Manifestations of Cognitive Legitimation in the Client Consultant Relationship

<u>Working Version</u>

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Abstract

This paper examines manifestations of cognitive legitimation in the client-consultant relationship. The client organizational setting and the consultant proposed contribution is situated within a cognitive paradigm in which experienced challenges are contrasted against proposed recommendations/solutions. Organizational needs and proposed solutions are reduced into mental a paradigm comprised of socio-cognitive constructs that dominate the social exchange. The clients' reason for conformity into a proposed course of action is underpinned by cognitive associations about envisaged outcomes which cannot be tested until they have been materialised. This paper makes an afresh contribution to the literature by demonstrating a two stage process of cognitive legitimation. The first stage concerns the perceived alignment between means and outputs. Here, cognitive legitimation happens on basis of demonstrating a convincing manipulation of resources for achieving outcomes. The second stage concerns the consultants' demonstration of managing risk and implications on the assumptions that the desired changes were implemented. Here the proposed solutions are judged against internally situated interests and reactions. Cognitive legitimation occurs when there is conformity to a mental state that shifts the clients' original position.

Introduction

The study of language tactics that consultants exercise for generating legitimation with clients remains a neglected phenomenon of study in the literature. Legitimation is concerned with understanding how congruence and conformity is produced and maintained in the partaking of a social exchange (Suchman, 1995). In the client-consulting relationship congruence concerns the distribution but also accommodation of a service that the client purchases.

Existing studies focus on methods by which consultants' commodify business ideas by creating different lines of services that tap into different knowledge territories (Werr and Styhre, 2003; Heusinkveld, 2004). The consultants' growth and popularity has been argued to be based on new ideas and their legitimation which often remain the re-incarnation of old ones (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). The reasons behind the clients' conforming to the consultants' service is argued to depend on the business ideas' popularity but also the consultants' rhetoric and instrumentality for making them relevant to clients (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001).

This paper contributes to the literature by examining how consultants legitimise claims by focusing on manifestations cognitive legitimation (Suchman, 1995; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; Rescher, 1993). Cognitive legitimisation occurs in the consultants' exercise of instrumental rationality based on the technical features of their advice as well as on practices of rhetoric and impression management (Tedeschi, 1983 Clark, 1995). This paper argues that cognitive legitimation takes place as a contested phenomenon where competing claims for action are made. Such claims concern, the proposition of changes, access to resources, and decisions that can allow clients meet the desired objectives.

The paper argues that cognitive legitimation is demonstrated as a two stage process. The first stage concerns the demonstration of means by which desirable outcomes can be achieved in the client. Here, consultants have to achieve a causal representation between means and outcomes which comply against the client's cognitive paradigm. The second stage concerns the consultants' demonstration of managing risk following the assumed acceptance of their propositions. Here, consultants have to demonstrate that the produced reactions can be addressed. The paper argues that cognitive legitimation needs to take place in both arenas. Failure in one arena can signal the clients' rejection of the consultants' propositions onto the other area.

Research Context

Consultants and Cognitive Structures

The study of cognitive schemata represents a key field of research in organizational studies (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Morgan, 1980) but also corporate strategy (Hodgkinson, 1997; Prahalad and Bettis,1986; Prahalad, 2004). The association between the organizational environment and its confinement within cognitive representations is well captured by the work of March and Simon (1958), Tsoukas (2005), von Krogh and Ross (1995). Mental representations accommodate perceptions as become meaningful through experience (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; Gergen, 1999, 2001).

According to Bridwell-Mitchell and Mezias, (2012) cognitive legitimation can be defined as "the assessment that organizational activities are desirable, proper or appropriate because they match pre-constructed beliefs about ways of organizing work and generating social value" (p.192). Perceptions of organizational reality are

embodied into cognitive structures which represent mental associations (Daft and Weick, 1984; Scott, 1992, Scott, 1995). Such associations/schemata are situated in human experiences which are made explicit through reasoning and articulation (Volkema and Goreman, 1998; Allison and Hayes, 1996). Van Dijk (1993) writes that "social cognition entails the system of mental strategies and structures shared by group members, and in particular those involved in the understanding, production or representation of social objects, such as situations, interactions, groups and institutions" (p.110) Conformity between different mental structures requires the need to understand the different triggers of legitimation (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). Hence, the process of conformity remains socio-cognitive as it is dependent on comprehension, argumentation, and reasoning (Suchman, 1995; Shepherd and Zacharakis, 2003; Tyler, 2006).

Declarative Knowledge Claims

The consultant-client relationship is driven by the making of declarative knowledge statements about organizational needs, courses of action, and performance improvement practices (Pinault, 2001). Consulting claims seek to address and respond against the client's concerns and challenges (Sturdy and Wright, 2011). Organizational needs and solutions are confined in client-consultant conversations which help the two parties elicit and document a given organizational reality. Language constitutes a principle vehicle by which organizational problems are defined and re-defined so that the consultants' contribution can be made evident in the client (Werr and Styhre, 2003; Werr and Linnarsson, 2002).

The clients' acceptance, resistance, or/and rejection of the consultants' propositions are deeply situated into cognitive and mental structures from which

clients produce judgements (Sturdy et al., 2009). The representation of a business problem is thus reduced to mental propositions in which tools, models, and methods can be used to articulate them.

The Power of Persuasion

The consultants' persuasive power is a key theme in the management fashion literature (Abrahamson, 1996). The instrumentality to manipulate and embedded key concepts is a process of winning perceptions but also trust and long-term partnerships with clients (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005; Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). The management fashion literature argues that legitimation happens because key management concepts represent methods for realising outputs (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Suddaby and Greewood, 2001). The implication of this argument is that client organizational challenges which consultants have to address, are inevitably reduced to mental propositions (Gibson and Tesone, 2001). Such propositions are thought to help respond to the clients' needs but also exhibit attractive and feasible solutions (Bloomfield and Vurdoubakis, 2002).

