



## Between ‘best’ and ‘good enough’: How consultants guide quality in environmental assessment



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### ABSTRACT

Quality enhancement in environmental assessment tends to be connected to control mechanisms and best-practice guidelines. This paper takes an alternative approach examining quality performance through the lenses of consultants' perceptions of appropriate action, primarily in relation to the scoping phase. The study builds on interviews with Swedish consultants. The interviews are analysed by using a recently published theoretical framework focusing on practitioners' spaces for action. The analysis reveals that quality is highly open for interpretation and that consultants have a strong position for guiding quality performance, partly due to the key knowledge they hold. Their action is strongly guided by how the consultants perceive their responsibility, requiring a balance between maintaining good relationships with their clients through 'good enough' performance and maintaining a good professional reputation by undertaking what they themselves perceive as a 'best' practice. These findings indicate a need to reconsider the research in this field, promoting a shift of focus away from the dominance of quality enhancement measures and engage with issues of consultants' and other practitioners' perceptions of their responsibility in respect of quality performance.

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### 1. Introduction

A central concern in the field of environmental assessment (EA) is the need to raise quality (Jalava et al., 2010; Peterson, 2010; Retief, 2010; Sandham et al., 2013). There are many dimensions of quality which could be addressed, however this paper engages with quality under the lenses of consultants' perceptions of appropriate action, particularly in relation to the scoping phase. At the core of quality enhancement efforts are ideas of 'best' practice. EA practice has long been criticised for not achieving best practice, which in itself is viewed differently from varying perspectives (e.g. Benson, 2003; Geneletti, 2006; Gunn and Noble, 2011; Hildén et al., 2004; Kågström et al., 2013; Landim and Sánchez, 2012; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Steinemann, 2000). Studies of how EA should be applied, including best practice guidelines, dominate EA literature (Retief, 2010). In this literature, ways to ensure that these guidelines or other quality standards are met are often linked to different control mechanisms, such as enhanced regulation, different kinds of review systems and licensing of practitioners (Kruopienė et al., 2009; Lyhne et al., 2015; Sandham et al., 2013). However, there is limited empirical evidence on whether these types of mechanisms are significant in raising EA quality (Lyhne et al., 2015). Despite all efforts made, there still seems to be "a significant

gap between the best practice thinking represented in the research and practice literature and the application of EIA on the ground" (Morgan, 2012: p. 11). There is thus a need for further examination of why this is the case.

A central component of EA processes and one that strongly affects quality performance is scoping – deciding what issues and impacts are included or excluded in an EA (Sandham et al., 2013; Weston, 2000; Wood et al., 2006) and how these are addressed. At the heart of this work is determination of significance, i.e. the issues and impacts determined significant enough to be addressed. Although the practices of determining significance in EA processes are poorly understood, some studies suggest that decisions made about what is significant are strongly guided by context, values, sense-making and subjectivity (Ehrlich and Ross, 2015; Lawrence, 2007; Lyhne and Kørnø, 2013; Wood, 2008). There remains a need for more in-depth examinations of just how EA practitioners are guided by these kinds of factors in their decisions and actions regarding determining significance and the implications for EA quality.

Despite this weak understanding of the connections between regulations and quality, it has been suggested that meeting regulatory demands is a key concern for practitioners (Landim and Sánchez, 2012; Morgan et al., 2012; Runhaar et al., 2013). It is therefore of particular interest to examine quality performance resulting from determination of significance in relation to practitioners' concern about meeting regulatory demands, in order to: i) examine how this concern is perceived and used by practitioners when deciding on issues

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and impacts they perceive as significant and therefore appropriate to address in EA and ii) examine their possibilities for acting in line with their perceptions of appropriate action, i.e. their possibilities for influencing quality. Environmental assessment in this study refers to both project-level environmental impact assessment (EIA) and policy, plan and programme-level strategic environmental assessment (SEA).

The aim of the present study is to shed new light on EA quality performance, using a recently developed conceptual framework focusing on EA practitioners' possibilities for shaping practice (Kågström and Richardson, 2015). The framework builds on earlier work by planning theorists (Grange, 2012; Healey and Underwood, 1978; Tait, 2002), combined with elements from frame theory. The framework is grounded in EA practitioners' perceptions of appropriate ways to act. These perceptions are guided in turn by socially constructed frames (cf. Healey and Underwood, 1978; Schön and Rein, 1994; Van Gorp, 2007). Another important dimension is whether individual EA practitioners' decisions on appropriate actions are enacted and agreed upon in EA processes (Kågström and Richardson, 2015). This approach adds to the growing stream of research examining the importance of EA practitioners' and other actors' values, norms, experiences and interrelations for decision making and action throughout EA processes (e.g. Beattie, 1995; Blicharska et al., 2011; Cashmore and Richardson, 2013; Kørnøv and Thissen, 2000; Kørnøv et al., 2014; Lawrence, 2000; Morgan, 2012; Richardson, 2005; Wilkins, 2003).

