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Risto Puutio

Hidden Agendas

Situational Tasks, Discursive Strategies and Institutional Practices in Process Consultation

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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

JYVÄSKYLÄ 2009

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines conversations drawn from the author's own process oriented consulting practice. It views them as situations that are embedded in various interactional challenges. This dissertation identifies these challenges and asks how responding to them creates particular situational tasks for the consultant.

The methodological repertoire utilizes perspectives developed within systemic thinking tradition and tools from discourse analysis. Both audio- and video recorded material from one single consulting case provide the data corpus for the study. The three original articles of the thesis analyze in detail: (1) how a shared agenda for the consulting relationship is conducted during the contract meeting; (2) how mutual relationships are negotiated during a consulting event with the organization; and (3) how reflection is supported in advice giving episodes during the follow up meeting.

The results reveal that a process oriented consultant becomes a container of various simultaneously emerging tasks with a twofold character. When building a shared agenda, the consultant needs to assist the clients to raise sensitive matters for discussion, while at the same time developing the meaning potentials of the sensitive topics raised. When negotiating mutual relationships the consultant needs to accept and support current asymmetries of the system and simultaneously build new symmetric relationships. When enhancing reflection during advice giving episodes the consultant needs to support the client's agency and simultaneously offer alternative perspectives to the client.

The results draw attention to the carefully balancing character of consulting activity. Rather than following a clearly formulated role, a process oriented consultant's work seems be guided by responding to situational dual tasks. To manage the dilemmatic interaction in situ, a consultant brings forth, 'hidden agendas', targets that are not articulated as open and shared for the work. 'Hidden agendas', I claim, characterize the institutional practices in process consultation.

The study expands the current picture of process consultation practice and provides a more dynamic and context sensitive way to view it. The differentiation of three research perspectives contributes to theoretical discussions whereas the idea of balancing activity in consulting contributes to the development of practices, for example, in the supervising context.

Keywords: agenda construction, institutional interaction, consultant-client relationship, discursive strategies, systemic methodology, process consultation, practice research

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CONTENTS

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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"The consultant is in a very difficult position. If he behaves according to his ideas and values, he stands a good chance of being a threat to the client. He could be asked to leave. If he decides to behave even temporarily in accordance with the client's values, he may be accepted but he runs a serious risk of failing to change and develop"

Argyris, 1961, 123

1 INTRODUCTION

Having worked for years as a professional consultant in the field of organizational development (OD), I have often found myself asking, "what's going on when I talk with clients". The question reflects the development of my own worldview in which, during the years of studying social constructionist based systemic ideas, the 'linguistic turn' took place. When practicing systemic consultancy, I began to believe that the whole idea of the consulting process is to help the consultees to construct a shared enough and an acceptable view of the realities of an organization, and that the consultant has an active role in this construction work. In my working practice I started to pay attention to discursive practices, the living moments in consulting conversations through which the organization is re-told by the participants. The ultimate question of 'what consultants do' through interaction and 'how they do it', introduced recently also by academic researches (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Alvesson and Svenningson, 2004; Kipping and Engwall, 2002), has acted as additional motivation for this study.

I have been guided by the assumption that examining my own practice is beneficial, not only for me, but also for a wider audience interested in consulting practices. Being aware that the lived practice is always unique, my purpose is to open up perspectives that would be of use in exploring consulting interaction in all its uniqueness. Thus, the generalizations made in this dissertation concern more the theoretical than the practical level. The study continues the work started in my pilot study (Puutio, 2000), where I outlined a general conceptual model of consulting work as discursive activity, based on materials taken from my own practice. The model introduces consulting as 'contextual work', where the consultant's key role is to build purposeful contexts for the consulting relationship as well as for meaning construction work within it. The current thesis takes a step further in examining consulting work from a more in-depth reciprocal interaction perspective and in utilizing a new video-recorded data.

Consulting work varies in functional focus (e.g. business strategy vs. human resource development) and structure, ranging from global companies to solo practitioners (Kitay and Wright 2004). Consulting work is practice that is best characterised as a variety of techniques, approaches and theories (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Golembiewski, 1993) that are employed with the ultimate goal of improving organizational performance. This study focuses on practice that follows principles of the process consultation approach (Schein, 1969, 1987, 1988) and views organisations as a system that creates and re-news its social realities by language use (Campbell, 2000).