The client-consultant relationship is situated within a cognitive discourse of competing claims in which actions and perceived outcomes dominate in conversations (Heusinkveld et. al, 2011). The consultants' accommodation and response to the clients' cognitive representations remains crucial for the degree to which consultants come to demonstrate an added-value service. The social construction of the clients' needs is argued to depend on the way language is used in order to shape understanding. Hence, understanding how organizational reality is represented within cognitive schemata remains necessary (Van Dijk, 1993) because it contributes to the management of the working relationship between the two parties.

Prior to implementation, the consultants' contribution can only be judged on its 'potential' rather than 'actual' outcomes (Clark, 1995). Conceptual projections become an ongoing discursive activity between the two parties.

Consultants have to make competing claims that need to be accommodated, opposed or rejected (Sturdy, 2012). However, the judgement of such outcomes remains subjected to the already existing cognitive models with which the organizational situation is represented in the first place (Shaw, 1997). The consultants' demonstration of value remains conceptual and fuelled by information asymmetries (Clark, 1993). This means that the cognitive representation of mental models remains paramount for how clients indentify but also evaluate the consultants' contribution. The legitimation of mental models with which advice and knowledge are represented become crucial for understanding how consultants attain legitimation.

Codification and Translation

One of the ways in which the communication and accommodation of consulting knowledge is conceptualised in the literature has been proposed by the work by Suddaby and Greeenwood (2001). This framework suggests that there are three principle stages that take place in the consultants' knowledge legitimation process, namely, a) codification, b) abstraction and c) translation. Codification is the process by which consultants are seeking to conceptualise their experience into some tangible form that can be made explicit and shared with others. Abstraction is the process of amplification by which the consultants are seeking to produce wider conclusions that can be made relevant to the clients' specific organizational settings. Translation is the process of seeking to embed the crafted consulting knowledge into the client's organizational context. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argue that the

process of translation can be understood as "an element of semantic movement or subtle shift in meaning as the original knowledge product is disembedded from its original context, abstracted into iconic form and reembedded in another, somewhat different organizational context" (p.939). In this paradigm, the consultants are perceived as the main actors who are seeking to capture but also apply the customisation of their knowledge service to clients. The client organization is perceived as the targeted recipient where the accumulated knowledge becomes customised. Such customisation is often discussed in the literature as a process that occurs in the course of the consultants' communication of advice. However, as the model assumes a change of mental structures remains crucial for understanding how the knowledge is actually situated and accommodated in the client. This is why reference is made to the 'subtle shift in meaning" (p.939). However, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) do not discuss the deeper socio-cognitive process by which knowledge can be embedded. Put differently, what are the specific triggers that contribute towards a shift of meaning?

A 'semantic movement' assumes a change of paradigm in which an organizational situation can be viewed differently. This argument suggests that the consultants' added-value becomes the point of the actual accommodation of a point of view that assists the client to tackle a situation more effectively. This is a crucial process for understanding how and why clients might be willing to accommodate a course of advice. This process of 'mental transition' remains an unexplored field in the consulting literature. Understanding the cognitive legitimation process of remains significant and yet lacks any systematic conceptualisation in the literature. This paper aims to conceptualise the process in which the cognitive shift/transition occurs in the way consulting advice and knowledge is accommodated in the client.

Current Limitations

A major current limitation in the consulting literature concerns the lack of examining the nuanced discursive practices that help demonstrate the achievement of cognitive congruence in the client. The client's perception of a particular organizational setting assumes a shift that results from the consultant's engagement. The consultant's force of argumentation is perceived as an important motor that can generate conviction (Werr and Styhre, 2003). However, little is known for how the development of varied/new mental representations might come to differ from existing ones. There is need to understand the underlying socio-cognitive triggers that can allow a shift in the clients' cognitive schemata.

The study of cognitive legitimation demonstrates that the representation of the environment becomes meaningful because it is situated within mental propositions. Thus, the process of articulation embodies the ontological presence of conception. Decisions can thus be understood as the resulting outcome seated in the existing reasoning. Mental representations exercise significant force in regulating how clients perceive the boundaries of their decisions. As von Krogh, Roos and Socum (1996) note "conceptualizations and resource allocation decisions may be sustained in organizations and develop into 'cognitive rigidities' due to conventional wisdom and past experiences" (p.163). This observation suggests that mental representations play an important role for the way behavioural pattern occur but are also constrained.

The process of conformance to a proposed or/and varied mental state requires an investigation into existing mental structures as well as the claims that can shift a client's paradigm of thinking. The change of cognitive schemata becomes a necessary precondition for understanding how a shift of mental representation is actually contained within a social context. For this reason it is necessary to study the shift between different mental propositions as these are contained within cognitive

schemata. Such study requires a more explicit understanding for how an organizational setting is represented and what inner dynamics allow it to shift. Even though cognitive legitiamtion is discussed in the consulting literature as an event that results from the dynamic interaction between consultants and clients, at the same time very little is known for how a change of cognitive schemata comes to be socio-cognitively represented. There is need to explore how the client's cognitive schemata are changing to the extent that the consultants' external advice/recommendations are accepted/rejected/negotiated. The discursive dimension of client-consultants negotiations and the extent to which they are able to shift existing cognitive schema currently remains absent in the literature.

