fact, been an integral component of management consultancy from the very beginning. As Donham (1940: 33) writes in an early article, “if no action follows the diagnosing and the planning, the consultants’ engagement has availed exactly nothing”.

How, then, does the consultant ensure that their recommendations are implemented by the client? Above all, the consultant must stimulate emotional commitment to the proposed solutions and provoke a desire for change within the client organization. Block (2000: 249) explains: “There are two aspects of implementation for the consultant. One is the technical work using the expertise you have spent years developing...The second aspect of implementation is how to build support for the business or technical change you are planning”. While technical expertise in a specific operational area is necessary for implementing solutions, the management consultant must also know how to gain the client’s backing for the solutions and their implementation. The application of content-knowledge, in other words, must be accompanied by the application of process-knowledge. Along similar lines, Obolensky (2001: 162) asserts that consultants must deal with implementation on two levels, ‘intellectual’ and ‘emotional’, during the assistance phase: “For implementation to succeed, you need to appeal to both the intellect, to get rationally based agreement, and the emotions, to get deeply held commitment”. While rational agreement can be achieved through the demonstration of technical expertise, emotional commitment can be secured by managing the consultant-client relation in accordance with the prescriptive guidelines in the practitioner literature.

It should be said that the consultant is not likely to encounter too much resistance from the client if the consultant-client relation has been managed properly during the previous phases of the engagement. This is because the client, if they have been adequately involved in joint problem diagnosis and joint solution formulation, will not be in a position to reject the product of this collaborative work. Kubr, et al. (2002: 229) elaborate:

If the client does not accept the consultant's proposals at the end of the action planning phase, the assignment has been poorly managed by both parties. If the consultant and the client collaborate closely during the diagnostic and action-planning phases, the client cannot really reject proposals that are the product of joint work.

Failure to implement solutions, then, does not result from inadequate application of content-knowledge. Rather, it results from inadequate application of process-knowledge, that is to say, the *mismanagement* of the consultant-client relation during the various phases of the consultancy engagement. If the client has been fully involved in the analysis phase and advisory phase, there will be little for them to resist when it comes to implementing a solution to the organizational problem in the assistance phase.

However, resistance may nonetheless be encountered during this phase, particularly from members of the client staff who were not involved in the previous phases (Block, 2000: 260). The consultant-client relation still needs to be managed effectively during the assistance phase: like the previous two phases, the management consultant and the

client must work collaboratively by turning recommendations into workable solutions. Just as the analysis phase involves joint problem diagnosis, and the advisory phase involves joint solution formulation, so the assistance phase involves joint solution implementation (Kets De Vries and Balazs, 2005: 13; Kubr, et al., 2002: 234; Schaffer, 1997: 38). This means that the consultant neither undertakes all the work of implementation alone nor delegates all the work to managers and their staff; instead, the consultant *assists* the manager with the implementation of organizational solutions. This leaves the consultant in a curious position within the client organization, as Obolensky (2001: 178) notes:

[The consultant] will need to dance the paradox between being an external, uninvolved advisor and internal, involved catalyst. They will need to remain unbiased and maintain their integrity and yet, at the same time, become involved in the typical political behaviour in an effort to help the organization through the implementation maze.

Obolensky says that the management consultant is necessarily both outside *and* inside the client organization: on the one hand, they are outside to the extent that their work involves a technical component based on content-knowledge while, on the other hand, they are inside to the extent that their work involves a relational component based on process-knowledge. But matters are even more complicated than Obolensky imagines. Content-knowledge is outside the client organization insofar as it is provided by the management consultant; but it is already *inside* the organization insofar as this knowledge comprises, first and foremost, the technical component of management (and

only secondarily management consultancy). Likewise, from the other direction, process-knowledge is inside the client organization insofar as it enables the management consultant and the client to work collaboratively on the same hierarchical level; but it remains *outside* the organization insofar as this knowledge comprises the relational component of management consultancy (and not management).

The consultant, then, does not implement a solution independently as an outsourced service-provider. Rather, the consultant and the client work together to implement a solution jointly. The assistance phase is thus characterized by the same collaborative relation we identified in the previous phases, which is simultaneously equal (since the solution is implemented jointly) and unequal (since the consultant seeks to reduce the client's resistance by prompting a desire for organizational change on an emotional level).

We should note, finally, that the assistance phase overlaps with the other phases of the consultancy engagement. Some form of organizational change – the basic purpose of the assistance phase – inevitably takes place due to the very presence of the consultant in the client organization (Kubr, et al., 2002: 180; Schein, 1969: 97). This means that all the phases of the consultancy engagement contain at least an element of implementation.

5. Concluding Phase

In the concluding phase, which is often called ‘termination’, the consultancy engagement is brought to an end. This does not mean, however, that the consultant-client relation itself also finishes. On the contrary, the concluding phase is an opportunity to continue the consultant-client relation by beginning a new consultancy engagement. When the solution to an organizational problem has been formulated and implemented, there is no longer any need for content-knowledge. But it is the task of the consultant, during the concluding phase, to create a renewed need for the application of content-knowledge. This is how the consultant-client relation can continue even when the consultancy engagement reaches its conclusion. As Markham (1997: 32) notes: “A consultancy project is...only one part of an ongoing relationship between a client and a consultant”. Or, in even simpler terms: “The project will end; your relationship will not” (Biech, 1999: 198; see also De Haan, 2006: 117).

The concluding phase loops back to the introductory phase to the extent that it allows the formal contract and the psychological contract to be renewed and revised. This is why Mulligan and Barber (2001: 94) assert that “terminating a piece of work often does not mean terminating the relationship so much as changing the form of contact and contract”. The concluding phase, then, marks the *conclusion* of a particular consultancy engagement but, at the same time, the *introduction* of another. Greiner and Metzger (1983: 290) write:

The most propitious time for closing a sale of follow-on business is to make a verbal proposal during the presentation of results and recommendations from

the first assignment. If the consultant's work has been to the client's needs, then the client should be in a receptive mood. A recommendation for additional work becomes a natural part of the change program flowing from the first phase of work.

Kubr, et al. (2002: 254) reiterate this point:

Often, the client and the consultant may agree to terminate a particular assignment without completely discontinuing their working relationship. Any further work done by the consultant which is related in some way to the current assignment is called follow-up. The desirability of some follow-up is often identified in the evaluation of the assignment. If the consultant is convinced that follow-up is in the client's interest and that he or she has something more to offer the client, this may be suggested in the final report and meeting with the client.

Both Greiner and Metzger and Kubr, et al. suggest that the consultant should use the concluding phase as an opportunity to sell extra work to the client organization. Since the previous phases of consultancy engagement might serve to bring to light new and unanticipated organizational problems, the consultant, during the concluding phase, is able to demonstrate the need for further joint problem diagnosis, joint solution formulation, and joint solution implementation. Such 'follow-on' or 'follow-up' services could theoretically continue ad infinitum, since the concluding phase of the *next* consultancy engagement would serve to further renew and revise the terms of the

formal and psychological contracts and thus prepare the ground for *another* consultancy engagement. This is what Curnow (2003a: 195-6) has in mind when he says that the consultant-client relation must be *established* in the introductory phase, *managed* in the analysis, advisory, and assistance phases, and finally *transformed* in the concluding phase.

The emphasis, during the concluding phase, on continuing the consultant-client relation serves to secure more business for the management consultant. On another level, however, it shows us that the consultant-client relation is complex and multidimensional. Each phase of the consultancy engagement is enfolded within every other phase. While there are five phases in total – contracting in the introductory phase, problem diagnosis in the analysis phase, solution formulation in the advisory phase, solution implementation in the assistance phase, and terminating in the concluding phase – the consultant-client relation does not necessarily pass through each one chronologically (one after the other) but synchronically (all at the same time). The consultant-client relation, then, must be managed in *each* phase according to the prescriptive guidelines for *every* phase. Put simply, there is always a degree of contracting, problem diagnosis, solution formulation, and solution implementation in every single phase of the consultancy engagement (although one phase might, at any given time, gain precedence over the others) (Schein, 1969: 78). De Haan (2006: xx) recognizes this when he notes that some consultants

have learned not to see...classification into phases as a straitjacket, and not to structure their own contribution as linear and incremental, but rather as an

encounter and a joint process of discovery. In addition, they have often experimented with the sequence of phases, for example by deferring exploration and bringing forward the implementation or evaluation.

Such ‘experimentation’ with the sequence of phases is, in fact, unnecessary since the various phases of the consultancy engagement already overlap with each other to a considerable extent. As soon as the management consultant draws up the formal and psychological contracts, the work of problem diagnosis, solution formulation, solution implementation will have already begun (see also Donham, 1940: 39; Turner, 1982: 120-1).

It is not difficult to see what will result from the application of these prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation: the management consultant will be rendered permanently necessary within the client organization since, with each successive cycle of diagnosis, formulation, and implementation, new organizational problems will be continuously revealed. Although such dependence on management consultants is frequently condemned in the practitioner literature (Argyris, 1961: 130; De Haan, 2006: 117; Eggert and Van der Zeil, 1995: 33; Mulligan and Barber, 2001: 98; Swartz and Lippitt, 1975: 312), there can be no denying that this is precisely what process-knowledge will succeed in bringing about. The consultant, as Curnow and Downs (2003: 184) note, has now become “an everyday necessity in running modern business” and “an indispensable resource in most organizations”. While the application of content-knowledge seeks to improve technical operations in a client organization, the application of process-knowledge seek to establish an effective consultant-client

relation; in doing so, the ties that bind together consultants and managers are trussed ever tighter. In chapter 5, we will see how this aspect of management consultancy knowledge plays out in terms of the profession of management consultancy. For now, it is enough to note that the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation aim, ultimately, to make managers dependent upon consultants.

Conclusion

In their discussion of the consultant-client relation, Clark and Salaman (1996a: 167) contend that “the key question to ask of consultancy is not ‘what is consultancy knowledge?’, but how do consultants develop a strong story?”. This chapter began by inverting this question. What has concerned us is not the kind of *stories* management consultants develop, but the kind of *knowledge* they possess. By describing the arrangement and ordering of concepts in the practitioner literature, we saw that this knowledge takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation during the various phases of the consultancy engagement. This process-knowledge, which remains the same for all management consultants and is applicable in every consultancy engagement, contrasts with content-knowledge, which differs from one management consultant to another and from one consultancy engagement to the next. It is on the basis of this process-knowledge, then, that we are able to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy.

We are now in a position to distinguish management consultancy from management. The previous chapter said that the meaning of management changed during the twentieth century as its relational component became divorced from its technical component. Among other things, this opened up the possibility for management to develop as a profession in its own right, with its own common body of knowledge. This chapter has shown that management consultants, as a professional group, possess a body of knowledge that differs from management knowledge. Although the technical component of management consultancy (content-knowledge) is the same as the technical component of management, it is the relational component of the former (process-knowledge) that differs from the relational component of the latter. While the relational component of management refers to knowledge about how to deal with the manager-subordinate relation, the relational component of management consultancy refers to knowledge about how to deal with the consultant-client relation. In effect, the relational component of management consultancy has become separated from *management's own* relational component.

Armstrong may well have been right in claiming that, for management theorists such as Urwick, there was no palpable difference between management consultancy and management, neither in terms of their technical components nor in terms of their relational components. On this view, Armstrong (1991: 225) was able to assert that management, as “a profession of universal application”, provided at one and the same time “the rationale of the peripatetic management consultant”. However, Armstrong did not take into account that fact that, since at least the 1960s, management consultants have been able to develop a common body of knowledge that is based on prescriptive

guidelines, not for managing the manager-subordinate relation, but for managing the consultant-client relation. This provides us with a way, then, to distinguish clearly between management consultancy and management.

This raises a further question. Management, as we saw in the previous chapter, was able to divorce its relational component from its technical component. This meant that a manager no longer needed any operational expertise whatsoever, since all they required was knowledge about how to deal with their subordinates. As Armstrong (1987a: 428) reminded us, this type of manager – located at the top level in organizational hierarchies – became the “model for managerial excellence”. We might ask whether management consultancy, on the basis of its separation between industry-specific content-knowledge and universally-applicable process-knowledge, is now also able to become completely disconnected from its operational expertise and, as a consequence, come to be situated exclusively on the level of unproductive labour at the topmost level of organizational hierarchies. This question – and its far-reaching, paradoxical implications – will be addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Paradox of Management Consultancy

Introduction

This chapter describes how diverging theories are constructed in the practitioner literature. In particular, we will see how Edgar H. Schein's model of process consultation differs from the conventional model of content-based consulting (outlined in the previous chapter) whilst remaining within the same field of knowledge. We will see that the model of process consultation is a 'pure form' of management consultancy, stripped of all technical expertise. Whereas the conventional model of management consultancy involves both industry-specific content-knowledge and universally-applicable process-knowledge, the model of process consultation draws exclusively on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation.

In the previous chapter, it was said that process-knowledge provides the means by which content-knowledge is transferred to managers in the client organization. On this view, the relational component of management consultancy is inextricable from its

technical component. How, then, can universally-applicable process-knowledge be detached from industry-specific content-knowledge? The present chapter will show that Schein's model of process consultation turns process-knowledge, with a curious twist, into a form of content-knowledge. This means that management consultants (or at least 'process consultants') are now able to transfer the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation, and not just technical expertise in a specific operational area, into the client organization. On this view, managers are encouraged to become 'their own consultants' in their own organization in order to minimize staff resistance to organizational change. The result is as simple as it is seemingly contradictory: management consultancy becomes, in effect, a part of management knowledge. This is the paradox of management consultancy we will bring to light in this chapter.

We will now see how process-based consulting diverges from content-based consulting, before we describe how process-knowledge becomes content-knowledge and how managers become their own consultants.

The 'Pure Form' of Management Consultancy

Edgar H. Schein has written extensively about corporate culture, leadership, and organizational development. This chapter will focus on his model of process consultation, which he outlines in a trilogy of books over several decades (Schein, 1969; 1987; 1999). In the first volume of *Process Consultation*, Schein outlines three models of management consultancy: the purchase model, the doctor-patient model, and the process consultation model. Schein's intention, here, is to describe the latter model

by comparing it with the former two “more traditional consultation models” (1969: 4). Schein borrows this scheme primarily from Seymour Tilles’ 1961 article ‘Understanding the Consultant’s Role’. In this piece, Tilles describes two “misleading analogies” – the purchase-sale model and the doctor-patient model – before outlining the model for a more constructive consultant-client relationship (1961: 88-91).