Interestingly enough, consulting practices are only loosely linked to the academic research, implying that consulting is based more on observations and experiences from practice, than on scientific findings (Sorge and Witteloostuijn, 2004). Overall, there exists only a thin body of descriptive research on consulting. This gap between practice and academic knowledge make sense since, as argued by Massey (2003), consultants are only occasionally able to identify the underpinning theoretical approach that they employ in their practice. Recently, research on consulting work has increased, not the least due to the increase in demand for consulting services. During the last 30 years in particular, a brand of 'knowledge industry' (Kipping and Engvall, 2002) or 'management advice industry' (Clark and Fincham, 2002a) emerged in tandem with wider economical and social changes in the western world. However, acknowledged to still be lacking are materials that would allow researchers to examine what actually takes place in conversations between consultants and their clients.

This study contributes to bridging the gap between real-life practice and academic research. A process consulting setting offers a particularly interesting scope for the examination of interaction situations, conversations and language use, since the approach is based on the assumption that conversations can enhance organisational performance. The study is conducted by examining consulting practice at the somewhat early stage of one consulting case by means of micro-level analysis. My aim is to show that examining naturally occurring interaction in its fine detail within multi-party consulting situations can provide new insights into consulting work and thus contribute to theoretical knowledge.

This thesis is organized around three original papers each of which takes a situational perspective to consulting practices of the case. First, an introduction outlining the key perspectives to this thesis is presented. Consulting practice is approached from the role, goal and task perspectives and consulting work is portrayed as an interaction challenge that the consulting parties face in consulting conversations. This is followed by a methodology section that introduces the research design and the discursive and systemic approaches followed in the research. Moreover, the analysis process and the use of analytical concepts and tools are explained to give the reader an opportunity to follow the methodological choices made throughout the process. Then, summaries of the original articles are presented. Each article illuminates how a consultant, in particular, meets the challenges of conversations: what situational tasks and discursive strategies become employed. In the discussion the main findings of the study are summarised and embedded in the context of dual tasks and the use of 'hidden agendas' in consulting practice. The explanations, functions and consequences of hidden agendas are discussed and connected to the institutional interaction perspective. The hidden vs. open perspectives to role, goal and task are offered as a theoretical perspective to understanding of consultancy. The contributions of the study from practical perspective as well as the research process itself are also reflected upon. Theoretical contributions are then listed. Finally, following suggestions for future research directions, some concluding remarks are made.

1.1 Consulting practice as research object

The management consulting literature over the past 40 years can be divided into two main categories: the early literature, referred to as either the OD (Organization Development) approach (Fincham and Clark, 2002) or *functionalist approach* (Werr and Styhre, 2003) and the more recent strand of academic literature, the *critical perspective* (Fincham and Clark, 2002). The functionalist literature, often authored by professional consultants, takes a positive stance to management consulting and is practice oriented. It presents consultants as professional helpers whose knowledge base nor professional practices need not be challenged. The critical, and mainly academic authored perspective however, takes a more challenging stance towards consultancy work and calls its essentials, like status of knowledge and power relations, into question (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Fincham and Clark, 2002). The critical interest in management consultancy centres on attempts to explain the success and impact of management consultants (Salaman 2002). The viewpoints offered throughout this thesis make use of both the functionalist and the critical literature.

During the expansion of critical consulting research, a wide range of issues have been taken under scrutiny. These include the history and development of consultancy (e.g. Engwall, Furusten and Wallrestedt, 2002; Ainamo and Tienari, 2002), the consultant-client relationship (e.g. Fincham, 1999a; Pellegrinelli, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2003), the methods, ideas and knowledge base of consulting work (e.g. Werr, 2002; Werr, Stjernberg and Docherty, 1997), the creation of consulting knowledge (e.g. Sturdy, 2002; Werr, 2002), rhetoric and language use (e.g. Berglund and Werr, 2000; Clark, 1995; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990; Fincham, 1999b, Jackson, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007), professional status of consulting work (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002) and its relationship to management fashion (e.g. Ramsay, 1996), management guru phenomena (e.g. Clark and Salaman, 1998b), and the management and organization of consultancy firms (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; Robertson and Swan, 2003). The expansion of consulting research becomes understood by the fact that the economic significance of 'knowledge industry' (Engwall and Kipping, 2002) has increased exponentially (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Engwall and Kipping, 2002). To some extent, when viewing clients as victims of the consultants' impression management (e.g.

Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998a), the critical research is, among those who would like to adopt a neutral view, said to have taken a negative stance to consulting practice.

This study takes the critical perspective seriously in the sense that, unlike functionalist literature, it challenges the idea of a clearly defined relationship and the idea of one clearly defined task for consulting work, as well as the view of the consultant as having a special power position (Werr and Styhre, 2003). Moreover, this study does neither adopt an idealistic view to consulting nor take the efficiency of OD practice as its target (cf. Worley and Feyerherm, 2003) but rather tends to look at how the practice works. This study relates to the functionalist perspective in that the author works as a practitioner as well as a scholar of consulting practice. Moreover, unlike other critical research, the study approaches consultancy as a profession (cf. Fincham and Clark, 2003) that follows a particular institutional order. Thus, rather than purely adopting either critical or a practice orientation, this thesis places the two in dialog and discusses consultancy from both perspectives.

Consultancy research varies in terms of adopting either the consultant's perspective (Argyris, 1961; Czander, Jacobsberg, Mersky and Nunberg, 2002; Ellis, Kiely and Pettigrew, 2001; Fincham, 2003; Hawk, Schor, Kane and Lindsay, 1995; Kakabadse, Louchart, and Kakabadse, 2006; Massey, 2003; Smith and Zane, 1999; Worley and Feyerhem, 2003) or the client's perspective (Edvardsson, 1989; Martin, Horne and Chan, 2001; Werr and Styhre, 2003; Williams, 2001). Even in studies that focus on both parties of the consultant-client relationship (e.g. Alvesson and Svenningson, 2004; Fullerton and West, 1996; McGivern, 1983; Pellegrinelli 2002) the distinction between them has led to a situation where consultants and clients became viewed as separate agents. Recently, this separateness has been identified and more research has been called for from an interaction perspective that acknowledges the collaborative, reciprocal nature of the consultant-client relationship (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Clark and Fincham, 2002b; Edvardsson, 1989; Engwall and Kipping, 2002; deCastro, Alves, and Proenca, 2005; Fincham, 1999a; Kykyri, 2008; Pellegrinelli, 2002; Sturdy, 1997, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2003; Williams, 2001).

The lack of interaction research is surprising given that there seems to be a consensus on the importance of a 'good interaction' in the consultant-client relationship as a success factor in consulting (e.g. Fullerton and West, 1996; Glasser, 2002; Gummesson, 1991; McGivern, 1983; McKinney Kellogg, 1984).

There is a variety in data collecting strategies that have been used in consulting research. Mostly, survey methods (Church, Burge and Eynde, 1994; Church, Waclawski and Burke, 1996; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003) and interviews (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2004; Chao, 2005; Gbadamosi, 2005; McGivern, 1983; McKinney Kellogg, 1984; McLachlin, 2000; Kitay and Wright, 2007; Turner, 1982; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003) have been used. Research taking consulting cases (Alvesson and Svenningson, 2004; Argyris, 1961; Baitsch and Heideloff, 1997; Czander et al., 2002; Fincham, 2003; Johansson, 2003; Massey, 2003; Pellegrinelli, 2002; Puutio, 2002) or consulting firms (Alvesson, 2004; Robertson and Swan, 1998) under scrutiny is mostly carried out using interviews. Some researchers have been able to add observing of consultants' real-time practices to their interviews (Adamson, 2000; Handley, Clark, Fincham and Sturdy, 2007; Johansson, 2003; Massey, 2003). Also, some have added the use of other documentary materials like meeting records, data sheets and other case material (Handley et al, 2007; Sturdy, 1997). Still other authors have conducted research based on their field notes from practice (e.g. Czarniawska, 2001; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Marshak and Heracleous, 2005; Smith and Zane, 1999).

Not until recently has the need for studying real practices in consulting been acknowledged and taken as a starting point for empirical work (Adamson, 2000 Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2004; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Chao, 2005; Fincham, 1999a, Gbadamosi, 2005; Handley et al., 2007; Johansson, 2003; Kipping and Armrüster, 2002; Kykyri, Puutio and Wahlström, 2007a,b, 2009, Puutio and Kykyri, 2007). Using real time materials helps researchers to obtain a more detailed picture of the variety of what takes place in consulting.