Theory of Cognitive Schemata

The study of cognitive legitimation has been explored in the literature through the theory of cognitive schemata (Weick, 1993; Daft and Weick, 1994). This theory represents a viable framework for understanding the interplay between propositions and their absorption within their mental state (Moussavi and Evans, 1993). The term 'schema' was initially introduced by *Jean Piaget (1896-1980)* (1936, 1945, 1971, 1970b) in order to explain the relationship between the different blocks of knowledge. 'Schema' or 'schemata' represent a metaphor for understanding the ongoing human interaction between people and their environment as this is situated in cognitive representations (Kelley 1967, 1973; Weiner, 1985; Mitchell, Green and Wood, 1981; Staw, McKchnie and Puffer, 1983).   The usefulness of this framework is that it helps underline the deeper socio-cognitive processes by which decisions and judgements are made over a human situation. The theory suggests that any human experience situated in a social environment and is organized into cognitive patterns before it can

become meaningful. Such patterns help regulate behaviour but also constitute the boundaries of thinking and action (Daft and Weick, 1984).

In this socio-cognitive arena there is an ongoing interaction between assumptions, evaluations and meaning creation. Decision making requires an internalised representation of the world. Mental structures remain implicit within human cognition but yet represent a necessary precondition *for* action. Mental structures play an important *regulating* role allowing the individual to manipulate the environment according to his/her intentions. The value of this framework is in identifying how organizational reality is perceived within a social context and in patterns that remain meaningful. Hence, the perception of any situation can only be communicated in a manner when such patterns become understood by the other party. This means that a call for action can be treated in a serious or less receptive manner depending on the extent to which there is alignment, or misalignment, of the cognitive schemata between the people involved.

Cognitive schemata do not exclude the importance of emotions in the making of human judgements. As Maula (2006) notes judgements are contained within errors, stereotypes and bias. However, the theory suggests that the human conditioning of the environment does not remain detached from it but rather it becomes an internalised process. The work by Daft and Weick (1984) has been influential in this literature and for making explicitly the process of subjectivity by which reality is progressively realised and with initially consisting of different disorganized elements. The process by which a hidden reality become explicit and conscious become part of the sense-making process. In this literature, the emphasis on schemata seeks to capture the collective representation of the human experience as it remains meaningful for the individual. Decisions are perceived as situated in the process of

evaluating possibilities. However, the mental spin of the word 'schemata' underlines the process of reasoning and the wider mental effort towards sense-making (Daft and Weick, 1994).

An example that can help illustrate this proposition is the case of an organization that considers the possibility of downsizing its workforce. Such decision could be the result of responding to a challenging economic environment following the economic credit crunch. Assuming a declining level of sales and the need to streamline resources the client considers the decision to downsize as a possible solution for addressing the stringent economic challenge. The client members who are involved in this decision consider the possible implications of this decision in the context of its advantages and disadvantages. However, requesting the external help from a third party is an indication for how the client requires help for validating the different propositions which are at stake. The consultants' evaluation as well as recommendations are situated within a pattern of cognitive schemata that can be supportive but also refute the clients' decisions. The process of contesting the more optimal courses of action is the process at which the cognitive schemata from both parties come to be contained in this communicative interaction.
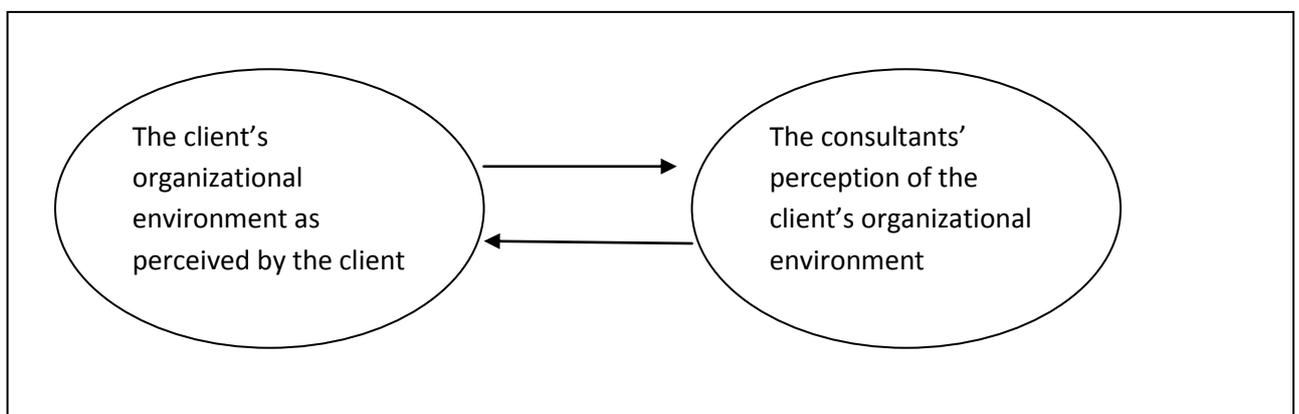
Figure 1 the representation of the environment between clients and consultants

Cognitive schemata in the client-consultant relationship

The application of the cognitive schemata theory helps provide a realistic context for understanding the emergence of propositions and these are articulated in the course of a client-consultant engagement. Most often the consultant represents an external party that conveys a point of view/claim that responds to the client situation. Such claim needs to be accepted/rejected/negotiated by the client. Consultants are unable to demonstrate the aftermath affect of their propositions in the client and at the time of making them. The consultants' communication of possible outcomes constitutes a crucial part of the communication within the client. Such process intensifies the importance for understanding how consulting claims might be accommodated by the client.

The client-consultant relationship underpins the *dual* character of cognitive schemata as these are contained in corresponding propositions. Cognitive schemata help situate how a client might perceive and articulate a given organizational setting within its different components. Moreover, cognitive schemata can be useful in operationalising the demonstration of cognitive legitimacy by exploring how contested claims are supported, rejected or/and negotiated. The wider implication of this argument is that any perception of organizational reality cannot but only be situated within the pattern of cognitive schemata that comprise it.