The purchase model is based on the idea that the client purchases a service from the consultant that is based on technical expertise in a specific operational area. This model of management consultancy assumes that the client knows what their problem is and how it can be resolved: “The buyer, an individual manager or some group in the organization, defines a need – something he wishes to know or some activity he wishes carried out – and, if he doesn’t feel the organization itself has the time or capability, he will look to a consultant to fill the need” (Schein, 1969: 5; see also Tilles, 1961: 88-90). This might involve hiring a consultant to find out how a group of customers feel, to help in the design of a new plant, or to put into operation a new accounting system (Schein, 1969: 5). The effectiveness of this model depends on the client being able to conduct an accurate diagnosis and to communicate the organizational problem clearly to the consultant. For this reason, the purchase model often fails to deliver improvements to the client organization (Schein, 1969: 5; Tilles, 1961: 90).

The second model of management consultancy is the doctor-patient model. Here, the client hires the consultant to conduct a general diagnosis, to identify any organizational problems, and to propose possible solutions. Schein elaborates:

One or more executives in the organization decide to bring in a consultant or team of consultants to ‘look them over’, much as the patient might go to his doctor for an annual physical. The consultants are supposed to find out what is wrong with which part of the organization, and then, like a physician, recommend a program of therapy. (1969: 6; see also Tilles, 1961: 90-1)

This model is based on the notion that the organization is dysfunctional in some way and that the client requires a consultant to find out what the disorder is and how it can be remedied. Its effectiveness depends on the client’s willingness to allow the consultant access to information about the organization as well as the client’s disposition to accept or reject the consultant’s diagnosis. For this reason, the doctor-patient model also often fails to deliver improvements to the client organization (Schein, 1969: 6-7; Tilles, 1961: 90-1).

Both the purchase model and the doctor-patient model involve some basic assumptions about the relation between the consultant and the client. In the first model, the consultant is construed as a passive ‘seller’ whereas the client is construed as an active ‘buyer’. In the second model, meanwhile, the consultant is construed as an active ‘doctor’ whereas the client is construed as the passive ‘patient’. Both the purchase model and the doctor-patient model, however, are variations on the same basic model: in both cases, the consultant plays the role of a vendor (as a provider of managerial services) and the client plays the role of a customer (as a purchaser of managerial services). This, we will recall, is precisely the situation that process-knowledge seeks to

avoid, since it sets the consultant and the client over and against each other during the course of the consultancy engagement.

Accordingly, the purchase model and the doctor-patient model, as Schein describes them, cannot in fact be called ‘management consultancy’ (this is no doubt why Tilles calls them “misleading analogies”). These two models are based on an unequal consultant-client relation, rather than a collaborative one. This means that the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation do not apply to the purchase model and the doctor-patient model. If they *did* involve such process-knowledge, then the consultant and the client would not be set over and against each other. Without this crucial relational component, the purchase model and the doctor-patient model cannot be considered forms of management consultancy in the strict sense; they are something else entirely, namely, an outsourced service provided to managers.

Against the purchase model and the doctor-patient model, Schein proposes a third model: ‘process consultation’ (or ‘P-C’).¹⁶ In contrast to the purchase model and the doctor-patient model, process consultation emphasizes the need for a collaborative consultant-client relation in order to conduct the joint diagnosis of problems, the joint formulation of solutions, and the joint implementation of solutions: “The client must learn to see the problem for himself, to share in the diagnosis, and to be actively involved in generating a remedy” (Schein, 1969: 8). Process consultation, in this

¹⁶ We should note that the model of process consultation has its roots in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology, as well as organizational areas such as leadership, training, and mentoring (1969: 12-3). Unfortunately, there is no space in the thesis to describe the interconnections between process consultancy and these other fields of knowledge.

respect, is based on the prescriptive guidelines we described in the previous chapter. But what is novel and interesting about Schein's model of process consultation is the fact that it does not necessarily involve any technical expertise in a specific operational area. Schein explains:

It should be emphasized that the process consultant may or may not be expert in solving the particular problem which is uncovered. The important point in [process consultation] is that such expertise is less relevant than are the skills of involving the client in self-diagnosis and helping him to find a remedy which fits his particular situation and unique set of needs. The process consultant must be an expert in how to diagnose and how to develop a helping relationship. He does not need to be an expert on production, marketing, finance, and the like. (1969: 7)

While Schein does not discount the possibility that the process consultant may well possess technical expertise in a specific operational area, he makes it clear that such expertise is not a prerequisite for process consultation. The process consultant need only possess the appropriate skills to manage the consultant-client relation (what Schein calls here a 'helping relationship') in a collaborative way. Industry-specific content-knowledge is less important, for Schein, than universally-applicable process-knowledge.

Schein is actually equivocal about whether or not content-knowledge plays a role in process consultation at all. Whereas, in the above passage, he suggests that the process

consultant “may or may not be [an] expert” and “does not need to be an expert” in an operational area – which implies that content-knowledge *can* play a role – he later goes on to say that it *cannot*, in fact, play a role in process consultation:

Actual solutions to management problems...would not be considered valid interventions in a P-C model. If I permitted myself to become interested in a particular management problem in sales, marketing, or production, I would be switching roles from that of process consultant to that of expert resource. Once I have become an expert resource, I find I lose my effectiveness as a process consultant. (1969: 103)

Schein suggests, here, that any application of content-knowledge in a client organization would detract from the function of the process consultant. By solving a particular managerial problem in a specific operational area – such as sales, marketing, or production – the process consultant becomes a technical resource. It is unclear whether this technical resource is another type of management consultant, that is to say, someone who applies content-knowledge *in addition* to process-knowledge; or whether the technical resource is not a type of management consultant at all, that is to say, someone who *solely* applies content-knowledge (and thus falls into either the purchase model or the doctor-patient model). In any case, as Schein notes, the application of technical expertise in a specific operational area is, for the process consultant, “very rare, largely because it violates some of the basic assumptions of the process consultation model” (1969: 118). Such comments serve to emphasize the fact that

process consultation can be – perhaps *must* be – stripped of all technical expertise. It is therefore based primarily on process-knowledge.

Schein is outlining, with his process consultation model, a ‘pure form’ of management consultancy. We previously said that the *technical* component of management consultancy is, in fact, the *non-consultancy* aspect of consultants’ work (just as the technical component of management is the non-managerial aspect of managers’ work). By the same gesture, we said that the *relational* component of management consultancy is the *properly consultancy* aspect of consultants’ work (just as the relational component of management is the properly managerial aspect of managers’ work). If management consultancy’s technical component can be reduced, even eradicated, then all that remains is its relational component. Management consultancy, on this basis, no longer contains any knowledge that is external to its own system, that is to say, those disparate functional specialisms we outlined in chapter 2; it is now restricted entirely to its proper domain, namely, process-knowledge. This, then, is the ‘pure form’ of management consultancy that Schein seeks to elaborate with his model of process consultation.

Let us pause, for a moment, and consider the consequences that follow from the model of process consultation.

In the previous chapter, we saw that process-knowledge is a crucial aspect of management consultancy. Indeed, the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation define management consultancy precisely *as* management

consultancy. But it was also said that technical expertise in a specific operational area is no less important for the management consultant. Indeed, whereas content-knowledge determines the ‘what’ of the consultancy engagement (*what* data to collect, *what* problem to identify, *what* solution to implement), process-knowledge determines the ‘how’ of the engagement (*how* to collect data, *how* to identify a problem, *how* to implement a solution). Joint problem diagnosis, joint solution formulation, and joint solution implementation, on this view, are possible only by combining prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation with technical expertise in a specific operational area. Process and content thus belong together in a consultancy engagement.

But the model of process consultation, as we have just seen, does not involve the transfer of technical expertise in a specific operational area. It is evacuated of industry-specific content-knowledge; all that remains is universally-applicable process-knowledge. This raises a troubling question. If content-knowledge is applied without process-knowledge, management consultancy does not take place; but what happens if process-knowledge is applied without content-knowledge? Can we still say that management consultancy takes place? On the one hand, it would seem that process consultation involves *nothing else* apart from management consultancy knowledge, since its relational component gains absolute primacy over its technical component. In another sense, however, we might wonder how this ‘pure form’ of management consultancy is able to function *at all*, since the purpose of its relational component is to facilitate its technical component. In short, our question is: what happens when

management consultancy is stripped of all technical expertise and reduced entirely to the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation?

We will address this question in the following section. By doing so, we edge closer towards the paradoxical heart of management consultancy.

Process as Content

It might seem as if process consultants do not have anything to offer by way of content to client organizations, since they do not (or do not need to) possess technical expertise. Certainly, this possibility is entertained by at least one commentator. The very presence of an external advisor in a client organization, De Haan (2006: 113) notes, will serve to bring about some kind of organizational change. This means that the consultant does not necessarily have to make a positive contribution in terms of specific operational improvements. However, this is a limit case. More often than not, the process consultant is said to be useful for a client organization because they are able to transfer process-knowledge *as* content-knowledge to managers. In this way, the relational component of management consultancy is able to function in the absence of its technical component.

Schein writes that early studies of organizations, such as the scientific management school, focused exclusively on “the ‘structural’ or static elements of organization” (1969: 10). These structural elements include the correct division of labour, the appropriate distribution of managerial responsibility, the proper scope of departmental

control, the optimal number of hierarchical levels, etc. (1969: 10). Management consultancy, Schein notes, has conventionally reflected this approach to the study of organizations. Consultants are brought into organizations “to examine the existing management *structure* and to recommend alternative forms which are presumed to be more effective for achieving organizational goals” (1969: 11; emphasis in original). We should be clear that Schein is not describing, here, the purchase model or the doctor-patient model. These models, as we will recall, cannot strictly be called models of ‘management consultancy’ since they do not involve the application of any process-knowledge. Schein, rather, is describing the *conventional model of content-based consulting*, the very same model we outlined in the previous chapter, which involves both a technical component (in this case, organizational structure) and a relational component.

Schein takes issue with this conventional form of management consultancy. “The problem with this approach,” he writes, “is not that it is wrong but that it is incomplete” (1969: 11). Why is it incomplete? It is not enough, for Schein, to focus exclusively on the structural elements of the client organization. The consultant must also, and need only, focus on “the processes which occur between people and groups” (1969: 11). In other words, while structural elements of an organization – the division of labour, the distribution of managerial responsibilities, the scope of departmental control, the number of hierarchical levels, etc. – certainly influence its effectiveness, the consultant cannot neglect the interpersonal relations between managers and their subordinates in the same organization. Managerial positions are, after all, occupied by actual managers, each with their own personality and style of managing. As Schein puts it: “It is

important to have the right structure of roles for effective organizational performance, but at the same time, people's personalities, perceptions, and experiences also determine how they will behave in their roles and how they will relate to others" (1969: 11). Whereas conventional management consultancy attempts to improve *formal* aspects of the client organization ("the structure of roles"), process consultation is more concerned with improving its more *informal* aspects ("the processes which occur between people and groups").¹⁷

Schein thus prioritizes *relational* problems over and above *technical* problems. This means that the objective, for the process consultant, is not so much to change a particular operational element in the client organization but, rather, to change the way that managers deal with their subordinates. This is the most important aspect of process consultation. Schein elaborates:

Managers tend to focus much more on the content of decisions, interactions, and communications. They tend to devalue the importance of 'personality', or 'feelings', of 'how things are done', or they attempt to dodge such process-related issues by perpetual redesign of the structure of the organization. The process consultant faces the problem of showing managers that processes in the organization follow patterns which can be studied and understood, and which have important consequences for organizational performance. More importantly, processes can be rationally changed and adapted to increase the

¹⁷ Of course, "the structure of roles" will always have some kind of effect on "the processes which occur between people and groups", but Schein's model of process consultation proposes to intervene actively in the latter rather than allowing them to be determined solely by the organizational structure.

effectiveness of performance. Therefore, one should attempt to improve the organization through a joint consideration of the structure and of the processes of the organization. (1969: 124)

Schein says that, during the consultancy engagement, managers are more likely to focus on operational issues in the organization – production, marketing, accounting, etc. – rather than on interpersonal issues with their subordinates. The task of the process consultant is to demonstrate to the manager that the ‘how’ of management work (process) is just as important, if not more so, than the ‘what’ of management work (content). By prioritizing relational problems over technical problems, the process consultant thus seeks, in collaboration with the client, to transform the interpersonal relations between managers and subordinates in the organizational hierarchy. This is what Schein means when he says that the process consultant aims “to improve...the processes of the organization” in addition to improving its structural or technical elements.

How, then, are the interpersonal relations between managers and subordinates transformed? On a basic level, the process consultant achieves this by transferring process-knowledge to the client. Schein writes: “It is of prime importance that the process consultant be an expert in how to diagnose and how to establish effective helping relationships with clients. *Effective P-C involves the passing on of both these skills*” (1969: 8; emphasis added). This is a significant admission. Like the content-based consultant, the process consultant must possess process-knowledge in order to diagnose organizational problems and to establish and maintain an effective consultant-

client relation (what Schein calls here a ‘helping relationship’) during the course of a consultancy engagement. But Schein is not simply suggesting, here, that this process-knowledge should be used solely to facilitate the transference of content-knowledge, which we said was its purpose in the previous chapter. Schein goes one step further. He suggests that *process-knowledge itself* can also be transferred in order to improve interpersonal relations between managers and their subordinates in the client organization. By passing on the skills for diagnosing organizational problems and for establishing effective helping relationships, the model of process consultation turns process-knowledge into a form of content-knowledge.

We are now in a position to see how the model of process consultation is able to function in the absence of technical expertise in an operational area. Whereas conventional management consultancy contains a technical component (content-knowledge) and a relational component (process-knowledge), the model of process consultation contains *two relational components*: its first relational component (process-knowledge) serves to facilitate its second relational component (process-knowledge as content-knowledge). It should be said that process consultation may well involve, in addition, a technical component. But this is not strictly necessary. In theory and in practice, the model of process consultation can be stripped of all technical expertise in a specific operational area and yet still function precisely *as* management consultancy in a client organization. It is now possible, on this basis, to understand Schein’s assertion that the process consultant need only be “an expert in how to diagnose and how to develop a helping relationship” and need not be “an expert on production, marketing, finance, and the like” (1969: 7).

This fundamental separation between universally-applicable process-knowledge and industry-specific content-knowledge, between the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation and technical expertise in a specific operational area, is not limited to Schein's work (although it is developed here in an exemplary form). It is also found elsewhere in the practitioner literature. Block (2000: 183), for example, suggests that interpersonal processes in a client organization are as important as technical content:

Sometimes the management issues are even more interesting than the technical issues. But there is a part of us...that does not want to get into the 'personalities' or 'politics' or 'relationships'. It is a mistake to avoid these areas...Technical/business problems almost always have accompanying management problems that affect how the technical/business problem gets resolved.

Block says, here, that the conventional content-based consultant might be reluctant to pay as much attention to interpersonal processes (or 'management issues') as they do to technical content in the client organization. It would be wrong, however, to focus on technical problems at the expense of relational problems, since the former are affected to a large extent by the latter. The consultant, while tempted to concentrate on formal aspects of the client organization (content), must not therefore neglect its more informal aspects (process). In this way, Block concurs with Schein by emphasizing the necessity of dealing collaboratively with relational problems as much as technical problems, even if he does not explicitly prioritize one over the other.