Process consultation

The professional literature defines *process consultation*, which is in the scope of this study, as a practice that aims at helping the client system to help itself – through conversations. Edgar Schein, the advocate of the term, describes it as a "helping relationship" where "the client owns the problem and the solution, but the consultant and client jointly own the inquiry process that will reveal what the correct next steps might be" (Schein 1997, 207). The client's active involvement in defining the key issues and formulating the remedy is viewed as crucial since the client has contextual knowledge that would not be available for a consultant and the process itself aims at learning skills needed for organizational change. Unlike the practice of expert consultancy where 'fixing the given problem' creates the context for consulting work, process oriented consultation suits best situations where neither the problem nor the solution is clear.

Drawing from behavioural science and concentrating on improvement of organization's effectiveness through collaborative intervention, process consultation is often described as one application of Organization Development (OD) (e.g. Fincham and Clark, 2002). However, it differs from the mainstream of OD in underlining the importance of the consulting relationship whereas the OD tradition has emphasised the planned nature of a change process (e.g. Beckhard, 1969; Bennis, 1969; French and Bell, 1995) as well as intervention techniques and their consistency with the intervention objectives (e.g. Blake and Mouton, 1983, Cummings and Feyerherm, 1995; Reddy, 1995). Process consulting, instead, is practiced in situations, which have freedom to emerge from the base of local understanding. This type of consulting work requires 'hands on' abilities to deal with individual, group and organizational dynamics while making interventional choices in real time (Marshak and Hearcleous, 2005; Czander et al., 2002).

Both the OD consulting and the process consultation approaches are forms of organizational consulting that aims at enhancing the organisation's effectiveness by focusing on the system (including multiple individuals and groups) level rather than on individual level (Glasser, 2002). These two can be placed under the umbrella of the term 'management consultation', which, according to Clark and Salaman's (1996, 155) definition is "advisory activity which necessitates intervention in an ongoing system where the advisers are external specialists and have no organizational responsibility, and where the aim of the activity is some alignment to the organizational system". Furthermore, the term management consulting is, similarly to the term 'business consulting' (Kakabadse et al., 2006), used to refer to a variety of services of 'management advice industry' like technology application, business strategy planning and implementation, quality management or management guru performing and other forms of management training. Roughly, we can say that mainstream management consultation stands for 'top-down' approach to changing organisations whereas process consultation belongs to 'bottom-up' approach, in which participation of the organisation is seen as essential (Tienari, Ainamo, Kykyri and Puutio, 2008).

The systemic approach offers a useful perspective within which to view process consultation. It is rooted in a belief that "an organization must balance its need for change with its need for stability" (Campbell, Draper and Huffington, 1991, 6). This means that one having a consulting position needs to acknowledge his or her position in the system and be able to reflect upon one's own contribution to the system while at the same time considering how one could intervene from that position (Baitsch and Heideloff, 1997). The ability to take a systems-view to organisations is acknowledged as one key competence of an OD-practitioner (Worley and Feyerherm, 2003). The social-constructionist school of systemic thinking, which this study represents, highlights the importance of meaning construction in consulting (Barge and Little, 2002; Campbell, 2000, Oliver 2005). From the systemic perspective, process consultation could then be viewed as a practice that helps organizational members to reflect on the connections between meaning and action, or in other words, on the discursive processes by which meaning is constructed in context. A consultant should – as a part of the system – enhance its reflexivity, organisational members' joint ability to see how their participation and language use in a situation affects the emerging social realities.

Clearly, there is a lack of research on process consultation, even though exceptions do exist (Fullerton and West, 1996; Kykyri et al., 2007a,b, 2009; Williams and Rattray, 2004). Conducting a literature review, I found no empirical analyses that would, for example, focus on the early stage of process consultation relationship. Academic journals publish literature that illustrates process oriented consulting practices based on authors' own experiences and its documentation (Ellis et al, 2001; Kaplan, 1979; Kurpius, Fuqua and Rozecki, 1993; Schein, 1995, 1997; Schein, Kahane and Scharmer, 2001; Marshak and Heracleous, 2005; Kets de Vries and Balaz, 2005; Shaw, 1997; Smith and Zane, 1999; Tosey and Llewellyn, 2002). This literature offers valuable insider reflection on consulting practice and broadens views regarding the nature of process oriented consulting work. However, its contribution to empirically based knowledge is still poor which means that there is a need for empirical research on the consulting practice (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2004, 2, see also Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003).