This paper seeks to highlight that a client's decision to accept or reject a course of consulting advice/recommendation requires a mental shift. Such shift implies a change of consideration in the way that a challenge/problem/situation is perceived. The contested interaction between consultants and clients remains dependent on the cognitive communication of the advice itself. The consultants' course of action is articulated within propositions that are considered for what possible outcome they

could generate once they are supported or rejected. However, this process of cognitive absorption, between similar and different points of view, brings to attention the importance of understanding the process of mental transition itself. That is, how and why existing new/varied cognitive schemata in the client, might be accepted and thus change as a result of the consultants' intervention. The process of acquiring advice requires a mental transition in which the consulting advice/recommendations/course of action has to be evaluated. Understanding how such transition happens remains significant for understanding how the organizational reality is represented in mental structures.

The implication of this argument is that the stage of 'translation', as discussed by Suddaby and Greenwood (2001), could not simply explain how consultants are imposing a set of meanings in the client because of the manner with which their ideas are manipulated within the specific organizational setting. The consultants' translation of advice and the clients' accommodation of such service requires the need to examine a deeper transition in the structure of the clients' mental schemata and for the way that an organizational situation is perceived by the members concerned.

Theory of Autopoiesis

The autopoiesis theory was developed by Maturana and Varela (1980) from studies of the cell in living organisms. The theory was introduced in the literature through the work by Luhamann (1990) and Von Grogh and Roos (1994). It is a framework that seeks to capture the inner organic processes that allow an organization to survive but also sustain its existence in its environment. This theory takes a system perspective for explaining cognitive legitimation. Hence, emphasis is placed on a 'system' that helps regulate its internal actions.

This theory proposes that organizations survive through the ongoing process of self-production which is the recreation of their already existing processes, functions and mechanisms. The already existing structures of a system play a foundational role for how the system is organized. Maturana, Varela and Uribe (1978) encapsulate the definition of the term as follows: "The autopoietic organization is defined as a unity by a network of productions of components which (i) participate recursively in the same network of products of components and (ii) realise the network of productions as unity in the pace in which the components exist" (p.188). Even though the theory is situated in the 'systems' field it nevertheless is distinct from the open-system theory in that it assumes that there is a closed ongoing interaction between the organizational and the environment.

The definition suggests that the interrelationship between the components sustains the unity of a structure. Hence an organization is bounded by its components but is at the same time dependent on them for its ongoing existence. von Grogh and Ross (1995) write "a system is the set of relations between its components, independent of the components themselves" (p.35). The relations remain independent in the sense of creating the principle organizing element for

sustaining the relationship between the different components. Even though the quality of the components might change what remains important is whether relationships can be changed.

Even though the theory was initially developed for the study of living systems within the field of neuro-biology it gained increased recognition within social science (Vicari, 1993). Its main proposition suggests that understanding already existing social processes that comprise a system are determining elements for understanding its boundaries and behaviour. Maula (2006) notes that "autopoiesis theory provides a useful theoretical basis for approaching the management of knowledge and for elaborating 'corporate epistemology' that explains how and why organizations know" (p.53). Such relevance is founded on the proposition that knowledge structures are situated within the functions and organizing elements of the system which sustain it. In contrast to open system theory, autopoiesis suggests that all systems are closed and do not automatically respond to reactions from the external environment. Instead, knowledge about the external world becomes internalised and conditioned by the already existing relationship that comprise the unity of the system. For example, an organization's ability to respond to a recent product-innovation developed by a competitor is firmly situated within the existing governing relations that are reproduced in the course of the employees' endeavours to come up with a similar innovation. Gaining access to knowledge is not viewed as an outside reality that is made accessible only but it is about understanding the already existing internal relations that might determine and what and how it can be known. As von Krogh and Roos (1994) note "the human being uses past experiences to orient itself in new situation. Thus previous experience will affect new experiences gained." (p.50). In this theory, the self-production of knowledge is highly situated in already

existing processes that organize and also maintain the system as a unit. This means already existing structures regulate the embodiment of new knowledge on the basis of already existing relations within the system itself. Maula (2006) writes "from the perspective of autopoiesis, learning is an expression of structural coupling in which the intention is to maintain compatibility between the operation of the system and its environment" (p. 54).

The implication of this theory to the study of cognitive legitimation for management consulting is twofold. Firstly, legitimation does not depend on the conformity to an external set of propositions communicated from an external party. The possibility of a client firm becoming receptive to consulting recommendations and to the extent of changing its current course of actions remains remote. This is because consulting knowledge as contained in the form of business tools which cannot be translated into the client as for example suggested by Suddaby and Greenwood (2001).

According to the autopoiesis theory translation is not feasible as a process for legitimising advice in the client to the extent that the introduced changes can cause disruption or/and lack of continuity. Hence the accommodation of new structures within the clients' already existing system remains a crucial process for how and why consulting propositions are perceived as legitimate. Secondly, the continuity of the organization remains a determining factor for how change from its current position is evaluated. This means that client needs to self-legitimise consulting propositions within the existing associations that sustain the system. Here, the client plays an active role in situating the role that new knowledge could play by creating connections that help prolong the firm's continuity. A key process concerns the

process of observation that allows the creation of new norms in which propositions are embedded in the organization.

Methodology

The study of cognitive legitimation is concerned with understanding how mental schemata achieve conformance and congruence in a social exchange (Von Krogh and Roos, 1995). Such schemata are embedded in the social context in which they occur. Assumptions and perceptions of organizational reality are made explicit in the course of the interaction between people (Burger and Luckman, 1964; Daft and Weick, 1984).

In the context of the client-consultant relationship cognitive legitimation is defined as the client's *conformity to a proposed mental state* that results from the consulting engagement. However, we are interested in the consultant's nature of input that can cause of a possible shift in the mental representation of a situation. Hence, it is not enough for consultants to communicate a service that does not correspond to the client situation and to the extent that a change of mental representation can occur. A shift of dominant thinking remains crucial for appreciating how consultants demonstrate their value-adding to the client. Moreover, a shift of thinking can indicate a deeper shift in the interpretation of a challenge.