Kubr, et al. (2002: 41) also draw attention to the model of process consultation. They note that some

consultants emphasize that their main strength and usefulness to clients lie not in a detailed knowledge of a specific technical area or system, but in their ability to share with the client their effective work method – for diagnosing and resolving organizational problems, devising action programmes for organizational change and performance improvement, introducing and improving knowledge management systems, and making sure that such programmes and systems are implemented. Their service is defined neither by the area of intervention (e.g. marketing) nor by the problem to be tackled (e.g. high production or distribution costs), but by the consulting approach or method used.

While we might wonder whether ‘knowledge management systems’ really fall under the remit of management consultancy process-knowledge, there is little doubt that Kubr, et al. are outlining here the ‘pure form’ of management consultancy that Schein describes in *Process Consultation*. What is important is not so much the ‘area of intervention’, which involves the transference of content-knowledge, but the ‘consulting approach or method’, which involves the transference of process-knowledge (see also Margerison, 2001: 9; Mulligan and Barber, 2001: 101).

The model of process consultation is able to function in the absence of technical expertise in a specific operational area because it enables the transfer of universally-

applicable process-knowledge (instead of industry-specific content-knowledge) to the client organization. The following section will reflect on the paradoxical implications of process consultation by examining what happens when managers are encouraged to become ‘their own consultants’ in relation to their ‘clients’.

Manager as Consultant

The process consultant, then, must not only *possess* process-knowledge about how to manage their relation with the client during the various phases of the consultancy engagement; they must also seek to *transfer* this process-knowledge as content-knowledge to the client. This means that the management consultancy knowledge is said to be useful not simply for the management consultant in dealing with their client, but also for the manager in dealing with their subordinates.

Schein belatedly recognizes the usefulness of process-knowledge for managers in the second volume of *Process Consultation*, published in 1987.¹⁸ Its subtitle – ‘Lessons for Managers and Consultants’ – makes explicit what remained more or less implicit in the first volume of *Process Consultation*, namely, that the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation can be transferred to, and applied by, managers in the client organization. In the preface, Schein discusses the genesis of the second volume:

¹⁸ Schein’s original 1969 book was republished in 1988 under the title *Process Consultation, Volume I: Its Role in Organizational Development*. A third volume – *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*, which repeats much of the same material contained in the two previous volumes of *Process Consultation* – was published in 1998.

My original intention had been simply to revise the 1969 book. However, as I began to write, I realized that most of what I was saying was an elaboration and that the new ideas were intended for a much different audience. Whereas my original book was a primer for consultants, the present book is much more a new approach for experienced consultants and a prescription for effective management...Line managers often have to function as process consultants vis-à-vis their subordinates...I believe that all managers can become more effective if they adopt some of the concepts of process consultation and learn some of the skills associated with that concept. (1987: vii-viii)

While Schein had initially sought only to amend the first volume of *Process Consultation*, he admits that the second volume extends beyond that work. He came to realize that the model of process consultation applies no less to managers than it does to consultants. Accordingly, the second volume of *Process Consultation* is addressed to the former as well as the latter. He says that managers can (or rather, 'have to') function as process consultants when dealing with their subordinates. Managers can become better at managing, then, if they also possess management consultancy process-knowledge.

But how do managers function as consultants? Schein admits that managers and consultants appear, on the surface, to differ considerably. Managers, on the one hand, exercise formal authority over their subordinates and remain inside their organization. Consultants, on the other hand, do not exercise formal authority over their clients and, on the whole, remain outside the client organization (1987: 5). Beyond these superficial

differences, however, there are certain shared characteristics that belong equally to managers and consultants. Schein explains: “People who are perceived by their colleagues, bosses, and subordinates to be *effective* managers and *effective* consultants have in common that, when they relate to others whom they are trying to influence, they both take the stance of trying to *help*” (1987: 6; emphasis in original). Managers and consultants both attempt to help the people with whom they are dealing, whether these people are clients or subordinates. This is by no means a vague or ambiguous concept of ‘help’ but, in fact, a very clear and well-defined one. It refers to the interpersonal relations that consultants establish and maintain with their client and the interpersonal relations that managers establish and maintain with their subordinates (1987: 6-8).¹⁹ Since such ‘help’ is an integral part of management work as much as management consultancy work, managers can be said already to act as consultants in their own organization. It is not a case, for Schein, of imposing process-knowledge on managers willy-nilly, but of drawing attention to the similarities between managers and consultants in order to improve the effectiveness of both. Schein writes:

Managers reading this book may find at first that some of the ideas seem less applicable to them, but the more they think about the managerial role, the more they will come to recognize how much of their own behaviour resembles that of consultants, and therefore, how much they might increase their own

¹⁹ In *Process Consultation Revisited*, Schein (1998: 1-2) expands this concept of ‘help’ even further so that “[t]he ability to be an effective helper also applies to spouses, friends, managers vis-à-vis their superiors, subordinates, and peers, parents vis-à-vis their own parents and children, and teachers vis-à-vis their students”. For the purposes of this chapter, we will restrict ourselves to examining the concept of ‘help’ insofar as it applies to consultants and managers, which is Schein’s primary focus in the second volume of *Process Consultation*.

effectiveness if they learned some of the philosophies, concepts, and skills that consultants, especially process consultants, use. (1987: 9)

Schein seeks to reassure sceptical managers, here, about the feasibility and value of applying process-knowledge in their own organization. While it might seem, at first, counterintuitive to think of the managerial role as a management consultancy role, Schein insists that their basic task – ‘helping’ – is the same. Management consultancy process-knowledge, therefore, can be applied by managers as well as consultants.

Schein elaborates on this assertion by describing, once again, three models of management consultancy; or, more accurately, two models of helping that cannot strictly be called ‘management consultancy’ and one model of helping that is management consultancy in its ‘pure form’. These are the purchase model (which he now calls the ‘purchase of information or expertise model’ or, more simply, the ‘expert model’), the doctor-patient model, and the model of process consultation (1987: 8; see also 22-34). This time around, Schein argues that the model of process consultation can be applied, and indeed *should* be applied, by managers as well as consultants: “My argument is that the key to effective helping, both for the manager and the consultant, is the ability to be a process consultant and not to succumb to the temptations of being the expert or the doctor except where that is appropriate” (1987: 8). But just as the purchase model and the doctor-patient model cannot strictly be called ‘management consultancy’, it is rarely ever appropriate for the manager to adopt either of these two models:

When should a manager be an expert, a doctor, or a process consultant? The formal authority of a manager makes it easy for him to fall into the expert or doctor role, especially when help is being sought by a subordinate. But if the goals of the manager are to teach the subordinate problem-solving skills and to ensure that the solutions developed will be the right ones and will be implemented correctly, then being a consultant is by far the preferable way to begin. (Schein, 1987: 35)

A manager should not, then, act as an expert or a doctor in relation to their subordinates; rather, they must act as a consultant in order to ensure effective diagnosis of organizational problems and successful implementation of organizational solutions, both structural and interpersonal. Put simply, a good manager is one who has the ability to be a good consultant. For Schein, management work and management consultancy work are not simply analogous; the latter is, in fact, an exemplary model of the former.

This serves, in effect, to change the way we understand the managerial role. If a good manager is, by definition, a good consultant, this means that managers must abide by the same prescriptive guidelines for establishing and maintaining a 'helping relation' that consultants also follow. Such collaboration, as we saw in the previous chapter, involves joint problem diagnosis, joint solution formulation, and joint solution implementation, which provides the basis for consultants to minimize client resistance to organizational change. Correlatively, by applying management consultancy process-knowledge in their own organization, managers are now expected to involve their subordinates in joint problem diagnosis, joint solution formulation, and joint solution

implementation; moreover, this provides the basis for managers to minimize staff resistance to organizational change. In this way, the traditional manager-subordinate relation is transformed into an entirely different one: the ‘consultant-client relation’. The model of process consultation, in other words, seeks to replace the relational component of *management* with the relational component of *management consultancy*. Schein succeeds, therefore, in making management consultancy knowledge – those prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation – indispensable not only for consultants but also for managers.

We can see the impact of Schein’s work on some of the more recent textbooks for practitioners. For Kubr, et al. (2002: 3), “a manager can also act as a consultant if he or she gives advice and help to a fellow manager, or even to subordinates rather than directing and issuing orders to them”. This point is also made by Margerison (2001: 4), who suggests that, like consultants, “line managers also spend a good deal of time advising and using consulting skills”. Margerison acknowledges that this involves a shift in the way we understand management consultancy:

The word ‘consultation’ has always implied giving advice... Today, the concept of consultation and consultancy is changing rapidly. It is a set of activities designed to improve things. This can be and is done by managers as well as consultants. The role of consultancy is now multi-faceted. It now involves relationships between manager and subordinate just as much as it involves relationships between clients and consultants. (2001: 10)

Margerison says, here, that the idea of management consultancy has undergone a significant change in recent years. Whereas it once referred solely to forms of business counsel, management consultancy is now about establishing and maintaining relationships in organizations, whether between consultants and their clients or between managers and their subordinates. While this certainly implies a shift in how we understand management consultancy, it also involves a shift in how we understand management itself. It no longer suffices for managers to apply *management knowledge*; managers must now also apply *management consultancy knowledge*. Margerison directly echoes Schein on this point: “An effective manager is increasingly an effective consultant” (2001: 104).

Along similar lines, Markham (1997: xiii) writes that “consultancy skills are increasingly seen as an important element of every business person’s toolkit”. It is not only consultants, then, who are engaged in management consultancy: “nowadays, staff functions have increasingly to engage with their colleagues in a consultancy fashion. Competence in consultancy skills is vital to all” (1997: 1). Such ‘consultancy skills’ must be applied not only by consultants in dealing with clients, but also by managers in dealing with subordinates. This approach to management consultancy is even more pronounced in Markham’s (2001) edited collection *How to Be Your Own Management Consultant*. The very title of this book demonstrates, in the clearest possible terms, that management consultancy process-knowledge has now become available, indeed indispensable, to managers. It is not enough for managers simply to hire consultants; managers must now actually function *as* consultants in their own organizations.

The peculiarity of this situation cannot be overstated. On the one hand, the model of process consultation involves nothing else apart from process-knowledge, which means that the relational component of management consultancy is completely detached from its technical component. From this perspective, the model of process consultation is the purest form of management consultancy since it contains no knowledge that is external to its own system. On the other hand, process consultation involves the transference of this process-knowledge to managers in client organizations, which means that the relational component of management consultancy effectively replaces management's own relational component. From this perspective, the model of process consultation seems to undermine that which characterizes management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy since it succeeds in turning management consultancy knowledge into a form of management knowledge. This, then, is the paradoxical outcome of the model of process consultation.

While this is certainly a paradox, it is by no means an unproductive one.²⁰ As we will examine in more detail in the following chapter, the model of process consultation enables management consultants to raise their professional status (since management consultancy knowledge becomes more necessary for managers) at the same time as it serves to put it at risk (since management consultancy knowledge becomes a part of management knowledge). In other words, the paradox of management consultancy allows management consultants to advance their own collective mobility project even as it threatens to undermine the very basis for such a project in the first place.

²⁰ As Whittle (2006: 424) puts it, albeit in a slightly different context to ours, "paradoxes are less a problem to be resolved as resources through which change agents can understand, account for and affect organizational change".

Conclusion

In this chapter, we described how diverging theories are constructed in the same field of knowledge. Whereas the conventional model of management consultancy involves both content-knowledge (i.e. technical expertise in a specific operational area) in addition to process-knowledge (i.e. the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation), Schein's model of process consultation is a 'pure form' of management consultancy, stripped of all technical expertise; it thus draws entirely on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We said this was possible because the process consultant seeks to transfer this process-knowledge into the client organization, enabling managers to become 'their own consultants' in their own organization in order to minimize staff resistance to organizational change.

Towards the end of chapter 2, we said that our investigation into management consultancy would be guided by three questions, which followed on from a discussion of Armstrong's analysis of management. First, have management consultants, like managers, also been able to detach their work from the operational tasks of productive labour? Second, have management consultants also been able to position themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies? Third, have management consultants also been able to secure their collective interests as a professional group? The previous chapter demonstrated that management consultancy involves a separation between a technical component (the *non-consultancy* aspect of consultants' work, i.e. industry-specific content-knowledge) and a relational component (the *properly consultancy* aspect of consultant's work, i.e. universally-applicable process-knowledge). This resulted in a clearer distinction between the productive and the unproductive aspects of

management consultancy labour. The present chapter showed, moreover, that process consultation can be divorced *entirely* from productive labour and come to be situated *exclusively* on the level of unproductive labour. This means that the labour of conventional content-based consultants will still be productive whereas the labour of process consultants will be almost entirely unproductive. In answer to the first question, then, we can say that management consultants – to the extent that they apply the model of process consultation – have been able to detach their work from the operational tasks of productive labour. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent management consultants have been able to position themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies and whether they have, like managers, thus been able to secure their collective interests as a professional group. That will be the task of the following chapter, to which we now turn.

Chapter 5

Profession of Management Consultancy

Introduction

This chapter describes the institutional effects of the practitioner literature for management consultants. We are concerned, in other words, with the relation between knowledge and power. We will show that management consultants have, over the years, made a sustained attempt to professionalize on the basis of a common body of knowledge, which takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. Turning once again to the work of Armstrong, we will see that this process-knowledge allows management consultants to gain access to the top managerial levels in large-scale capitalist organizations, thus serving to secure their collective interests as a professional group. But, as we suggested towards the end of the previous chapter, this is by no means a straightforward matter: while process-knowledge enables management consultants to situate themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies, it also serves, at one and the same time, to frustrate their attempt to occupy the key position of executive control in a decisive way. It will be

argued, on this basis, that the collective mobility project of management consultants is put in jeopardy by the very same factor that guarantees its success.

Before we can undertake this task, we first need to show that management consultancy is, in fact, a profession in its own right. This is necessary because, unlike other, more established professions – such as medicine, law, and even accountancy – it is disputed whether management consultancy can lay claim to a similarly professional status. Put simply, management consultancy does not seem to fulfil the formal criteria usually required by occupations hoping to become fully recognized professions, such as a stable knowledge base, educational syllabi, entry examinations, a system of accreditation, a period of training or apprenticeship, a code of ethical conduct, and a regulatory body (Clark, 1995: 29). This is why Greiner and Metzger call management consultancy an ‘emerging profession’, noting that “it clearly does not yet meet all the standards common to traditional professions” (Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 14). More recently, a number of commentators in the practitioner literature have remarked that, despite the evident success in extending and formalizing its knowledge base, there is still considerable debate as to whether management consultancy is a set of eclectic commercial activities or a coherent profession (Barratt, 2003: 114; De Sonnaville, 2003: 123-4; Kubr, et al., 2002: 130-1; Rassam, 2001a: 31-2).