One reason for the lack of research can be found in the theoretical conceptualization of process consultation. Process consultation authors have not provided conceptualization and tools that would help to "catch the dynamics going on in process consultation" (Lambrechts , Grieten, Bouwen and Corthouts, 2009, 41). Another reason is practical one. Simply, there is no easy access to authentic consulting conversations – consultants are not willing to share their materials with researchers nor are they willing to invite researchers to observe their practice (Adamson, 2000). On the other hand, consultants themselves seldom document their practice (e.g. by videotaping it) for later research purposes. This study bridges this gap by providing real-life materials for empirical examination.

1.2 Approaching the practice: role, goal and task

There exists a wide strand of literature on consulting *roles* to guide the practitioner to do the right things or to illuminate 'what consultants do'. The functionalist literature (including applied research) in particular offers various consulting role typologies (e.g. Kaarst-Brown, 1999; Kitay and Wrigt, 2004; Massey, 2003; Schein, 1969) which certainly contribute to knowledge among practitioners and consultancy trainers. For example, the dimensional model of expert versus process roles in consulting as presented by Lippitt and Lippitt (1986) offers a frame, or a 'theory' for practice, that can help to make judgments in choosing the appropriate role in terms of the clients needs, situation and the consultant's personal style. The discussions among academic (more or less critical) researchers also deal with roles, however, with different focus and contribution (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Czarniawska-Joegers, 1990; Fincham, 1999a). For example, the idea of consultants as 'merchants of meaning' presented by Czarniawska-Joegers (1990) illustrates the consultancy role in ways that critical research can benefit from and further develop (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). Moreover, there is literature that classifies the typologies on consulting roles (e.g. Glasser, 2002; Kakabadse et al, 2006). Overall, due to the great variation of the practice as well as the intangibility of the service itself (Clark and Salaman, 1998b; Kakabadse et al, 2006), the consulting role has been difficult to define. Perhaps for this reason, consulting roles are often illustrated using metaphorical language (see, Kaarst-Brown, 1999; Massey, 2003).

The problem with the consulting role descriptions is that they tend to overlook the consultant-client interaction and thereby tend to handle the client-consultant relationship as a de-contextual variable. The local and unexpected practice of consultants and their clients makes models on consulting role appear too simple, narrowing the livingness of the reciprocal practice. It is not only the variation within the consulting activity itself but also the variation in research methods that have been used to explore it, that create difficulties with role descriptions. There is also variation in epistemological assumptions among researchers and other authors on consulting which means that the models on consulting roles do not easily communicate with each other (Whittle, 2006).

Due to consulting being practiced in organizational context, and due to its being informed by professional ideals, it is justifiable to view it as a form of institutional interaction. Indeed, Werr and Styhre (2003, 50) confirm this in that we should "view client-consultant relationship as institutionally embedded, emphasizing that it does not exist detached from social norms, shared beliefs and ideologies" . In fact, the functionalist literature also suggests, albeit for practical purposes, that we need to view consulting as culturally determined action (e.g. Chapman, 1998, Schein, 1999, 2002). The research tradition of institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 2005) argues that professions contain *goals*, identities and special constraints and inferences about what is allowable or preferred in interaction. It is thus an institution with its norms and beliefs that becomes lived through the ways consulting parties orient towards the goals of a working situation. It can be asked what sort of institutional order process consultation might follow.

Recently, a situational perspective has been introduced to consulting research (Handley et al., 2007). This third perspective offers insight into practical actions that consulting parties take in the moments of interaction. For the purposes of this study, a situational approach is justifiable since we can look at how participants of a consulting conversation respond to each other and jointly orientate to the various *tasks* at hand. Putting the mentioned three perspectives together, this study examines the local, context bound tasks that a consultant, informed by a process consultation role, takes when orienting to the goal of an institutionally embedded situation. Figure 1 illuminates the three perspectives.