The study of the social context constitutes prerequisite for the use of an interpretive methodology and for understanding how legitimation occurs (Straus and Gorbin, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The study of communication remains a central vehicle for understanding how dominant thinking might change as a result of the consultants' providence of information and argumentation.

Data Sample and Access

This paper obtained data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Thirty interviews have been conducted with fifteen client organizations. Moreover, participant observation on two consulting projects was made possible with the result of gaining access to instances of client-consultant interaction.

Interviews

Interview access was obtained with fifteen organizations in the UK. Contact was made through the use of snowballing from a previous research project. Contact information was obtained through direct client recommendations. Twenty three organizations were conducted in total from which ten responded positively to the invitation. Moreover, the researcher was able to make use from alumni members working in senior management posts. This information was made available through two educational establishments affiliated to the researcher. Thirty four alumni members were contacted from which seven had made use of consultants and five were willing to participate in the study.

An electronic letter was drafted and sent electronically following a brief telephone conversation with the lead client. The letter outlined the project's detailed aim and requested access to an interview that would be conducted at the client's site.

An explicit request made to those participating in the project was interviewing the lead as well as an additional member that had active involvement in the project. Even though it was difficult for the researcher to know the job role/identity of the additional participant at the time of making contact, it was nevertheless made clear that an additional interview was desired for obtaining additional information in order to compare and contrast the data. Some clients already indicated colleagues that were willing to participate in the project prior to the interview, whilst others requested

that such information could be only made available after the interview was conducted. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes long and were digitally recorded and conducted between the years of 2007-2012.

Figure 1 The client projects and the interviewees participating in the study

Client	The client organizational Issue	Interview participants and their positions
Client 1	Investing into renewable energies	Interviewee 1: County councillor Interviewee 2: Public officer
Client 2	Developing performance management indicators	Interviewee 1: HR manager Interviewee 2: Project team leader
Client 3	Improving moral and high turnover in employees	Interviewee 1: Chief executive Interviewee 2: HR manager
Client 4	Knowledge Transfer	Interviewee 1:Managing director Interviewee 2: HR manager
Client 5	Research and Development	Interviewee 1: Research and development Manager Interviewee 2: Team Employee
Client 6	Creating capacity for the HR department	Interviewee 1: HR manager Interviewee 2: HR manager assistant
Client 7	Tackling future market challenges for enhancing competitiveness	Interviewee 1:Chief executive Interviewee 2: Project employee

Client 8	Internal restructuring	Interviewee 1: Operations manager Interviewee 2: Employee
Client 9	Changing the internal departmental culture	Interviewee 1: Marketing manager Interviewee 2: Employee
Client 10	Improving employee loyalty in the organization	Interviewee 1: HR manager Interviewee 2: Team Leader
Client 11	Consideration for outsourcing internal practices	Interviewee 1: Finance manager Interviewee 2: Operations manager assistant
Client 12	Overcoming resistance towards change	Interviewee 1: HR manager Interviewee 2: HR assistant
Client 13	Identifying how to proceed with merger between organizations	Interviewee 1: Chief executive Interviewee 2: Operations assistant
Client 14	Improving B2B practices	Interviewee 1: Marketing manager Interviewee 2: Employee
Client 15	Tackling economic pressures following decline of revenues	Interviewee 1: Sales manager Interviewee 2: Marketing assistant

Participant Observation

Access to participant observation was obtained on two consulting projects, one from the public sector and the second from the private sector. The first project has been completed whilst the second remains ongoing.

The first project concerns an educational establishment situated in the South East of England. The project lasted for eleven months and concerned the internal restructuring of the educational institution following ongoing evaluations from external regulating authorise regarding meeting its performance indicators. The internal restructuring involved a strategic change management plan where the senior management team was requested to consider the performance of its staff as well as the offering of its educational services to students. The organizational challenge that the institution faced was the need to comply against increased demands imposed by the government and as becoming a precondition to attaining ongoing funding. The possibility of introducing radical change to the organization became an extremely challenging event because of the government's increasing demands. Moreover, the consideration of the changes that needed to be introduced onto the staff created new implications the client did not know how to address.

For this project access was obtained through the snowballing effect in which the lead client happened to be an alumni member of the researcher's residence and who was made aware of the researcher's project. A total of sixteen consultation meetings took place and the researcher was allowed to observe the discussions concerning the progress of the project. The duration of the meetings lasted approximately two hours and took place at the client's sites.

The second project concerned the deployment of strategic training targeted on branch managers who were responsible for a large clothing retailer chain. The

consultants were involved in designing a strategic framework that was aimed at creating a new approach to training and which would be well integrated into a performance initiative scheme. This project began 2012 and is expected to finish towards the end of 2013. The project comprised of three phases, namely, a) design, b) implementation and c) evaluation. Each phase was followed with an experimental period in which the client had to put into action the 'agreed plans'. The training was delivered in three sites which comprised of a) the client, b) an external venue and c) the consultants' site. The discussions became often lively with both parties expressing openly their concerns. Six client members were involved in the project from which two were replaced during the first four months for reasons that are not clear to the researcher. Electronic notes were taken in the course of the meetings. Participant observation was possible in all three sites and where the training was deployed.

Data analysis

Combining the interview and participant observation data became a challenging task in terms of codifying diverse information into manageable categories. The data analysis took place in three stages.

The first stage comprised of the analysis of the organizational issue that was at stake in each project. The recorded data provided the opportunity to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how the client issue/challenge/need was reiterated differently and by revising the testimonies of the client members. At this stage emphasis was placed on identifying the articulation of the organizational issue but also exploring the representation of clients' mental schemata. As Table 1 shows categories were created for capturing the client's perceived need. In this context the

client's cognitive schemata represented the more subjective interpretations that were perceived as dominant in the organization.