Some academic commentators, as a result of this confusion and uncertainty about management consultancy’s professional status, propose to characterize the work of management consultants in an altogether different way. Most notably, Alvesson (1993) suggests replacing the term ‘professional’ with ‘knowledge-intensive’ to describe not

only management consultancy but also other occupations such as accountancy, law, and advertising. He writes:

It does not seem reasonable to see law and accounting firms – the most commonly recognized professional companies – as distinct from architectural, management or computer consultancy firms or advertising agencies in terms of most organizational aspects. Of course, we can use the concept of a professional organization more widely than a traditional or strict definition of a profession allows...but it may be a good idea to bypass the idea of the profession – even broadly defined – altogether and direct attention to something else, perhaps ‘knowledge-intensive’ work and firms. (1993: 998)

The term ‘profession’, for Alvesson, is not a useful one for discussing occupations like consultancy, accountancy, law, or advertising because it relies on an imprecise and often arbitrary demarcation between a professional and a non-professional (1993: 998). Moreover, the idea of management consultancy as a profession is not even one that is wholeheartedly supported by management consultants themselves, since professionalism can serve as a constraint on their work as much as a resource for furthering their interests (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002: 243). Instead of speaking about professions, then, we should use the concept of ‘knowledge-intensive firms, organizations, and workers’ (KIFOWs). This, Alvesson suggests, will allow us to focus on the similarities between consultancy, accountancy, law, and advertising, rather than on their differences. Such a view, it should be said, is endorsed elsewhere in the academic literature on management consultancy and related types of KIFOWs (see e.g.

Empson, 2001; Fincham, 2006; Løwendahl, Revang, and Fosstenløyken, 2001; Morris and Empson, 1998; Robertson, Scarbrough, and Swan, 2003; Robertson and Swan, 2003; Starbuck, 1992; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003).

I want to suggest, however, that we should not relinquish so easily the term ‘profession’ in relation to these occupations. It remains the case that management consultants (not to mention accountants and lawyers) have, over the years, attempted to establish a codified body of knowledge, entry examinations, training and apprenticeship, a code of ethical conduct, and regulatory bodies. This means that professionalization is still an ongoing concern for such occupations, even if the precise definition of a ‘profession’ is open to some contestation. By grouping together management consultancy, accountancy, law, advertising, and information technology under the banner of KIFOWs, we risk overlooking what is specific about each of these occupations in terms of their respective attempts to professionalize and, moreover, the way they have engaged in interprofessional competition with one another.

With this in mind, the following section will chart the development of management consultancy as a profession, paying particular attention to the emergence of trade associations and professional institutes for management consultants in the context of the UK. This will serve to clarify the nature and extent of management consultancy’s professional status. We will then be in a position to see how management consultants are able to advance their own ‘collective mobility project’ in relation to other organizational professions, most notably accountancy.

Profession of Management Consultancy

Although firms had been operating under the umbrella term ‘management consultancy’ in the UK from at least the 1920s, it was only after the Second World War that efforts were made to formalize management consultancy as a profession in its own right.²¹ This properly began in 1948 when the British Institute of Management (BIM), established the previous year to deal with matters of industrial efficiency on a national level, conducted a report on the recommendation of the Board of Trade into the use of management consultants. It was concluded that a ‘Register of Management and Industrial Consultants’ should be drawn up to provide a directory for prospective clients to select an appropriate and ‘approved’ consultancy firm or individual for their needs (Ferguson, 2002: 125; Hyman, 1961: 19; Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 452-3). To qualify for inclusion on the Register, firms and individuals had to demonstrate to the Consultants’ Registration Committee that they “had a good reputation, a satisfactory record of service to clients, maintained approved standards of professional conduct, possess qualifications of general and technical education and had had adequate executive experience in the appropriate field” (Hyman, 1961: 21). The aim, here, was to raise the status of management consultancy work through a regulatory system that sought to guarantee the quality of services to potential clients (Kipping and Saint-

²¹ We follow here Abbott’s (1988: 8) “very loose definition” of professions as “exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases”. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us focus on interprofessional competition in terms of the control of abstract knowledge, rather than on the professionalization of occupational groups that are assumed to be isolated from one another (i.e. the trait-based approach). As Abbott writes, “abstraction is the quality that sets interprofessional competition apart from competition among occupations in general. Any occupation can obtain licensure (e.g. beauticians) or develop an ethics code (e.g. real estate). But only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems...Abstraction enables survival in the competitive system of professions” (1988: 8-9). We will see, later in this chapter, how management consultants are able to use their own abstract knowledge system to compete with other professional groups.

Martin, 2005: 452-3; Tatham, 1964: 47). In addition to laying out these broad criteria for membership, the Committee also specified the range of activities that firms and individuals were able to undertake in client organizations. As we saw in chapter 2, this functional scope was, at the time, mostly restricted to industrial engineering aspects of management (such as time and motion study, production control, and manufacturing method and process development). It would, however, soon broaden out to encompass other areas of managerial concern (Hyman, 1961: 20; 27). The Register is significant because it marked one of the first attempts, in the British context, to group together diverse management consultancy firms and individuals under the single rubric of an organized profession (even if this was, at the time, rather confusingly called ‘Management and Industrial Consultancy’).

Even at this very early stage of management consultancy’s development as a profession, we can already begin to see its conflicts with other professions, notably accountancy. In particular, both the Institute of Chartered Accountants and the Institute of Cost and Works Accountants took issue with the inclusion of some of their members on the Register of Management and Industrial Consultants. As a result of discussions with these professional associations, the BIM decided to disallow accountants from becoming members of the Register (Hyman, 1961: 25; Tatham, 1964: 48-9). Such conflict between management consultancy and accountancy, it should be said, could not be settled quite so easily and would soon become a recurring flashpoint for both professions over the years.

While the Register grouped together a variety of firms and individuals under a single rubric, it was never intended to be a fully-fledged professional association. Indeed, the distribution of its members list was strictly limited to potential clients and was released to them only on special request to the BIM (Tatham, 1964: 47). Consequently, four of the largest consultancy firms in the UK at the time – Associated Industrial Consultants, Personnel Administration, Production Engineering, and Urwick, Orr & Partners (collectively known as the ‘Big Four’) – broke away from the BIM in 1956 to form their own industry body, the Management Consultants Association (MCA, now called the Management Consultancies Association). Although these firms remained members of the Register, the formation of the MCA allowed them to pursue the professionalization of management consultancy in a more explicit way. The MCA was founded by these firms, according to Hyman (1961: 29), with three aims in mind: “firstly, to develop co-operation between themselves in order to improve the services they render; secondly, to promote understanding of these services and to assist those who require information about them; and thirdly, to improve and develop the techniques available to management”. The scope of the MCA’s agenda, then, was much broader than that of the Register and, for the first time in the UK, management consultants (or at least, the largest management consultancy firms) were able to lobby for professional recognition through an industry body (Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 453; Tisdall, 1982: 80). Membership to the association, however, was granted only to firms with more than five full-time consultants on their payrolls, which effectively precluded the large number of sole practitioners in the UK from joining the MCA’s ranks (Tatham, 1964: 53). As a result, the MCA retained the character of a trade association rather than a professional institute, thus seeming to protect the interests of a

few large firms instead of practitioners as a whole (Ferguson, 2002: 125-6; Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 454; Lynch, 2003: 80; Tatham, 1964: 51; Tisdall, 1982: 80). Such an impression was no doubt encouraged by the fact that the membership of the MCA was slow to grow in its early years, increasingly from its original four founding members in 1956 to eleven members in 1965, eighteen members a year later, and twenty-five members in 1973 (Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 454). The figure now stands at sixty-four (Management Consultancies' Association, 2008).

It was not until 1962 that the Institute of Management Consultants (IMC), which admitted sole practitioners, was founded on the coat-tails of the MCA. While this might seem, in retrospect, an inevitable occurrence given the apparent protectionism of the MCA, the circumstances surrounding the IMC's formation bear testament to the ongoing professional conflict between management consultancy and accountancy. Indeed, members of the MCA decided to form the IMC after they became aware of a proposal, submitted by two accountants in 1961, to establish such a professional institute themselves (Tisdall, 1982: 80-1). It was thought, by the MCA's general secretary, to be 'embarrassing' for such an institute to be founded independently of the MCA itself and, more seriously, for it to gain the possible support of the Institute of Chartered Accountants (Tisdall, 1982: 81; see also Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 454). As a response to this perceived risk, the MCA decided, in the early 1960s, to form the IMC as an independent professional association for individual management consultants. This pre-emptive move by the MCA against the Institute of Chartered Accountants is significant because it shows us that professional associations play a key

strategic role in jurisdictional disputes between the organizational professions, in this case, management consultancy and accountancy.

The establishment of the IMC, having been granted certification under the Companies Act, signalled the first steps towards full professional recognition for management consultants. The Institute was not a trade association for the largest consultancy firms, like the MCA; it was, on the contrary, a professional institute for individual practitioners based on the same model as medicine, law, engineering, and accountancy. As a result, membership of the IMC greatly surpassed that of the MCA. By 1964, it had over 500 members; three years later, this figure had doubled (Tisdall, 1982: 87-8). Today, membership of the Institute stands at over 7,000 (Institute of Business Consulting, 2008).

An early memorandum that outlined the conditions for gaining professional status, drawn up by members of the IMC steering committee, stipulated four requirements: a body of knowledge, a period of formal training, qualifying examinations, and an ethical code of conduct (Tisdall, 1982: 83). Some headway was made towards attaining these requirements in the first few decades of the IMC's existence. The introduction of qualifying examinations, in particular, was seen as an urgent task for the IMC. Tisdall (1982: 88) explains:

A qualifying examination procedure had been identified as a prerequisite of the Institute from its inception. It was seen not only as desirable in its own right, but also as an essential step towards obtaining a Royal Charter which, in turn, was

seen by some as the most effective method of winning official recognition of professional status.

The introduction of qualifying examinations would mean that access to the Institute could be determined by measurable standards and that membership could be restricted to qualified professionals. The attempt to implement qualifying examinations, however, has presented a number of problems to the IMC. Not least among these difficulties is the fact that, as we saw in chapter 2, the functional scope of management consultancy covers such a wide range of operational areas; moreover, this content-knowledge is often shared by managers in the client organization (Tisdall, 1982: 88). In short, examinations cannot be standardized because each candidate specializes in a different field of expertise, such as strategy, marketing, human resources, finance, IT, etc.

This provides us with an important clue as to why it was so necessary for management consultants to develop their own specific body of knowledge, which takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. Since this process-knowledge is said to belong exclusively to management consultants (leaving aside, for the moment, the paradoxes we found in the work of Schein in the previous chapter), it is thus able to serve as an appropriate knowledge base on which to establish qualifying examinations. This means that process-knowledge has an invaluable role to play in the attempts to professionalize management consultancy, to the extent that it allows management consultants to demarcate a professional jurisdiction over which they alone can lay proprietary claim and exercise exclusive control. Such examinations, following

unsuccessful attempts in the 1970s, were eventually established in 1980 and continue to this day (Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005: 454; Tisdall, 1982: 89-90)

The introduction of qualifying examinations, in addition to other criteria such as client references and several years of consulting experience, provides a basis on which a general system of accreditation and licensing for management consultants can be established (Kubr, et al., 2002: 143-5). Although this remains a voluntary procedure, it is nonetheless significant that certain professional benchmarks have now been adopted not only in the UK but also elsewhere in Europe and beyond. Most notably, the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI), affiliated with some forty-five professional associations across the world, recently developed a standardized model of certification for management consultants. This model allows practitioners to adopt the internationally-recognized title 'Certified Management Consultant' (CMC), provided that they have demonstrated their proficiency, through a written examination, in both 'functionalist specialist expertise' (content-knowledge) and 'consulting skills' (process-knowledge) (Barker and Curnow, 2003: 70; see also Barratt, 2003: 119[n4]; Kubr, et al., 2002: 143-5; Lynch, 2003: 83; Rassam, 2001a: 58).²² The CMC qualification serves, on a superficial level, to reassure clients about management consultants' competencies and to guarantee that their conduct is governed by a code of ethics (Kubr, et al., 2002: 143; Woodward and Williams, 2003: 101). The

²² In 2002, the IMC developed an additional framework that further emphasized the need for both content-knowledge and process-knowledge to form a part of consultants' professional qualification. The 'Management Consultancy Competence Framework' (MCCF), which supplements the CMC qualification, breaks down into three sections: 'capability and knowledge' (focusing on specific areas of technical expertise), 'professional behaviours' (dealing with general ethical conduct), and 'consulting competence' (concentrating on managing the relationship with, and delivering expertise to, the client) (see Barker and Curnow, 2003: 71-2).

ultimate aim, however, is for accredited practitioners to claim a legal right over the title ‘Certified Management Consultant’ in much the same way as ‘Chartered Accountant’ is protected under law (Tisdall, 1982: 91; see also Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 16; Kubr, et al., 2002: 145). Irrespective of whether or not this is ever likely to be achieved in the UK, it remains the case that the procedure for attaining the CMC qualification, particularly in terms of assessing the consultant’s process-knowledge in the written examination, signals an important step in management consultants’ ability to assert their own unique professional identity.

We have provided an overview, in this section, of the development of professional associations for management consultants in the context of the UK. Although it is disputed whether or not management consultants can lay legitimate claim to the familiar hallmarks of established professions, the *attempt* has nonetheless been made, over the last half-century, to establish management consultancy as a profession in its own right. Moreover, we have seen that this attempt to gain full professional recognition is inextricable from the development of a common body of knowledge for management consultants based on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. While we have focused on developments in the UK, it should be recalled that, in addition to the IMC (or the Institute of Business Consulting, as it was renamed in 2007), there are countless other institutes elsewhere in Europe and beyond. These include, most prominently, the Association of Management Consulting Firms (AMCF) based in the US, the European Federation of Management Consultancies Association (FEACO), and the All-Japan Federation of Management Organizations (ZEN-NOH-REN), as well as the previously mentioned International

Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI) (Kubr, et al., 2002: 141). The proliferation of these institutes demonstrates that, while the professionalization of management consultancy remains a contentious matter, it is still an ongoing concern for practitioners across the world. We can be left in little doubt that management consultants constitute a distinct professional group, even if management consultancy does not quite live up to the formal standards that characterize other organizational professions such as engineering and accountancy.

We will now see how engineers, accountants, and other professional groups have sought to secure their own collective interests before we turn, finally, to the case of management consultants.