The focus in the present study is on the thoughts and actions of consultants, who despite their central role in EA practice (Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009) remain curiously under-investigated (Landim and Sánchez, 2012). It is well known that developers contract consultants to advise on and undertake case-specific EA work. In some national contexts, there are also examples of consultants supporting the work of reviewers (Ahmad and Wood, 2002; Glasson et al., 2012; Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009). However, studies on national contexts indicate that the level of trust and cooperation in relations between consultants and, respectively, developers, reviewers and regulators, vary from high (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009) to low (Chanthy and Grünbühel, 2015). It also varies widely within national contexts, e.g. in Sweden consultants are very well trusted in some cases, with good relations to developers (Kågström and Richardson, 2015), while in other cases they have less influence and may even have their access to important information restricted by the developer (Isaksson and Storbjörk, 2012). Other studies show that since consultants are dependent on developers, in certain national contexts they act to protect these client relationships (Snell and Cowell, 2006) and make biased decisions in favour of their developer clients (Kruopienė et al., 2009).

The paper continues as follows. First, the methods used for collecting and analysing the empirical material are presented, followed by a section presenting the theoretical basis and refinements for the study and a section presenting the findings. The paper closes with a discussion of new insights on quality offered by using the framework and suggested implications for research.

## 2. Method

The conceptual framework developed by Kågström and Richardson (2015) guided the collection and analysis of empirical material. However, during the analysis the framework was refined to clarify the connection between restrictions on practitioners' action and associated restriction on quality performance (Table 1). Following the framework, insights were sought into: how people perceive themselves and their situation; what they perceive as appropriate action; and their possibilities to have their action accepted by relevant others. An interview guide was therefore developed focusing on consultants' thoughts and actions concerning the subject. During a pilot phase, questions were developed

**Table 1**

Sub-dimensions guiding EA quality developed here from the original dimensions of potential and actual space for action in Kågström and Richardson (2015).

Sub-dimensions from the original dimension: Potential space for action	
<i>Self-restriction</i>	<i>Initial restrictions on EA quality</i>
–How is it appropriate for me to act?	–Which perspectives are acted on and argued for?
Sub-dimensions from the original dimension: Actual space for action	
<i>Interactional restriction</i>	<i>Further restrictions on EA quality</i>
–How is it possible for me to act?	–Which perspectives are accepted and enacted?

and adjusted and broad themes were identified. The interview guide was organised around the following themes:

- What do practitioners perceive to be appropriate action?
- What actions do they take?
- What possibilities and restrictions do they have for acting in line with their perceptions of appropriate action?
- What can they do differently in order to improve practice?

Semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), lasting about one hour each, were held with 19 EA consultants. Four of the interviews were carried out in November–December 2012 and the remainder between March and June 2013. The informants were selected from a list of key names in Swedish EA practice created in consultation with consultants and other EA practitioners. After 19 interviews, saturation of data was reached. The informants came from six of Sweden's largest consulting firms in the EA field, within smaller and larger cities, and were all active consultants each with between 8 and 20 years of EA experience. Their disciplinary background ranged from environmental and soil sciences, ecology and agronomy to landscape architecture, planning, economy and cultural geography. The consultants had all previously worked as, or were currently working as, EA coordinators. This role in particular made them relevant interview subjects for examining issues of EA quality, because it usually involves coordinating the work of sub-contractors, writing EA reports and taking responsibility for the overall quality of the consultant team's EA work.

The interview guide served as a base for the interviews and made it possible to formulate interview questions and pose follow-up questions in a way that suited each interview situation, without losing track of the themes and aim of the interviews (Trost, 2005). Where possible, questions were formulated in a way that encouraged the interviewees to thoroughly explain and reflect on their practice. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, in order to allow full attention to be kept on what was said during the interviews and the interview material to be revisited, by keeping the words of the informants and interviewer intact (Bryman, 2008).

The transcripts were analysed, searching for what “appear[ed] to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied” (Bryman, 2008: p. 542). The reading focused in particular on: delimitations and critical dividing lines between consultants' perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate actions for addressing certain perspectives on issues and impacts in EA; relations between perceptions

**Table 2**

Categories developed for self-restriction and interactional restriction.

1. Self-restriction	2. Interactional restriction
Quality performance in connection with perceptions of:	Between consultants and developers:
a) 'Good enough' practice ('level of approval')	a) Situations of agreement
b) 'Best' practice	b) Situations of disagreement
c) Consultants' role and responsibility	

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