By having access to two client members it provided the opportunity to compare and contrast how the organizational issue was articulated within argumentation. It was noted that the organizational issue was captured in the marking of specific statements which situated the specific organizational challenge. The representation of the organizational issue as contained within cognitive schemata as these are represented within the individuals' goals and intentions. However, the study of the clients' articulation of the organizational issue indicated the perceived obstacle/blockage that was perceived as preventing the client from reaching the organizational goals.

Table 1: The clients' articulation of the organizational challenge in the project

Client	The client organizational Issue	Organizational Challenge	The perceived organizational obstacles
Client 1	Investing into renewable energies	The real issue for us was whether to invest in renewable energies or not. We were not sure if we should undertake such serious investment. (Participant A)	When you engage in any major business initiative you have to think about the 'others' – not just what you think is right (Participant B)
Client 2	Developing performance management indicators	The problem was the seemingly irrelevant performance indicators we were using. Time for example was compromising quality. We had to do something to address this. (Participant A)	I think we knew what needed to happen. The issue is how do you actually organize this into something manageable, something you can work with (Participant B)
Client 3	Improving moral and high turnover in employees	It is not simple for us to change the overall feeling of work completely, to make this an enthusiastic and really positive place to work. (Participant A)	The problem is that they don't think we listen. So whatever we do is I think taken wrongly – like we have a hidden agenda

			(Participant B)
Client 4	Knowledge Transfer	I am a strong believer in the power of our tacit knowledge. The idea was to make this more wide and participative (Participant A)	We wanted an external point of view, some better insight in terms of how could carry it out successfully (Participant B)
Client 5	Research and Development	This is a hot potato for every organization. My aim was to truly make this work for us (Participant A)	The problem is that you get this point where everything become stagnated – we tried lots of things in the past (Participant B)
Client 6	Creating capacity for the HR department	We were struggling to manage our workflow. We were getting flooded with work from other departments. (Participant A)	I think the problem was simply the fact that we could not say 'no!' (Participant B)
Client 7	Tackling future market challenges for enhancing competitiveness	We experienced the same issue like all organizations. Improving competitiveness is an ongoing process and not just a 'one-off' (Participant A)	We are working in a cutting throat knife environment here. We need to get it right and not go round in circles (Participant B)
Client 8	Internal restructuring	We merged with another organization and there were lots of different options for how we should restructure(Participant A)	The issue I think in a sentence for us was how do you really bring all these different stakeholders and mindsets together (Participant B).
Client 9	Changing the internal culture	I think this was our biggest challenge because for a long people had been used to doing things in the X and Y ways. (Participant A)	I suppose our most immediate threat was resistance! (Participant B)
Client 10	Improving employee loyalty	Our chief executive started to get concerned about levels of high turnover. We are a service provider and having long-term relationships with customers is crucial for us. (Participant A)	I think we really think the problem was that it would escalate and it would be too late for us to react then (Participant B)

Client			
Client 11	Consideration for outsourcing internal practices	How much of it we should keep it inside and how much we should leave other to take care of. This was our main concern to outsource or not to outsource. (Participant A)	I think that you want that external perspective – this other point of view to compare and contrast with. We did not have this internally (Participant B)
Client 12	Overcoming resistance towards change	There are people have that have worked for this firm for many years feel strongly attached to this company. So change yes it was painful. (Participant A)	I think the problem for us then was that we could not find a way to smoothen our intention and gain support from everyone involved (Participant B)
Client 13	Identifying how to proceed with merger between organizations	We wanted to reduce waste and the duplication of resources. So the process of merging involved different stakeholders and different agendas. (Participant A)	The issue is political in my view because you have lots of 'territorial people' (Participant B)
Client 14	Improving B2B practices	We strongly felt that we needed to develop stronger alliances with manufacturers. For example, we could combine breakfast with chocolate serial offering new tastes. (Participant A)	The challenge for us was how to change our thinking and corporate focus. It is not just the final consumer we should target but other suppliers too (Participant B)
Client 15	Tackling economic pressures following decline of revenues	I guess for us quest was how can we work smarter in what we do. How can we use an external agency to help us reflect and put things in a better context for ourselves. (Participant A)	There can be lots of things you can do. However, what is the best action you should take. I think this was really the issue for us (Participant B)

The second stage of analysis concerned the collection of those instances in which the clients compared their position with that of the consultant. Here attention was paid to the clients' reasoning in comparing and contrasting the consultants' argumentation. Having access to the participant observation proved particularly useful as the researcher was able to physically witness how the consultants were presenting their propositions. Attention was paid to how the presentation of an organizational issue was shifting or not. This stage of analysis demonstrated a clear development of mental patterns that were reinforced throughout the interview. For example, one of the interviewees suggested that "We were struggling to manage our workflow. We were getting flooded with work from other departments." This statement captures the main concern as experienced by the client. However, the point of importance is that the organizational challenge existed because of the inability of the client to exercise control over processes that could be responsible for generating a different outcome. For example, it was perceived as impossible to persuade the different departments not to direct their tasks to the HR department. Moreover, the HR department found it impossible to impose penalties on other individuals/department that were not respecting the volume of work that was channelled to them. In this context, the HR people found themselves in a stringent situation with having little opportunity to exercise control over their own tasks.

The findings demonstrated that the presence of *regulation* remains an important dimension for how clients identify the organizational challenge but also the reasons for which they are asking for external help from consultants. Regulation started to emerge as a dominant theme with reference to how an organizational reality was represented and also became possible to change.

Even though regulation initially seemed to share similar connotation with argumentation it became apparent that they did not always represent the same thing. The regulation of cognitive schemata indicated a process of assimilation in which consulting propositions were accepted or rejected on the basis of their possibility to produce desired outputs.