Collective Mobility Projects

In chapter 2, we showed that the specific technical component of management was detached from, and made secondary to, the more general relational component of management. This meant that trained engineers were displaced from the senior executive positions they had once inhabited. We said that this resulted in the development of management as a profession in its own right, based on an abstract, universal set of skills that is detached from any specific operational area. This is certainly true. But, as Armstrong tells us elsewhere (1984; 1985; 1987b; 1988; 1993; Armstrong and Jones, 1992), the divorce of the managerial control function from technical expertise also means that other professional groups, such as accountants, personnel specialists, and IT systems analysts, now seek to gain access to the senior

executive positions in organizations. This is what Armstrong, following Larson (1977), calls the advancement of collective mobility projects by the organizational professions.²³

For Larson, the idea of a ‘collective mobility project’ relates, in the most general terms, to the attempt by members of a specific occupation to increase their social and economic status through the nature of their work. Although this will result in individual benefits, such as personal prestige and higher wages, a mobility project is collective because it can be achieved only through a combined organizational endeavour, such as the efforts of professional associations, qualifying institutions, and other ‘gatekeepers’ of professional knowledge (1977: 67). Central to collective mobility projects, Larson explains, is that “the upgrading of an occupation into a profession, or the upgrading of a profession in terms of respectability and social credit, implies the articulation of principles of inclusion and exclusion” (1977: 74). This means that ‘lay-people’ are barred from becoming members of a profession, and thus prevented from tendering certain professional services on the market, since they lack the requisite education and training. Collective mobility projects are therefore characterized by a monopolizing tendency, both in terms of control over access to the profession (and, by consequence, restriction to the social and economic status it confers on its members) and control over its common body of knowledge (1977: xvii).

²³ Armstrong uses the term ‘profession’ to refer to “specialisms within the global function of capital” (1985: 132; see also 1984: 99), namely, the set of functions in contemporary capitalism that were previously performed by the individual capitalist. While he admits that “[s]uch a usage calls for some explanation since professionalism has traditionally been thought of as in some degree antipathetic to the values of business organizations” (1985: 132-3; see also 1984: 99), it can be said that the concept of ‘profession’ in Armstrong’s work broadly corresponds to Abbott’s own “very loose definition” (even if they disagree about the actual *function* of professional knowledge) (see Armstrong, 1993: 2-4).

While Larson is concerned with professions in general, Armstrong focuses more specifically on the organizational professions, namely, engineering, accountancy, personnel management, as well as general management, marketing, and IT. These professions are able to advance their own collective mobility projects, Armstrong argues, by gaining access to the top managerial levels or “the key positions of command” where overall strategic decisions are made in capitalist organizations (1984: 100; 1985: 133). If a professional group is successfully able to assert its right and ability to occupy this position, this will serve simultaneously to raise the status of the entire profession over and above its competitors and to ensure the promotion of its members to senior executive levels within organizational hierarchies (1984: 100; 1985: 133). This is not to say, of course, that all members of a specific profession will gain access to senior executive levels; the key positions of command will generally be limited to the elite members of the profession while more routine, standardized tasks will be delegated to its junior members (1984: 101; 1985: 134).

But the question remains: how are the organizational professions (or at least their elite members) able to gain access to top managerial levels in capitalist organizations in the first place? According to Armstrong, the key positions of command can be occupied by a professional group in three interlinked ways: “identifying a key problem confronting capital (which need not necessarily be that of controlling labour), ideologically stressing the inadequacy of existing methods of coping with it (which may be associated with competing professions), and developing a solution based on the techniques of the profession” (1985: 133; see also 1984: 100). This means that a professional group can seek to gain access to senior executives positions, and thus

advance its collective mobility project, by using a part of its common body of knowledge to provide a solution to one of the critical problems facing capitalist organizations (such as the extraction, realization, or allocation of surplus value). At the same time, a professional group will emphasize the insufficiency of those techniques possessed by rival groups for dealing with such problems.

One of the most pre-eminent examples, widely discussed in the ‘labour process theory’ literature, is the case of engineering (see e.g. Braverman, 1974; Friedman, 1977; Gospel and Littler, 1983; Littler, 1982). As we saw in chapter 2, principles of scientific management, which took their cue from mechanical engineering design, were put forward by engineers as the most effective means of controlling the labour process. By providing a framework for analyzing and altering factory workers’ physical movements to achieve maximum efficiency in the production process, engineers were thus able to identify and resolve one of the key problems confronting capital (i.e. the extraction of surplus value) whilst simultaneously undermining existing forms of ‘non-scientific’ management. Armstrong explains:

[A]t the same time as scientific management offered techniques for, and an ideological justification of, the control of labour by capital, it derived those techniques from a particular analysis of the management task – an engineering analysis – and made the claim that an application of those techniques called for the installation of a particular group – engineers – at the apex of the developing differentiation within the ‘global function of capital’. (1985: 131-2)

Underlying the principles of scientific management, as we previously said, is the claim that engineers are inherently more suited to the task of managing capitalist organizations than any other professional group. This tells us that engineers were able to occupy the key positions of command on the basis of a part of their common body of knowledge.

We also saw in chapter 2 that engineers were displaced from these senior executive positions they had once inhabited. One of the difficulties they encountered, Armstrong says, was the fact that their knowledge (or at least that part concerned with subordinating labour to capital) was not sufficiently indeterminate for them to retain a monopoly over it. A body of knowledge must certainly be cogent enough for it to be transferred to members of the profession; but it cannot be too lucid since this would open up the possibility of a control strategy becoming detached from the professional group to which it belongs, thus undermining its collective mobility project. Each professional group, then, must maintain a certain inscrutability around its specialized techniques to ensure that its particular control strategy is rendered inaccessible to other, competing professional groups (1984: 99; 101; 1985: 132; 134; see also Larson, 1977: 31-2; 41). The failure by engineers to preserve a satisfactory degree of indeterminacy around their common body of knowledge – in particular, the principles of scientific management – explains, in part, the relative demise of their collective mobility project in the early twentieth century.

In the place of engineers, other professional groups, such as ‘general managers’, accountants, personnel specialists, and IT systems analysts, now compete to gain access

to the top managerial levels in organizations. We will recall that the separation of the technical component and the relational component of management means that the properly managerial aspect of managers' work now comes to be understood as an abstract, universal set of skills that is concerned with the general tasks of planning, coordinating, and controlling. This becomes most pronounced at senior executive levels in organizations: here, management is wholly identified with the function of agenda-setting and decision-making in the broadest organizational sense, completely disconnected from technical expertise. By developing control strategies on the basis of their specialized techniques, different professional groups have been able – with varying degrees of success – to assert their right and ability to occupy this key position of command in capitalist organizations. Such control strategies are concerned with the overall administration of capitalist enterprises (unproductive labour) rather than with the specific manufacture of goods or services (productive labour). Understood in this way, each organizational profession, on the basis of a part of its common body of knowledge, seeks to make itself synonymous with 'management' in its ideal form.

The case of accountancy, for Armstrong, is exemplary in this respect. Indeed, one of Armstrong's main tasks is to explain "[t]he comparative ascendancy of accountants (broadly defined) in management hierarchies" (1985: 129) and thus understand accountancy's "heavy and increasing representation at the key decision-making levels within the global function of capital" (1985: 134). The successful attempt by trained accountants to advance their collective mobility project contrasts with the relatively low professional status accorded to their eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors, who performed basic bookkeeping activities for early industrialists. Accountants were

eventually able to enhance their professional status as the need to monitor operations, control resources, and contain costs became ever-more pressing during the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s (1984: 102-3; 1985: 135). Such crises prompted accountants to provide a solution to this key problem facing capital on the basis of a part of their common body of knowledge. Armstrong illustrates this point by describing General Motors' "pioneering and prototypical" programme of corporate restructuring, based on principles of management accounting, under Alfred P. Sloan:

[T]his problem of allocation was solved by creating a multi-divisional structure, co-ordinated and controlled by a general office of financial and advisory staff who developed, from the original techniques for controlling inventories, new statistical techniques for more generally controlling, co-ordinating and evaluating the performance of operating divisions (and consequently of their managers). Senior managers were thus divorced from day-to-day operations and...they became financial rather than operational or technical decision-makers. (1985: 136; see also 1984: 103)

Although accountants were already present in management hierarchies prior to the depression, as a result of audit requirements that were imposed on firms by the state, the development of multidivisional corporate structures in the 1920s and 1930s enabled accountants to claim that they were the professional group most suited to the task of managing capitalist organizations. Since overall decisions of allocation were now imperative to the functioning of large firms, this meant that financial specialists could ascend to the senior executive levels in management hierarchies at the expense of

operational experts (1984: 103-4; 1985: 136).²⁴ It should be pointed out that while the control strategies of accountants, unlike those of engineers, do not actively intervene in the production process, they nonetheless serve to control labour in other, more indirect ways. For example, middle managers can be disciplined more effectively if budget allocation is tied to the financial performance of their department, since this will provide a compelling incentive for them to maximize the efficiency of their staff (1984: 105; 1985: 137). By implementing such a system of control, accountants were thus able to occupy the key positions of command on the basis of a part of their common body of knowledge. It should be added that some of these specialized techniques, such as cost accounting, were originally developed by early industrial engineers, which tells us something about engineering's failure to preserve enough indeterminacy around its own knowledge base for them to retain a monopoly over it (1984: 103; 1985: 136).²⁵

Other professional groups, in addition to accountants, have also attempted to advance their collective mobility project by seeking to gain access to top managerial levels. Personnel specialists, for example, have sought to ascend organizational hierarchies by subordinating 'labour efficiency' to 'worker welfare', thus highlighting the inadequacy of operational solutions to surplus value extraction at the same time as establishing control strategies on the basis of their own 'human relations' knowledge (1984: 110-114; 1985: 141-4; see also 1988). Or again, computer specialists and systems analysts have staked their claim on senior executive positions by emphasizing the importance of

²⁴ While this is certainly true in the context of the US and the UK, Armstrong notes that it is extremely rare for qualified accountants to inhabit top managerial positions in Germany and Japan (1984: 104; 1985: 130; 136).

²⁵ For a more detailed, and slightly modified, analysis of the development of accounting controls in British capitalist enterprises, see Armstrong (1987b).

information technology in monitoring and controlling the production process as well as routinizing the work of competing profession groups, such as engineering designers and production managers (1984: 115-6; 1985: 140; 144-5). This shows us that different professional groups within the global function of capital have been able to compete with each other for access to the key positions of command by using some of their specialized techniques to develop managerial control strategies. Armstrong's work thus provides a useful framework for examining the role of professional knowledge in the advancement of collective mobility projects. The next section will try to make sense of management consultancy's own collective mobility project on the basis of this same model.

Control Strategy of Management Consultancy

At first glance, it does not seem immediately apparent how management consultants fit into the framework outlined by Armstrong. After all, management consultants are not able to ascend management hierarchies because they are, by necessity, *external* to the client organization. If consultants did become completely internal to the client organization, then they would cease to perform consultancy activities and begin to perform managerial activities instead. This was the danger we outlined in chapter 2: management consultancy faces the constant risk of becoming absorbed into something other than itself, namely, management. When the consultant acts "on the behalf of or in the place of the manager", they "do the manager's job" and not their own (Block, 2000: 4). Management, on this view, was said to be the limit across which management consultancy was unable to step. Due to their external position in relation to the client

organization, and the crucial distance they must maintain in relation to managers, it seems that consultants are unable to occupy the key positions of command in capitalist organizations, unlike engineers, accountants, and other professional groups.

It is certainly true that management consultants are external to client organizations, and therefore management hierarchies within these organizations. But, as we saw in chapter 3, this outsider status is an ambiguous one. Whereas content-knowledge sets the consultant and the manager over and against each by turning the former into a vendor (as a provider of managerial services) and the latter into a customer (as a purchaser of managerial services), process-knowledge serves to bridge this divide by establishing a collaborative relation between the consultant and the client. This means that the consultant and the client are now expected to work together on the same hierarchical level in the client organization in order to diagnose problems jointly, formulate solutions jointly, and implement solutions jointly. We will recall, however, that this collaborative relation is double-edged: on the one hand, it is equal (since the consultant and the client work together on the same hierarchical level) and unequal (since this collaboration is governed by the consultant in order minimize the manager's resistance to organizational change in the client organization). The application of the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation thus enables consultants to gain access to managerial positions at the same time as it allows them to maintain an essential distinction from managers.

But that is not all. In chapter 2, we saw that there is a division between different levels of management in the organizational hierarchy. Whereas middle and lower managers

perform specific operational tasks in a particular department in their own organization (e.g. marketing, finance, IT, human resources) in addition to the general managerial tasks of coordinating and controlling their subordinates, top managers are wholly concerned with the overall direction of the organization and its members. Put differently, middle and lower managers draw on both the technical component and the relational component of management while top managers draw solely on the relational component of management. It is the latter group – those senior executives located at the top-most level in the organizational hierarchy – that serve as the ‘ideal type’ of management, detached entirely from productive labour and situated exclusively on the level of unproductive labour. This, it should be added, is the key position of command that the organizational professions compete with each other to occupy.

We now find that there is a similar division between different forms of management consultancy, namely, conventional management consultancy and the model of process consultation. On the one hand, the conventional management consultant aims to change something about the client organization in terms of the *technical* component of management, thus drawing on industry-specific content-knowledge in addition to universally-applicable process-knowledge. This means that the conventional management consultant is able to gain access only to middle and lower managerial positions in the client organization, since such managers require analysis, advice, and assistance in terms of the *non-managerial* aspect of their work (e.g. marketing, finance, IT, human resources). On the other hand, the process consultant aims to change something about the client organization in terms of the *relational* component of management, thus drawing solely on universally-applicable process-knowledge. This

means that the process consultant is able to gain access to top managerial positions in the client organization, since such managers require analysis, advice, and assistance in terms of the *properly managerial* aspect of their work, that is to say, the overall function of coordination and control. We thus find that the 'ideal type' of management, completely disconnected from operational activities and wholly concerned with the function of coordination and control, has its parallel in the model of process consultation – the 'pure form' of management consultancy.

In the previous section, we said that different professional groups are able occupy key positions of command in three interlinked way: identifying a critical problem confronting capital, ideologically emphasizing the inadequacy of existing methods for dealing with this problem, and proposing a solution based on the specialized techniques of the profession in question. Along these same lines, we can now see how management consultants, as a professional group, are able to situate themselves at the top-most levels in organizational hierarchies. We said that process consultants do not seek only to *apply* the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation, which will enable them to minimize client resistance to organizational change; they also seek to *transfer* these prescriptive guidelines to the client, which will enable managers to minimize staff resistance in their own organization. In this way, process consultants identify a key problem confronting capital (i.e. staff resistance to managerial control in organizations), ideologically stress the insufficiency of existing methods for dealing with it (i.e. the relational component of management), and develop a solution based on their own specialized techniques (i.e. the relational component of management consultancy). The model of process consultation, in other words, allows

process consultants to undermine existing control strategies – provided by other professional groups on the basis of their own specialized techniques – at the same time as it permits them to install their own control strategy. By seeking to replace the relational component of management with the relational component of management consultancy, therefore, process consultants are able to assert their right and ability to preside over (if not actually occupy) the key position of command on the basis of a part of their common body of knowledge.

