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Unpacking the client(s): Constructions, positions and client–consultant dynamics

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Summary Research on management consultancy usually emphasizes the role and perspective of the consultants. Whilst important, consultants are only one element in a dynamic relationship involving both consultants and their clients. In much of the literature, the client is neglected, or is assumed to represent a distinct, immutable entity. In this paper, we argue that the client organisation is not uniform but is instead (like organisations generally) a more or less heterogeneous assemblage of actors, interests and inclinations involved in multiple and varied ways in consultancy projects. This paper draws upon three empirical cases and emphasizes three key aspects of clients in the context of consultancy projects: (a) client diversity, including, but not limited to diversity arising solely from (pre-)structured contact relations and interests; (b) processes of constructing ‘the client’ (including negotiation, conflict, and reconstruction) and the client identities which are thereby produced; and (c) the dynamics of client–consultant relations and how these influence the construction of multiple and perhaps contested client positions and identities.

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Introduction

What is a client? At one level, the response might seem straightforward—someone who receives help from a professional person. Indeed, this response matches dictionary and everyday definitions. However, even in contexts such as health care and criminal law, where the client is typically an individual, there are often competing perceptions of the client from the different parties involved (Johnson, Larkin, & Saks, 1995). In corporate and other organisational contexts,

such as professional business services, this issue is even more complex (O’Farrell & Moffat, 1991). Indeed, even given minimal sociological imagination, it is possible to see that organisations are more or less heterogeneous assemblages of actors, interests and inclinations where conflicts of interests are inescapable (e.g. Marchington & Vincent, 2004). And yet, ‘the client’ – in the academic literature on professional services firms and management consultancy in particular – remains largely homogenous and static.

It is therefore important to unpack the nature/s of the client. Indeed, the interests and perspectives of the client have arguably become more important in recent years. The traditional image of the relatively passive or powerless party in the professional–layman interaction is giving way to a

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hegemonic customer-orientation discourse (Sturdy, Grugulis, & Willmott, 2001). Here, representatives of professional service organisations are encouraged to see clients as customers (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992), undermining the notion of client powerlessness, at least on a discursive level. Lowendahl, Revang, and Fosstenlökken (2001) argue that, by definition, professional service firms (PSFs) such as in accounting, law and consultancy, must pay particular attention to client needs and demands whilst they engage in creating customized solutions. Moreover, as PSFs often have a limited number of important clients, and as losing one of them may have significant financial and symbolic consequences, their employees may feel very vulnerable and even appear outwardly subservient to the wishes of the client. As Andersson-Gough, Grey, and Robson (2000) demonstrate, a particular discursive construction – ‘the demanding client’ – is often used as an instrument of socialization in PSFs and thus operates as a form of managerial control. On the other hand of course, traditional dynamics remain relevant whereby PSFs claim to have superior knowledge and are typically hired on that premise. Therefore, they have significant definitional authority on what constitutes a problem for the client and, in many instances, have regulatory authority and closure over client concerns (Lowendahl, 1997).

While some attention has been given to client diversity and dynamics in the traditional professions and, more recently, professional services, in the management consultancy literature, clients have been largely neglected (Hislop, 2002). Clients are typically presented as relatively unitary, organisational entities with attention given to diversity between firms and projects rather than client diversity within them (e.g. Kitay & Wright, 2004; Werr & Styhre, 2003). Admittedly, there is some acknowledgement of the difference between individual clients who work in teams alongside consultants, and other client employees who do not (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), implying, for example, that some client actors may be useful for consulting objectives such as knowledge acquisition, whilst others are useful for securing buy-in (Fosstenlökken, Lowendahl, & Revang, 2003; Sturdy, Schwarz, & Spicer, 2006). Likewise and more generally, the fact that consultancy work is highly interactive and networked (at least for consultancy partners and senior staff) is fairly well established (Alvesson, 2004; Jones, 2003). But overall, the myth of the monolithic client remains, and the implications of the potential diversity *within* client organisations for understanding consultancy practices, processes and outcomes are poorly understood. Organisations remain as super-persons (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994) such that actors become over-determined as organisational or, at best, project-based agents.

This neglect is less evident in the more prescriptive literature on consultancy, often written by consultants themselves. For example, one of the first rules of consultancy practice is to identify the key power brokers and decision makers in a client organisation, especially those with the authority to commission external advisors (Buchanan & Badham, 1999). Similarly and more generally, Arnaud (1998) suggests that ‘the word client only rarely designates a single unique person’ (p. 470), preferring the term ‘client system’. More specifically, Schein (1997) adopts a pluralist or, at least, stakeholder view in pointing to six types of clients or client positions. Here, ‘intermediate’ clients work directly with

consultants while the first ‘contact’ client may differ from the ‘primary’ owner of the problem. The primary owner is distinct from those ‘unwitting’/‘indirect’ clients who are unaware/aware of the effects of the consultancy, and from the more diffuse ‘ultimate’ client which might include client customers. This categorisation is a useful corrective to much of the more academic literature on consultancy. It serves as a key starting point but is still problematic in that it is rather static, is focused on the consultant’s perspective, and is based primarily on contact – from direct to indirect relations – and potential interests. It also understates symbolic and political roles. Here, the academic literature is stronger, pointing to clients using their role with consultants for their own individual, functional or managerial political purposes – legitimation and control – or as scapegoats for failed initiatives (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; McKenna, 2006; Sturdy, 1997a). However, and as we shall argue, this also presents a partial conception of the client, overemphasizing a fixed role or position.

In the following analysis, we both draw on and develop the above insights and portrayals of clients in an effort to emphasize:

- Client diversity: including, but beyond that arising solely from (pre-)structured contact relations and interests.
- Processes of constructing ‘the client’ (including negotiation, conflict, and reconstruction) and the client identities which are thereby produced.
- The dynamics of client–consultant relations and how these influence the construction of multiple and perhaps contested client positions and identities.

These concerns suggest an interest, not only in clients, but also in the – frequently multiple and diverse – consultant positions and constructions. We cannot understand clients without considering both parties and their relationship(s). However, given the marginalization of clients in the literature and space limitations we give less attention to the consultant side in order to take a closer look at the client from a set of pluralistic, constructivist and processual viewpoints and address a neglected aspect of the consultant–client relationship. We start by expanding on the three previously mentioned themes of client diversity, client constructions (and reconstructions) and the dynamics of client–consultant relationships. We then present three diverse case vignettes. We use these primarily to illustrate new ideas and to revise established views through a continued discussion of the key themes. The paper ends with a discussion of some of the implications of our analysis.

Towards the client as construction

Client diversity

In addressing the diversity of clients, we first need to examine the structured possibilities for difference associated with the client organisation. Firstly, notwithstanding broader socially produced distinctions based on gender, ethnicity, culture and occupation for example, most considerations of organisational plurality are based on structured (and associated cultural) divisions between individuals and groups as representatives of particular departments, functions and

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