The third stage of analysis was comprised of exploring more specific instances were clients regulation was perceived to have an important affect on the organization. Attention was paid to documenting how a shift in the client's thinking was becoming dominant in accepting or rejecting the consultants' propositions. Here, two arenas of interaction are identified as most prominent but also necessary. The first is the point at which consultants have to demonstrate the means by which the client is able to achieve the desirable output. The second is the consultants' demonstration for how risk can be managed as a result of the changes that follow from conforming to a new mental state. The paper argues that a shift in the client's paradigm of thinking happens when conformity occurs in both of these arenas. Put differently clients judge the consultants' method and likelihood impact of intervention on basis of these two areas simultaneously. Client conformity is not just fuelled by the consultant's power of argumentation. It is also conditioned by the client's perceived limitations regarding the tangible outputs and their implication. Hence, an achieved alignment in both arenas is necessary for cognitive legitimation to occur. A key factor that influences how consultants exercise their cognitive legitimacy is the clients' ability to challenge the consultants' claims.

Findings: Triggers that Fuel Conformity

This paper argues that cognitive legitimation occurs as a two stage process. The first stage concerns the consultants' argumentation for how the mobilisation of actions is necessary in order to achieve the desired outputs. The second stage concerns the consultants' management of perceived risks and implications if the proposed changes were incorporated. Our reference to 'means' comprises the consultants' proposed organizational actions that are perceived as necessary by the consultants and which can involve the acquisition of resources, the change of organizational practices, and the making of decisions. The clients' representation of the organizational issue is confined to cognitive patterns that have to be understood and managed by the consultant. However, the consultant also needs to demonstrate the more specific organizational means by which specific targets need to be achieved.

The second stage concerns the management of risks and implications that follows from the consultants' propositions. Clients are concerned about the wider reactions produced had the changes/output occurred. In accepting that the means are optimal for meeting the desired outputs, clients envisage the implications triggered by their perceived organizational constrains and interests. Such implications remain conceptual as the consultants' propositions have not been materialised in the organization. If clients perceived that the potential risks are not threatening then conformity to a mental state is likely to occur.

The clients' reactions to the consultants' propositions remains interactive. Consultants have to cognitively legitimise how their propositions might not generate adverse conditions. The consultants' method of argumentation is crucial for how conviction happen. The consultants' cognitive legitimation occurs in showing how

organizational risks can either be managed or minimised. This paper argues that clients judge the credibility of the perceived methods by which consultants support their propositions for reaching end-outcomes. The immediacy for reaching organizational ends becomes paramount for judging the consulting intervention. Cognitive legitimation is confined to the symbolic but also literal manifestation of alignment between means and outputs.

First Stage of Cognitive Legitimation

Means and Desirable Outcomes

Clients discuss their evaluation over the consultants' propositions by alluding to how the proposed means could help change their way of addressing an organizational issue. 'Means' denotes the mobilisation of internal and external activities that might require resources, expenditure, restructuring, and other similar changes. For example, the consultants' proposition in suggesting the development of a new business model for a food manufacturing firm followed earlier strategic considerations. However, the decision to launch the design of a business model results from the clients' conformity to the consultants' suggestion and for accepting the proposed change. The client's evaluation of the consultants' proposition remains conceptual but also exists in competition with its current but also proposed mental states. The consultants' propositions generate different/new associations that were not immediately obvious. The acceptance or rejection of such new associations is influenced by the perceived belief that desired outcomes can be achieved. Outputs represent a desired result that can take place after the client shifted/incorporated new or different methods of working. The clients can evaluate, challenge, and reject the consultants' propositions. We do not assume that consultants are able to

influence clients because of the power of their ideas. However, we propose that cognitive legitimation is achieved when there is conformity to a mental state that shifts the client's original position. The following interviewees make explicit reference to the consultants' input which triggered their own internal reflection and reconsideration of the given situation. The organizational situation as confined to cognitive schemata is challenging but at the same time shifting the clients' understanding. The prospect of realising the needed outcome and through the consultants' intervention generates attraction in the client that the desired outcome remains feasible.

> There's no doubt in my mind that the consultants were helping the senior management of this company discover an amazing amount of things about the business that we didn't know – perhaps we should have known, but we didn't know. We were able to achieve a lot more through realising what consultants suggested. For us this was an important outcome for the business (John).

> I believe we accepted what the consultants suggested because they helped demonstrate how and why our desired goals could be achieved through the suggested plans (Mark)

> For us to be able to change what we were doing… I really think we needed to think in terms of a new paradigm – sometimes I think they call it a 'paradigm shift'. The consultants helped us do this and I can say this. We could see that we could do things had we changed. This is what really was driving this project forwards (Elizabeth)

> I thought it was a cracking way of understanding my own role, and, it seemed logical and it seemed well researched and backed up with good evidence to at least give it a go, and that's what I did I gave it a go and I continue to try and practice some of the things that they suggested I needed to improve on. (Andrew)

It is evident from the excerpts that a change of thinking precedes the realisation of how the consultants' propositions could help achieve the desired outputs. Andrew's reference to the 'cracking way of understanding my own role; Elizabeth's reference to the 'new paradigm' indicate a change of

cognition in terms of how initial perceptions were challenged. The client's realisation of insight is contrasted with earlier conceptions and these are confined within the members' mental structures. We do not assume that clients act on the consultants' advice because they are attracted by it. We argue that cognitive legitimation represents a social arena which contributes to the clients' evaluation and attractiveness to consultants.