This has considerable implications for management consultancy as a profession. If professional groups are able to raise their social and economic status by gaining access to top managerial positions in capitalist organizations, then management consultants can advance their own collective mobility project by applying the model of process consultation in client organizations. Although management consultants are unable to actually occupy the key positions of command in capitalist organizations by virtue of the necessary distance they must maintain with managers, they can overcome this difficulty by making management consultancy knowledge indispensable to managers (whether they are engineers, accountants, or another professional group) by transforming the traditional manager-subordinate relation into a ‘consultant-client relation’. In this way, process consultants directly intervene on a senior executive level without physically inhabiting this top managerial position. Management consultants, as a professional group, are thus able to raise their social and economic status through the nature of their work.

But if a professional group needs to retain control over its common body of knowledge in order for it to serve as the basis for advancing a collective mobility project, we can see the difficulty faced by management consultants in this respect. The control strategy of management consultancy can – indeed, for it to be effective, *must* – become detached from the very professional group to whom it belongs in order for it to serve as a means for collective mobility. In other words, process consultants are able to preside over (if not actually occupy) the key position of command only by replacing the relational component of management with the relational component of management consultancy; but, since management consultancy knowledge now becomes a part of management knowledge, the relational component of management consultancy necessarily *turns back into* the relational component of management as soon as it is installed in the client organization. This paradox does not imply a ‘flaw’ or an ‘error’ in the model of process consultation, but in fact provides the source of management consultants’ professional power even as it simultaneously threatens to undermine the very basis of this power. In this way, the collective mobility project of management consultants is put in jeopardy by the same factor that guarantees its success.²⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter, we described the institutional effects of the practitioner literature for management consultants. We showed that the attempt has been made by management consultants, over the years, to professionalize on the basis of a common body of

²⁶ We might also note, somewhat parenthetically, that the case of ‘internal consultants’ – management consultants who are directly employed by client organizations as full-time members of staff – does not help to resolve this paradox, but serves rather to intensify it.

knowledge, namely, the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We also said that this process-knowledge has enabled management consultants to pursue their own collective mobility project in relation to other professional groups, such as engineers and accountants. It remains to be seen, of course, whether or not process consultants have actually been able to situate themselves on the top-level of organizational hierarchies on the basis of their common body of knowledge. Such empirical work goes well beyond the scope of the present investigation. It is hoped, however, that this chapter has laid some of the groundwork for further research into this complex, indeed contradictory, organizational area.

We are now in a position to answer the second and third question we posed towards the end of chapter 2. It was asked whether management consultants have been able to position themselves at the top-most level of organizational hierarchies on the basis of a part of their knowledge and, as a result, secure their collective interests as a professional group. There is little doubt that the model of process consultation – the ‘pure form’ of management consultancy – provides the resources for consultants to fulfil this task. But, as we have seen, this cannot be accomplished without the attendant risk that the model of process consultation will, at the moment of its ultimate triumph, succeed in undermining the crucial distinction between management consultancy and management on the basis of which it was possible to secure the collective interests of management consultants in the first place. The profession of management consultancy, we might say, plays itself out in the space of this contradiction.

With this paradoxical flourish, we have arrived at the conclusion to our investigation into the question of what management consultancy is. What we have ended up with is not so much a formal definition, but a detailed description of an entire set of relations between forms of knowledge and competing professional groups. It remains for us, now, to reflect at greater length on some of the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives that have guided the thesis as a whole. This will be the task of the final chapter.

Chapter 6

Symptoms of Management Consultancy

Introduction

This chapter examines the work of Foucault in more detail in order to reflect on what the thesis has achieved. We previously said, in the general introduction, that the first five chapters of the thesis each deal with a different aspect of archaeology: the disruption of historical continuities in chapter 1, the formation of an object in chapter 2, the arrangement of concepts in chapter 3, the construction of diverging theories in chapter 4, and the institutional effects of the practitioner literature in chapter 5. This has allowed us to produce a new or modified unity of management consultancy discourse. In clinical terms, we have sought to diagnose the symptoms of management consultancy. This means that we have attempted both to describe and transform certain aspects of management consultancy in terms of the knowledge it generates and the power relations it puts into operation. We will now bring this task into sharper focus by examining the place of ‘diagnosis’ in the work of Foucault. It will be argued that Foucault’s diagnostic approach seeks simultaneously to describe and transform fields of

knowledge in the human sciences. To this extent, the archaeological method is characterized by a certain ‘critical attitude’ towards the present. By outlining Foucault’s concept of the ‘diagnosis of the present’, and Gilles Deleuze’s analogous concept of ‘the clinical’, we will finally be able to reflect in greater detail on the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives of the thesis and clarify its overall contribution.

Diagnosis of the Present

Foucault is reluctant to position himself definitively in any political or philosophical tradition, although by his own admission his work can be located at the intersection between numerous strands of nineteenth and twentieth century thought, including among others Kant, Hegel, Marx, Bachelard, Canguilhem, Cavailles, Blanchot and Bataille (2007: 130-2). But when pressed on the point, Foucault claims that he is “at most a diagnostician” (1996: 218). Foucault says he is a diagnostician because the archaeology of knowledge allows him to diagnose the present.

The concept of the ‘diagnosis of the present’ appears in a number of Foucault’s books and interviews, although it is paid scant attention by commentators in CMS and beyond. In a 1969 interview, Foucault says that “[t]o diagnose the present is to say what the present is, and how our present is absolutely different from all that it is not, that is to say, from our past” (1996: 53). Put simply, the diagnosis of the present means to differentiate, in a certain way, between the present and the past. Foucault expands on this definition of diagnosis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002a), published in the

same year. Archaeology is a suitable method for conducting the diagnosis of the present, he writes:

Not because it would enable us to draw up a table of our distinctive features, and to sketch out in advance the face that we will have in the future. But it deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates the temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exercise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies; and where anthropological thought once questioned man's being or subjectivity, it now bursts open the other, and the outside. In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. (2002a: 147; see also 226-7)

On this view, the archaeology of knowledge opposes forms of thought that presuppose certain continuities between the past and the present. These continuities display themselves most obviously in the figure of 'man', whose anthropological being or subjective identity is said to remain constant and unchanging over time. Foucault, by contrast, takes discontinuity rather than continuity as his methodological starting-point. In this way, he aims to show that the present is discontinuous from the past. It should be said that, when he speaks about 'the present', Foucault is referring to knowledge in the human sciences that we currently accept as valid or true, knowledge that organizes our thought and informs our actions in various fields. By the same token, when he speaks

about ‘the past’, Foucault is referring to knowledge in the human sciences once accepted as valid or true (but now rendered false, impracticable, or obsolete), knowledge that no longer organizes our thought or informs our action in these same fields.

This diagnostic approach to knowledge is demonstrated most clearly in *The Order of Things* (2002b), originally published in 1966. In this book, Foucault proposes to conduct an ‘archaeology of the human sciences’ (namely, the broad epistemological fields concerned with life, labour, and language). Instead of seeking to affirm continuity between past and present forms of thought in these fields, Foucault aims instead to bring to light “the suddenness and thoroughness with which certain sciences [are] sometimes reorganized”. He continues:

Within a few years (around 1800), the tradition of general grammar was replaced by an essentially historical philology; natural classifications were ordered according to the analyses of comparative anatomy; and a political economy was founded whose main themes were labour and production. Confronted by such a curious combination of phenomena, it occurred to me that these changes should be examined more closely, without being reduced, in the name of continuity, in either abruptness or scope. (2002b: xii)

In *The Order of Things*, the human sciences in the classical age (1660-1800) are shown to have undergone significant transformations at the beginning of the modern age (1800-1960). As a result, Foucault insists that there is no linear development but instead

an epistemological rupture between general grammar and philology, between natural history and biology, and between the analysis of wealth and political economy. The diagnosis of the present thus aims to preserve the distinction between past and present forms of thought in various fields of knowledge, rather than seeking to impose an erroneous continuity on them. To take another example: at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1991: 3-7) describes the shift over some eighty years from the spectacular public execution of Damians in the eighteenth century to the meticulously disciplined regime of imprisonment in the nineteenth century. This shift does not involve a ‘development’ in penal techniques or a ‘progression’ in the treatment of convicted criminals, which implies some kind of continuity in terms of criminological knowledge. Rather, this shift involves an extensive transformation between a complex set of relations within a field of knowledge that signals the end of one regime of punishment and the emergence of another. This, then, is how we are to understand Foucault’s diagnostic approach: it shows us that the present (i.e. knowledge we currently accept as valid or true) is discontinuous with the past (i.e. knowledge we no longer accept as valid or true) by examining epistemological fields that have changed radically over time.

‘Diagnosis’ is a sufficiently broad term to encompass the evaluation of everyday problems (‘to diagnose a situation’) as well as the determination of a physical ailment (‘to diagnose an illness’). I want to suggest that Foucault’s diagnostic approach draws on the latter, specifically medical meaning as much as the former, more general meaning. Foucault makes an explicit reference to the medical meaning of diagnosis in a 1972 interview. He begins by describing his work as a form of ‘diagnostic knowledge’:

By diagnostic knowledge, I mean, in general, a form of knowledge that defines and determines differences. For example, when a doctor makes a diagnosis of tuberculosis, he does it by determining the differences that distinguish someone sick with tuberculosis from someone sick with pneumonia or any other disease. In this sense diagnostic knowledge operates within a certain objective field defined by the sickness, the symptoms, etc...However, there are forms of diagnostic knowledge that are not located within an objective field but which, on the contrary, permit a new objective field to appear. (1996: 95)

In one sense, Foucault's description of a doctor conducting a diagnosis by determining the differences between specific diseases is a metaphorical example. It is a way of clarifying a technical methodological point: Foucault diagnoses the present by specifying differences between, on the one hand, knowledge that currently organizes our thought and informs our actions and, on the other hand, knowledge that no longer organizes our thought or informs our action. But the passage can also be read in a more literal sense: Foucault diagnoses the present by separating, arranging, grouping, and regrouping symptoms in an objective field, a procedure that may serve to produce an entirely new objective field.

Foucault's conceptualization of the diagnosis of the present in explicitly medical terms is, for the most part, limited to brief comments in interviews. Despite the cursory nature of these remarks, I would argue that they provide an insight into the way Foucault understands his own diagnostic approach. To draw out their implications, I want to turn

at this point to the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose concept of ‘the clinical’ enables us to shed more light on the medical meaning of Foucault’s diagnosis.²⁷

The Clinical

The clinical is understood by Deleuze in methodological terms.²⁸ It focuses on a specific level of medical practice: it is neither etiology (the search for causes) nor therapy (the development and application of treatment), but symptomatology (the study of signs) (Deleuze, 2004a: 132). This symptomatological procedure involves taking apart certain symptoms and grouping together other symptoms that were previously disconnected. New syndromes will be produced as a consequence of this reconfiguration of the relations between symptoms. It is not a case of ‘inventing’ an illness, but of reorganizing a symptomatological table in order to individuate the signs of an illness in different, perhaps more refined ways. For example, ‘the plague’ does not exist today because it designated a cluster of illnesses that have since been differentiated according to new symptomatological classifications. The symptoms themselves will be transformed in this process, since they are defined by the very place each of them inhabits in the table (Deleuze, 1991: 13-6; 132-4; Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 119-23).

²⁷ Rose (1999: 57-8) is one of the few commentators to discuss Foucault’s diagnostic approach in relation to Deleuze’s concept of the clinical.

²⁸ Deleuze (1991) outlines the clinical approach in his book *Coldness and Cruelty*, originally published in 1967. The concept of ‘the clinical’ is also discussed elsewhere in Deleuze’s work (see 1995: 142-3; 2004a: 131-4; 135-42; 2004b: 272-274; 2006: viii-xii; Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 119-123). Smith (1998) provides an extensive review of this material in his translator’s introduction to Deleuze’s *Essays Critical and Clinical*.

But what are symptoms and where are they found? Put simply, the entire world may be treated as a symptom and searched for “signs of disease, signs of life, signs of a cure, signs of health” (2004a: 140). Note that Deleuze does not adhere to a strictly pathological approach to symptomatology: a symptom does not necessarily refer to an ailment, but can also imply forms of creativity and ways of living (2004a: 132; 1995: 143). For this reason, symptomatology is the place where artists, doctors, and philosophers come together and struggle over the symptoms of the world and the meaning that is attached to them (2004a: 134).

Deleuze elaborates on this relation between art, medicine, and philosophy in *Coldness and Cruelty*. Deleuze argues, here, that clinical psychologists such as Krafft-Ebing, Havelock, Féré, and Freud all fail to provide a proper diagnosis of masochism and sadism because they do not pay adequate attention to the specific symptoms of each perversion. This failure means that masochism and sadism are inaccurately understood by the clinical psychologists to the extent that a new syndrome – ‘sodomasochism’ – is produced. This syndrome is erroneous, indeed it is a “semiological howler” (1991: 134), because sadism and masochism are not commensurable in any respect. They are linked together into a single perversion only because the clinical psychologists do not take into account the very specific types of sexual behaviour found in the literary works of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the Marquis de Sade (1991: 37-46). Deleuze spends the rest of *Coldness and Cruelty* re-examining the specific symptoms of each perversion found in Masoch and Sade’s work. He is able to show that, while

masochism and sadism both involve a connection between pleasure and pain, this connection is exhibited in radically different ways in each perversion.²⁹

The interconnection between art, medicine, and philosophy can be summarized as follows. Artists (Masoch, Sade) bring to light symptoms of sexual perversion in their literary works (*Venus in Furs*, *Juliette*); doctors (Krafft-Ebing, Havelock, Féré, Freud) revisit the literary works and identify the syndrome of sadomasochism; and finally, the philosopher (Deleuze) conducts a differential diagnosis that serves to break up the crude syndrome of sadomasochism and enables us to distinguish properly between the symptoms of masochism and the symptoms of sadism. Symptomatology, then, is conducted by artists, doctors, and philosophers who examine, group, and regroup symptoms in a table. The crucial point is that with each successive symptomatology – that of the artist, the doctor, and the philosopher – the table in which the symptoms appear is revised and new syndromes are created in the process.

But how does Deleuze's clinical approach serve to clarify the medical meaning of Foucault's diagnosis of the present? This question can be addressed by returning to the

²⁹ Deleuze (1991: 134) summarizes his symptomatological findings at the conclusion of *Coldness and Cruelty*:

- (1) Sadism is speculative-demonstrative, masochism dialectical-imaginative; (2) sadism operates with the negative and pure negation, masochism with disavowal and suspension; (3) sadism operates by means of quantitative reiteration, masochism by means of qualitative suspense; (4) there is a masochism specific to the sadist and equally a sadism specific to the masochist, the one never combining with the other; (5) sadism negates the mother and inflates the father, masochism disavows the mother and abolishes the father; (6) the role and significance of the fetish, and the function of the fantasy are totally different in each case; (7) there is an aestheticism in masochism, while sadism is hostile to the aesthetic attitude; (8) sadism is institutional, masochism contractual; (9) in sadism the superego and the process of identification play the primary role, masochism gives primacy to the ego and to the process of idealization; (10) sadism and masochism exhibit totally different forms of desexualisation and resexualization; (11) finally, summing up all these differences, there is the most radical difference between sadistic apathy and masochistic coldness.

methodological principles Foucault elaborates in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and the application of this method in *The Order of Things*.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains that his diagnostic approach suspends, at least provisionally, conventional unities of discourse. These unities include such notions as ‘intellectual tradition’, ‘influence’, ‘*Weltanschauung*’ and, most of all, ‘the book’ and ‘the oeuvre’ (2002a: 22-33). Such unities, for Foucault, are based on a number of problematic assumptions that have an immediate bearing on how historical research is conducted in various fields of knowledge. For example, the notion of ‘influence’ implies a certain proximity between given theories where we might find, on the contrary, distance and dissension. Or again, the notion of ‘intellectual tradition’ suggests a linear transition from one thinker to the next where we might find, instead, an alternative family-tree of thinkers. Foucault suspends these conventional unities of discourse in order to avoid such assumptions and to reveal them precisely as problematic.

Foucault is not saying, however, that we should reject or abandon all unities of discourse. Indeed, his diagnostic approach seeks to produce modified unities by rearranging conventional ones. As we said in the introduction to the thesis, the rules of formation (namely, the way objects are defined, the way concepts are ordered, and the way diverging theories are constructed in the human sciences) in the work of Linnaeus in the eighteenth century are not the same as those found in the work of Cuvier in the nineteenth century. One is left with little choice but to identify, in each case, a separate and distinct system of knowledge. This serves to unsettle the conventional unity of

physiological discourse, which usually imagines Linnaeus and Cuvier to inhabit the same epistemological field. In addition to abandoning some of the ‘grand continuities’ that link together discourses over time, *The Order of Things* also disrupts some of the ‘great divisions’ that run between discourses. For example, Foucault shows that the rules of formation in the work of Ricardo and Marx are identical. One must conclude that they are both writing from within the very same epistemological field. This has the result of disturbing the surface of the conventional unity of economic discourse, which habitually pits Marx and Ricardo’s work against each other as competing systems of knowledge. By altering such conventional unities of discourse – whether in terms of ‘grand continuities’ or ‘great divisions’ – Foucault is able to establish a set of modified unities. He elaborates on this point in the 1970 preface to the English edition of *The Order of Things*:

I did not look in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the beginnings of nineteenth-century biology (or philosophy or economics). What I saw was the appearance of figures peculiar to the Classical age: a ‘taxonomy’ or ‘natural history’ that was relatively unaffected by the knowledge that existed in animal or plant physiology; an ‘analysis of wealth’ that took little account of the assumptions of the ‘political arithmetic’ that was contemporary with it; and a ‘general grammar’ that was quite alien to the historical analyses and works of exegesis then being carried out. Moreover, I saw the emergence, between these different figures, of a network of analogies that transcended the traditional proximities: between the classification of plants and the theory of coinage, between the notion of generic character and the analysis of trade, one finds in

the Classical sciences isomorphisms that appear to ignore the extreme diversity of the objects under consideration. (2002b: xi; see also 2002a: 197-9)

On the one hand, Foucault's diagnostic approach seeks to demonstrate that some of the distances and proximities that are usually said to characterize a given science are, in fact, erroneous. On the other hand, it attempts to bring to light correlations between forms of thought hitherto unconnected or, analogously, deviations between systems of knowledge that were previously unrecognized.

We are now in a position to clarify the medical meaning of diagnosis in the work of Foucault. It was previously said that Deleuze takes apart symptoms belonging to the crude syndrome of sadomasochism and rearranges them to form the new syndromes of masochism and sadism. In the same way, Foucault dissociates groups of signs (what he calls 'statements') from the conventional unities of discourse and rearranges them into modified unities in various fields of knowledge. Expressed clinically, archaeology diagnoses the present by separating, arranging, and regrouping symptoms in revised symptomatological tables in order to produce new syndromes, such as natural history and biology, analysis of wealth and political economy, and general grammar and philology'.³⁰

³⁰ Examples of such symptomatological tables can be found in *The Order of Things* (2002b: 219).

The Critical Attitude

Foucault's diagnostic approach seeks to rearrange conventional unities of discourse into modified unities. But what are the consequences of this symptomatological procedure? In short, the diagnosis of the present aims to say what the present *is* at the same time as it seeks to *change* something about the present. To this extent, Foucault's diagnostic approach is characterized by a certain 'critical attitude' towards the present.

In a series of texts from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault (2007) discusses the development of the critical attitude and its relation to Kant's question of enlightenment. In a 1978 lecture entitled 'What is Critique?', Foucault says that there emerged, in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, "a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others that we could call...the critical attitude" (2007: 42). This critical attitude, Foucault continues, arose in response to an entire set of ecclesiastical 'arts of government' (e.g. rules of religious obedience, methods of examination and confession, and individualizing techniques) (2007: 43). By seeking to challenge, restrict, or displace these arts of government, the critical attitude is considered by Foucault to be 'the art of not being governed so much'. Not, it should be emphasized, the art of not being governed *at all* but, rather, the art of not being governed like this or that, or at this or that cost (2007: 44-5). This means that the critical attitude does not seek to reject the arts of government in their entirety. Instead, the critical attitude is "the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth" (2007: 47). For example, the critical attitude is exercised when one attempts to

challenge a religious authority on the basis of its interpretation of the scriptures and the use to which biblical texts are put (2007: 45).

Although the critical attitude originated in an ecclesiastical context, it soon began to circulate more widely throughout society. This is the point at which the concept of ‘enlightenment’ – best exemplified by Kant’s (1991) newspaper article ‘An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’, originally published in 1784 – becomes important for Foucault. Kant opens his article by outlining what he understands by the term ‘enlightenment’:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding! (1991: 54; emphasis in original)

The thought of enlightenment ‘dares to know’ because it challenges some of the worst excesses of authority (e.g. aspects of religion, law, and science) that maintain us in a state of ‘immaturity’.³¹ This immaturity is self-incurred to the extent that we choose not to put our own reason to proper use; it thus remains governed by religious, legal or scientific authority. We can pull ourselves out of this self-incurred immaturity by using

³¹ ‘Immaturity’ (*Unmündigkeit*) is to be understood in the sense of ‘not yet being intellectually independent or autonomous’, rather than in the sense of ‘silly or childish behaviour’.

our reason to question religion, law, and science on the basis of the forms of knowledge they produce and the relations of power they maintain. It is therefore Kant's concept of 'enlightenment' put forward in his *Berlinische Monatsschrift* newspaper article, and not Kant's concept of 'critique' outlined in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that for Foucault embodies a certain critical attitude towards the present at the cusp of our modernity (2007: 47-8).

Foucault elaborates on the relation between Kant's concept of enlightenment and the critical attitude of modernity in more detail in a 1984 essay entitled 'What is Enlightenment?' In this text, Foucault considers Kant's 1784 newspaper article to have introduced into modern philosophical inquiry a new approach to an old question: 'What is today?' Whereas philosophy once attempted to decipher the present for signs of the future, now philosophy interrogates the present in the direction of the immediate past: 'How is today different from yesterday?' (2007: 99). This question of enlightenment involves a critical attitude towards the present because it aims to show that what is taken as universal and necessary about the present is, in fact, singular and arbitrary. If the religious, legal, and scientific authorities that govern our conduct today did not exist yesterday, then there is nothing universal or timeless about them. Indeed, they may not even exist tomorrow. Foucault thus characterizes the thought of enlightenment as a 'limit-attitude' that works on the present by analyzing and reflecting on its frontiers with both the past and the future (2007: 113). It involves determining precisely what forms of knowledge and relations of power have allowed us to constitute our thought and actions, and to what extent these forms of knowledge and relations of power have the capacity to be transformed by our thought and actions. Put simply, the critical

attitude of modernity seeks “to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (2007: 114). Not, to be clear, ‘liberation’ or ‘emancipation’ (understood as an outright rejection of the present state of things) but ‘freedom’ (understood as the work that we conduct on the limits of ourselves) (2007: 114-5).³²

It is this same critical attitude that also characterizes Foucault’s own diagnostic approach (2007: 113-4). Like Kant’s question of enlightenment, the diagnosis of the present also seeks to discover what today is by differentiating it from yesterday: it shows us that the present is discontinuous with the past by examining fields of knowledge that have changed radically over time. But this does not mean that Foucault is content simply to *describe* the present in relation to the past; his work also aims to *transform* something about the present. By reorganizing the conventional unities of discourse into modified unities, Foucault’s diagnostic approach demonstrates that the present is neither essential nor immutable but, in fact, subject to possible alteration. As Foucault puts it in a 1983 interview: “the function of any diagnosis concerning what today is...does not consist in a simple characterization of what we are but, instead – by following lines of fragility in the present – in managing to grasp why and how that which is might no longer be that which is” (2000: 449-50; see also 2007: 118). By reflecting on the knowledge we accept as valid or true and the power relations in which we are currently implicated, the diagnosis of the present attempts to determine to what

³² Foucault remarks in a 1984 interview that critics sometimes respond to his work by asserting that ‘if power is everywhere, then there is no freedom’. Foucault replies by saying that “if there are relations of power in every social field, this is *because* there is freedom everywhere” (1996: 441; emphasis added). The point, for Foucault, is that ‘power’ does not necessarily mean domination and that ‘freedom’ does not necessarily mean liberation from power. The concept of ‘freedom’, here, refers to the exercise and modification of the power relations that one maintains with others and with oneself (see 1996: 433-49).

extent it might be possible to change these forms of knowledge and relations of power through such reflection. By working on the limits of ourselves, in other words, we will eventually be able to transgress these very limits (2007: 113). It is in this sense that Foucault's diagnostic approach is characterized by a critical attitude towards the present.

We have brought to light the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives of Foucault's diagnostic approach. It remains for us now to conclude by seeing how the preceding discussion relates to the thesis as a whole. This will allow us to reflect on the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives of the thesis and to clarify its contribution.

Conclusion

In the general introduction to the thesis, we said that the archaeology of knowledge provides a suitable method into our own investigation into finding out what management consultancy is. This was said to be the case because archaeology allows us to describe how the object of 'management consultancy' is defined, how concepts such as 'analysis', 'advice', and 'assistance' are ordered, and how diverging theories such as 'content-based consulting' and 'process-based consulting' are constructed in the practitioner literature for management consultants. We have successfully shown in the thesis that this field of knowledge displays a certain regularity and coherence as a discourse: the practitioner literature conceptualizes in precisely the same way the limit

to management consultancy's functional scope, the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation, the various phases of the consultancy engagement, and the distinction between the content of management consultancy and its process. By bringing to light these discursive regularities, we have been able to show how the field of management consultancy knowledge produces for itself an entire series of true statements that remain valid and reproducible over time. In short, by following Foucault's archaeological approach, we have been able to say what management consultancy is.

But, as we previously said, the task of archaeology is not simply one of description; it is also one of transformation. On the one hand, archaeology allows us to describe how objects, concepts, and theories are formed in a field of knowledge; on the other hand, archaeology permits us to change the way we commonly understand this field of knowledge. In short, archaeology seeks to disrupt conventional unities of discourse at the same time as it aims to produce new or modified unities. But what conventional unities have we suspended in the thesis, and what new or modified ones have we established?

In chapter 1, we cast doubt on the conventional unity of discourse that presupposes a historical continuity between Taylorist work-design and contemporary forms of management consultancy. By examining accounts of management consultancy's origin in the business history literature, we showed that this conventional unity is erroneous because scientific management and management consultancy do not share the same epistemological space. The same was also said of management engineering and cost

accounting elsewhere in the business history literature: these fields of knowledge do not share the same epistemological space as management consultancy. By seeking in chapter 1 to disrupt these conventional unities of discourse, we were able to show that ‘the present’ (by which we mean knowledge that organizes our thought and informs our actions) is discontinuous from ‘the past’ (by which we mean knowledge that no longer organizes our thought and informs our actions).

We cast doubt on another, more entrenched conventional unity of discourse in chapters 2, 3, and 4: the assumption that management consultancy share the same epistemological space as management itself. While there is often said to be no distinction between consultants and managers in terms of the knowledge base each of them draw on in their work, we showed that this assumption is in fact problematic. Certainly, consultancy and management share the same technical component; but, as we saw, they differ in terms of their relational component. By examining the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation, we were able to disrupt the conventional unity of discourse that presupposes an epistemological equivalence between management consultancy and management itself (in the same way, perhaps, as Foucault unsettles the ‘grand continuities’ that characterize economic, biological, and philological thought).

We did not, however, seek to reject out of hand the conventional unities of management consultancy discourse; our aim was not to discard them and build a new unity entirely from scratch by ignoring the practitioner literature for management consultants. We intended, rather, to modify these unities of discourse and to reshape them into a new

discursive formation. This was achieved, as we said, by drawing on the archaeology of knowledge throughout the thesis. By paying close attention to the practitioner literature, we were able to describe the object of management consultancy without lapsing into ambiguity or equivocation, like so many other commentators; we were able to lay out concepts in the field of management consultancy knowledge, which are usually overlooked in the academic literature in favour of empirical case studies; we were able to examine diverging theories within the same discursive formation, which are often erroneously seen as radically different approaches to management consultancy; and finally, we were able to gain an insight into the institutional effects of management consultancy knowledge, which are discussed in the academic literature only in terms of client organizations and never in terms of professional associations for management consultants. We therefore sought to surface a modified unity of discourse that was nonetheless limited by management consultancy knowledge. We aimed at the very outset to transform something about management consultancy by remaining within the epistemological boundaries laid down by the practitioner literature in the hope of deforming and distorting these same boundaries.