> They will have a look at the technology-mix that they put in there. If we don't have the right level of knowledge to be able to actually say 'does this make sense, does this not make sense' we will do some research. But if we're still lacking on it then we'll use other organisations like Bartner, or like anybody else to say 'we've had this proposal we're not really sure about this, From your clients that you have on your list, has anybody else used this sort of technology? Have they had these sort of benefits? What's the sort of issues?' So we actually evaluate the proposals that come back to make sure what they come up with is actually fit for purpose for us. (Mary)

> They certainly helped us understand the dynamics of the market more fully than we perhaps had on our own. They had two consultants assigned to the long-term strategy work, and they did nothing else but long-term strategy for the first eight-week period, and they were examining everything: competitor analysis, geographical sector analysis, they were looking at the dynamics of the ferry industry in other parts of Europe – there was an international dimension as well, one of the consultants was Italian and one was Spanish, and they brought in sort of a completely fresh view, really to our market, because they had previous experience of working in it. But they were very good, and they were very quick – they learnt very, very quickly. And we were obviously able to furnish them with all the information they needed to make assessments and to go off and research particular ideas and…dynamics of the industry as it exists (Nathan).

According to Nathan the consultants' 'completely fresh view' is contrasted with an already existing conception of organizational reality that is considered stagnated. The question is what make the consultants' view insightful when compared to the client? In response to this question we argue that consultants offer a different/new mental model in which the mechanisms for achieving outputs offer a rationale that is attractive because of the plausibility for achieving the desirable outcome.

Second Stage of Cognitive Legitimation

Risks and Implications

The second stage process of legitimation happens when clients consider the aftermath implications had the initial changes been implemented. At this stage, clients might accept the consultants' suggested means for reaching outputs. However, they engage into a *visioning process* where all possible implications are considered. At this stage clients make their concerns and oppositions explicit as triggered by the already existing interests at stake. Whereas the consultants' means of achieving outputs is assessed against the *immediacy* of producing the desired results, here clients consider the immediate consequences within the internal organizational environment. Hence, the focus shifts from the desired business solutions to the produced reactions.

The clients' intertia to change can be part of the initial organizational challenge. We do not assume that the implementation is a timely matter that is only discussed after a proposed solution has been found. However, we argue that the clients' conformity to a mental state requires from consultants to demonstrate that risks and implications can be minimised as well as managed. Hence, consultants have to address and respond to the clients' contingent organization reactions in a way that the perceived desired outputs will not be threatened.

In the following excerpt Hazel argues that even though the client organization was satisfied with the proposed changes the possible implications caused fear. The consultants had to work with translating the application of the proposed means by understanding the more particular reactions. Even though the client's perceived organizational reactions remain part of conversations with the consultants at earlier instances, at this stage they become the focus of attention. Matthew argues that

trusting the consultants was essential when the aftermath reactions could be managed. Such management of risk takes into consideration the possibility of failure.

> I remember we were working on trying to reduce our turnover. As I said the consultants proposed a series of changes that we accepted. However we were afraid not to get back to square one. What really made the difference is understand how the changes would not jeopardise what we wanted to achieve (Hazel)

> When you change something you get reactions. Yes it all sounds nice and logical but the question for us was the repercussions. This was critical for our relationship with the consultants and for trusting them. (Matthew)

Our analysis shows that clients realise the rational limitations of the consultants' propositions. Hence, the attractiveness in identifying an ideal solution demonstrates a cognitive alignment with a different mental paradigm and this is accommodated in accepting a different business model and the proposed changes associated with it. However, the clients are also concerned about the aftermath implications and once the solution is reached. As Jonathan indicates in the following excerpts there is need to achieve some form of dissasotiation between the desired output and the actual implications that could be triggered from it. The clients' feared challenges include the human factor. Peoples' reactions needs to consider because it can affect the aftermath acceptance or opposition to the proposed changes. When the consultants engage with the client at the level of addressing the perceived risks then conformity to a proposed mental model is reinforced.

> The truth is that sometimes you know what the ideal solution could be. Of course you need the facts, you need the justification, to actually know this is what you need to do. So when consultants are able to demonstrate with vigour what is the best course of action that is half of the battle won. However, what you know in your mind to be the ideal solution does not mean that it is going to work. When you work with people it all gets messy. So you need to think about 'what next?' The consultants eased our fears

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> and this was important for us say yes! We then accepted to go for it (Jonathan)

> It is difficult to describe how many good ideas perish because people are not willing to support them. So when the consultants suggested that we needed a clear methodology for addressing the problem this all sounded good but then we had to work with all the I can call them 'waves' of deep concerns. We twisted things around and this helped us support the initiative. (Lauren).

According to Jonathan and Lauren their discussed cognitive models are concerned with receptivity and interpretation at a collective level. The client engages with making interpretations about the cognition and the shared mental models as entertained by other members. The sound rational propositions that might be judged against their methodological vigour and for achieving outcomes are now contrasted against the subjective limitations and constraints of the organization. Such tension indicates the rational dimension of the consultants' advice in terms of its logical structure and propositions. However such trend is contrasted against the client's conception of the members' judgement behaviour that might act as an obstacle to its implementation. In order to overcome such resistance the clients want from the consultants to deal with the discussed concerns and introduce changes to the proposed advice.

Conclusion

The social exchange between clients and consultants in confined to an interaction in which the conception but also articulation of the organizational reality and its needed actions are addressed. The clients' acceptance, opposition or/and rejection of consulting propositions are situated within cognitive constructs. Understanding the reasons that lead to conformity between the clients' existing and the consultants' proposed requires the need to understand how cognitive legitimation happens. This

paper argues that cognitive legitimation occurs as a two stage process. The first stage is concerned with the demonstration of how means can be manipulated in order to achieve the desirable outputs. Such demonstration takes place within a rationalistic discourse in which propositions about action are evaluated for their methodological vigour and logic. However, the second stage of legitimation concerns the envisaged management of risks associated with the achieved outputs. During this visioning process clients are interested in the consultants' competency for addressing the internal organizational constraints associated with proposed changes or courses of action.

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