The thesis has thus attempted both to describe and transform aspects of management consultancy in terms of the knowledge it generates and the power relations it puts into operation. In clinical terms, we have sought to diagnose the symptoms of management consultancy by separating, arranging, grouping, and regrouping symptoms in an objective field (i.e. the field of management consultancy knowledge), a procedure that has perhaps served to produce an entirely new objective field. Just as Deleuze takes apart symptoms belonging to the crude syndrome of sadomasochism and rearranges

them to form the new syndromes of masochism and sadism, so have we dissociated groups of symptoms and rearranged them into a new syndrome of management consultancy. To this extent, the thesis is an original contribution to the field of clinical management studies. Whereas critical management studies is characterized by an ethos of escape or emancipation, clinical management studies is characterized by a critical attitude insofar as it works on the limits of ourselves in order to transgress these very limits. We should be clear that this clinical approach does not imply that management consultants are 'sick' and need to be 'cured' or that corporate managerialism is in a 'morbid state' and must therefore be 'humanely terminated'. Despite its medical connotations, clinical management studies is not concerned exclusively with pathological aspects of management and organization. As we previously said, the clinical approach takes the symptoms of management and organization to imply signs of life and vitality as much as signs of sickness or bad health. It is in this spirit that we have engaged with managerial and organizational forms throughout the thesis: not as systems of oppression from which we must liberate ourselves, but as regimes of truth against whose limits we exercise our freedom.

Conclusion

An Answer

It is no secret that management consultancy has a rather bad reputation. This is not a recent phenomenon, and it certainly predates Arthur Andersen's involvement with the 2001 Enron scandal. As far back as the 1950s, *Fortune* magazine was regularly publishing articles that aimed to 'debunk' the emerging industry (Higdon, 1969: 5-7). Management consultancy has long been the target of satire and ridicule from the popular press, to the extent that it has now become the 'Essex girl' of the business world. An article published in *The Economist* two decades ago commented on this peculiar characteristic:

Management consultancy...has spawned more bad jokes than any other profession (three samples: consultants are people who borrow your watch to tell you the time and then walk off with it; they are people who are out of work; they are men who know 100 ways to make love but don't know any girls).
(Peet, 1988: 5)

Such jokes are revealing. They imply that management consultancy is widely considered to be a lucrative swindle rather than an ethical vocation, a sham profession rather than a respectable occupation. As Robert Townsend (2007: 68) put it in *Up the Organization*, originally published in 1970: “[Management consultants] waste time, cost money, demoralize and distract your best people, and don’t solve problems”. The book titles of recent management consultancy ‘exposés’ – such as *Rip-Off!*, *House of Lies*, *The Witch Doctors*, *Dangerous Company*, and *Consulting Demons* – further testify to management consultancy’s lack of general credibility (see Craig, 2005; Kihn, 2005; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996; O’Shea and Madigan, 1998; Pinault, 2001).

But jokes about management consultancy are not confined to the popular press; they are also found in the practitioner literature itself. Block (2000: 1), for example, opens *Flawless Consulting* with a series of humorous cartoons that poke fun at management consultants and their work. Later on, he explains that he began his book with these jokes because they serve as a “defence against criticism that contains the truth” (2000: 308). This tactic is also used by other practitioners, who provide tongue-in-cheek definitions of management consultancy alongside more serious definitions (Cody, 1986: viii; Greiner and Metzger, 1983: 4; 9; Biswas and Twitchell, 1999: 6). One practitioner compares management consultancy to prostitution as a wry warning about the present state of the profession: “not only is there very little that we are not prepared to do for cash but, as an industry, our relationship with our clients is in danger of becoming one of mutual distaste” (Lambert, 1998: 5). Another practitioner drolly suggests that the difference between a management consultant and a vulture is that only

one of them can get air-miles (Barratt, 2003: 113). Even in the practitioner literature, then, “[j]okes abound about consultants” (Biech, 1999: 187).

There does not seem to be anything particularly ‘critical’ about making jokes at the expense of management consultants or their work, since this is frequently done in both the mainstream media and the practitioner literature. In fact, such jokes are so familiar to us that they have become, by now, almost ‘commonsensical’: *of course* management consultancy firms are populated by conmen and cowboys, *we all know* that management consultants borrow your watch to tell you the time. But, as we said in the general introduction to the thesis, such apparently self-evident assertions should be approached with caution, since they provide off-the-peg answers to readymade questions. Ultimately, they stop us from asking after management consultancy because it is assumed we already know what it is.

The thesis has attempted, as far as possible, to avoid these commonsensical views on management consultancy. We did not therefore begin with a preconceived understanding of management consultancy. Instead, we sought to clear enough space for us to ask, and eventually answer, a single question: what is management consultancy? This question was asked in the direction of management consultancy knowledge because we wanted to specify a level that remains the same for *all* management consultants and is applicable in *every* consultancy engagement, and would therefore allow us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy.

Chapter 1 examined the various accounts of management consultancy's origin found in the business history literature. We turned to these accounts to see if we could find out what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin. These accounts claimed, respectively, that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on industrial production processes, that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on top-level bureaucratic organization, and finally that management consultancy originated with advice to managers on financial information systems. All of these accounts were shown to contain serious ambiguities and inconsistencies. None of them, as a result, enabled us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its origin. Nonetheless, the various accounts of management consultancy's origin served to raise a series of questions for our investigation: are all advisory services in a managerial context to be called 'management consultancy'? Or, in addition to management consultancy, are there other advisory services that also take place in a managerial context? If so, then how are we to distinguish between management consultancy and these other advisory services?

Chapter 2 addressed these questions by asking after the content of management consultancy, that is to say, the different types of technical expertise that management consultants provide to managers. We saw that management consultancy spans numerous operational areas, including strategy, human resources, marketing, finance, IT systems implementation, etc. Despite the diversity of its content-knowledge, we said there is something that distinguishes management consultancy from *other* services to managers, such as corporate legal advice and forms of accounting. This led us into a discussion about the kind of activities that are included within and excluded from

management consultancy's functional scope. It was shown that the picture is quite confused in this respect: the same activity is included by one commentator but excluded by another, or even simultaneously included and excluded by the same commentator. The limits of management consultancy's functional scope were thus said to be somewhat arbitrary. This made it difficult for us to say what management consultancy *is* on the basis of its content-knowledge.

Faced with this difficulty, we turned at this point to another limit altogether, the one limit across which management consultancy is unable to step: management itself. We said that the functional scope of management consultancy has, over the years, followed the ebb and flow of management's own functional scope; the development of the former is thus wholly reliant on the development of the latter. But management consultancy and management are not exactly the same; they were said to be distinct in some way. This distinction, moreover, was said to hold the key to the entire thesis.

We brought this task into sharper focus by examining the work of Peter Armstrong. We found that the relational component of management – namely, how to deal with subordinates in any operational area – is widely regarded as the properly managerial aspect of managers' work, whereas the technical component of management – namely, technical expertise in a specific operational area – is largely understood as the non-managerial aspect of managers' work. Management consultancy was also said to have two components: technical (industry-specific content-knowledge) and relational (universally-applicable process-knowledge). Whereas management consultancy was said to share its technical component with management, its relational component –

namely, how to deal with clients in any operational area – would allow us to distinguish clearly between management consultancy and management.

Chapter 3 set out to describe management consultancy process-knowledge, which we said takes the form of prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation during the various phases of the consultancy engagement. These prescriptive guidelines, as we saw, serve to establish a collaborative relation between the consultant and the client. This, we argued, ensures that the consultant does not play the role of a vendor (as a provider of managerial services) and that client does not play the role of a customer (as a purchaser of managerial services). Instead, the application of process-knowledge makes it possible for the consultant and the client to become equal partners, working together on the same hierarchical level in order to diagnose problems jointly, formulate solutions jointly, and implement solutions jointly. This equality, however, was shown to be deceptive. The consultant-client relation is simultaneously equal (since the consultant and the client collaborate with each other) and unequal (since this collaboration is governed by the consultant in order minimize client resistance to organizational change). We said that the prescriptive guidelines for managing this relation remain the same for all management consultants and are applicable in every consultancy engagement. To this extent, our description of this process-knowledge enabled us to characterize management consultancy precisely *as* management consultancy, and thus brought us closer to answering our guiding question, namely, what is management consultancy?

Chapter 4 examined Edgar H. Schein's model of process consultation. We saw that this model is the 'pure form' of management consultancy, stripped of all technical expertise and based entirely on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We asked how it was possible for universally-applicable process-knowledge to be detached from industry-specific content-knowledge, since we said in the previous chapter that the former serves to facilitate the latter. We found that, in contrast to the conventional model of content-based consulting, Schein's model turns process-knowledge into a form of content-knowledge in order to improve interpersonal relations between the manager and their staff in client organizations. Since this serves to replace the relational component of management with the relational component of management consultancy, we said that managers are now encouraged to become 'their own consultants' in relation to their 'clients' in order to minimize staff resistance to organizational change. We saw, finally, that this results in a paradoxical situation whereby management consultancy knowledge becomes, in effect, a part of management knowledge.

Chapter 5 examined management consultancy knowledge in relation to the profession of management consultancy. We first provided an overview of the development of professional associations for management consultants in the context of the UK. This demonstrated that considerable efforts had been made, over the last half-century, to establish management consultancy as a profession in its own right. Moreover, we saw that the attempt to gain full professional recognition is inextricable from the development of a common body of knowledge for management consultants based on the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation. We then went on

to show how the organizational professions, such as engineering and accountancy, have sought to advance their collective mobility projects. Once again, we turned to the work of Armstrong to examine this issue. It was said that these professional groups compete with each other in order to gain access to top managerial levels or the 'key positions of command' where overall strategic decisions are made in capitalist organizations. This, as we saw, would serve to raise the status of the entire profession over and above its competitors. We said that a professional group is able to access senior executive levels by using a part of its common body of knowledge to develop managerial control strategies in order to resolve a key problem facing capital.

The case of management consultancy was then examined in light of our discussion of Armstrong's work. It was said that process consultants are able to assert their right and ability to preside over (if not actually occupy) the key position of command in capitalist organizations by seeking to replace the relational component of management with the relational component of management consultancy. However, since management consultancy knowledge now becomes a part of management knowledge, we said that the relational component of management consultancy necessarily turns back into the relational component of management as soon as it is installed in the client organization. The paradox of management consultancy, outlined in the previous chapter, thus provides the source of management consultants' professional power even as it simultaneously threatens to undermine the very basis of this power. We concluded by saying that the collective mobility project of management consultants is put in jeopardy by the same factor that guarantees its success.

Chapter 6 reflected on the methodological assumptions and underlying objectives that guided the thesis as a whole. We said the thesis drew on the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in terms of his diagnostic approach to systems of knowledge. As we saw, Foucault's work is characterized by a 'critical attitude' towards the present, because it aims to describe what the present is at the same time as it seeks to change something about the present. We went on to say that the thesis also exercised a critical attitude towards the present by reflecting on the limits of management consultancy – in terms of the knowledge it generates and the power relations it puts into operation – in order to put these very limits to the test.

In the general introduction to the thesis, we made it clear that we intended to take the study of management consultancy into a new direction and thus contribute to the academic field. By moving away from the level of empirical practice (along with the seemingly arbitrary invocation of Foucault's concepts) and by turning towards the level of theoretical knowledge (along with the application of Foucault's method), we aimed not to criticize management consultants but to describe and transform aspects of management consultancy knowledge. This was achieved by paying close attention to the practitioner literature for management consultants, which as we saw displays a certain regularity and coherence as a discourse. By bringing to light the rules of formation for objects, concepts, and theories, we were able to determine how the field of management consultancy knowledge construes for itself an entire series of 'true statements' that remain valid and reproducible over time. To this extent, the thesis is intended as an original contribution to the field of clinical management studies.

We have now answered the question of what management consultancy is. It is hoped that the thesis has served to clear some ground for further research to be conducted in the field of management consultancy. For example, it would be interesting to find out precisely how the prescriptive guidelines for managing the consultant-client relation are applied during the course of real-life consultancy engagements, and whether or not management consultants are actually able to minimize client resistance to organizational change. Or again, it would be valuable to show the extent to which management consultants have been able to gain access to senior executive levels in capitalist organizations, and how far the model of process consultation has served to advance their collective interests as a professional group. Such questions remain to be addressed. The thesis concludes, then, by gesturing towards these future directions for research.

Appendix

‘Proposed classification of principal areas of competence in management consulting’

(Fuchs, 1975: 143-6):

1. General Management

- a. Organization planning and structure
- b. Corporate policy formulation
- c. Strategic business planning and long-range objectives
- d. General business surveys
- e. Feasibility studies
- f. Diversification, mergers, acquisitions, and joint ventures
- g. Management audits
- h. Management information systems
- i. Management reports and controls
- j. Profit improvement programs
- k. Corporate turnarounds
- l. Project control methods
- m. Operations research
- n. Public relations
- o. Social and minority group programs

2. Manufacturing

- a. Production planning and control
- b. Materials management

- c. Industrial engineering
- d. Manufacturing layout and workflow planning
- e. Automation
- f. Incentive programs
- g. Quality control
- h. Equipment utilization
- i. Plant management
- j. Plant location and site selection
- k. Materials handling
- l. Warehouse space planning and utilization
- m. Facilities and capabilities studies
- n. Standard costs
- o. Systems engineering
- p. Materials distribution
- q. Transportation

3. Personnel

- a. Management development
- b. Executive compensation
- c. Labour relations
- d. Personnel selection, placement, and records
- e. Training programs for non-management personnel
- f. Employee services and benefits
- g. Wage and salary administration

- h. Job evaluation and job rating systems
- i. Communication with employees
- j. Attitude surveys
- k. Psychological and behavioural studies
- l. Health and safety programs

4. Marketing

- a. Marketing strategy and organization
- b. Market and product research
- c. Consumer marketing
- d. Direct marketing and mailing
- e. Industrial marketing
- f. Merchandising
- g. Sales management
- h. Sales forecasting
- i. Sales training
- j. Advertising and sales promotion
- k. Marketing audits
- l. Product and customer service
- m. Dealer-operating support
- n. Physical distribution
- o. Salesman compensation
- p. Pricing policy

5. Finance and accounting

- a. General accounting
- b. Cost accounting
- c. Long-range financial planning
- d. Short-term planning, budgeting, and control
- e. Credit and collection
- f. Capital investment
- g. Marginal income analysis
- h. Financial information and reporting
- i. Financial planning
- j. Valuations and appraisals
- k. Taxes

6. Procurement

- a. Value analysis
- b. Commodity classifications
- c. Purchasing
- d. Inventory management and control
- e. Stores operation

7. Research and Development

- a. Basic and applied research and development
- b. Program administration and management
- c. Project determination and evaluation

- d. Project cost control
- e. Financial reporting of R&D effort

8. Packaging

- a. Packing function
- b. Packaging machinery
- c. Packaging and marketing design
- d. Structural design and testing

9. Administration

- a. Office management
- b. Office planning, design, and space utilization
- c. Integrated and electronic data processing

10. International Operations

- a. Area development
- b. Multinational company policies and strategies
- c. Licensing, joint ventures, and ownership
- d. Marketing
- e. Financing
- f. Tariffs and quotas

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