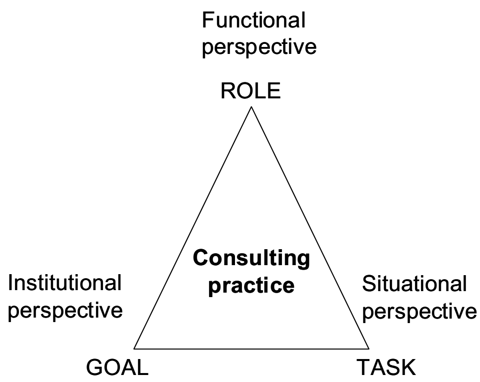

FIGURE 1 Three perspectives and their key points regarding consulting practice

In congruence with figure 1, we can view the three perspectives' various resources that inform a consultant and the client in practice. A consultant has some understanding – perhaps a well explicated one obtained by means of professional training - of the role repertoire that s/he can utilize and that s/he is supposed to display with a client (for example, that of an inquirer). The client also has understanding – often experience based – of what kind of a role s/he expects from a consultant (for example that of showing interest in clients own ideas and perspectives). In parallel with this knowledge, both parties are informed by some understanding on what purposes the consulting activity stands for. This gives orientation to what they are supposed to do together, i.e. what is the goal of the activity (for example, to learn ways to work more effectively). However, it is the particular working situation, with its contents and local processes between people at hand that guides both parties towards the immediate tasks to be done (for example, to help people to listen to each other).

Although not explicated as situational perspective, functionalist process consultation literature acknowledges the situated nature of consulting practice. Process consultation literature especially highlights the idea of unanticipated, emerging and opportunity based interventions, meaning that the situations should guide the consultant's decisions and that a consultant and a client (both those involved with the process and those purchasing the service) need continually negotiate where the focus should be (Campbell et al., 1991; Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Schein, 1987, 1988; see also Schön, 1983). This leads to relationships where "consultants can fill a variety of roles depending on the demands of the situation" (Chapman, 1998, 212).

The situational perspective is familiar to other business consultants too, since "everything they (consultants) do for their clients has to be done in a creative and customized way" (Kakabadse et al, 2006, 424). There is a strong expectation for customizing and 'tailor-made' solutions in consultancy (Fullerton and West, 1996), which means that consultants need to apply their methodology to the local context (Werr et al. 1997) and use each situation as a resource for their contribution anyway. This makes it understandable why Werr and Styhre (2003, 50) point out that there are no pre-defined or natural roles in consultancy settings, but rather "their (consultant's and client's) mutual activities are developed in contextually dependent situations against the background of larger discourses that lend legitimacy and reason to some relations, while at the same time making other kinds of relations more difficult". However, only few studies have adopted the situational perspective as a starting point for research (Handley et al, 2007, Fincham, 1999a; Werr and Styhre, 2003).

A situational research perspective becomes justifiable for other reasons, too. Clients turn to consultants and ask for help usually in critical situations of their organization. This means that consulting conversations have a specific nature – not least since they are loaded with various expectations. This makes consulting a practice of building situations that can be considered helpful for the organisation. In fact, the situation with the client is the only means for a consultant to offer relief to the client. What happens in these situations can help the client to find new ways of action for improving the performance of the organization. For a consultant, this means that a change – related to the issues at hand - needs to become produced in the moments of interaction with the client.

1.3 A discursive perspective to consulting practice

The situational perspective leads us to focus on what becomes done by words in a moment. The notion of the centrality of language use in consulting has generated a vast body of research in the field, particularly by the critical authors. Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2004, 36) make a very fundamental point when claiming that "consulting is first and foremost a linguistic activity – a discursive practice through which realities are enacted". The term 'discursive practice' has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand language use in organisations (including consulting situations) constructs the organisation itself, and on the other hand, in consulting, the language use has an immediate effect on the consulting interaction itself. This study adopts the latter perspective by drawing its methodology from the tradition of discursive analysis (DA). DA studies discourse as text and talk in social practice, by which people do things (Potter, 2004). While approaching the social world as action, as endless webs of encounters, conversations, matrixes of relations and negotiations of meanings, discourse analytic methodology is interested in what is done through conversation. Therefore, discursive methodology that approaches consulting as conversation suits well for the purpose of getting to know 'what consultants do'. This holds true particularly with process consultation, where conversations are at the hearth of the action itself and where the consultant's direct responsibility is the conversational process within a consulting project.

The organization discourse approach (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam, 2004) has recently brought together research from different disciplines, utilizing various theoretical approaches, focusing on issues concerning the use of language and discourse in organisations. The recent interaction oriented research on consulting has strongly adopted the discursive approach (e.g. Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Clark and Salaman, 1998a; Clegg et al, 2004; Engwall and Kipping, 2002; Fincham 1999a; Johansson, 2003; Kykyri, 2008; Marshak and Heracleous, 2005; Meriläinen et al, 2004; Sturdy, 1997, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2003; Whittle 2006).

The discursive research on consultancy has shown, for example, that consultants are skilful in utilizing various discursive resources in work with their clients. It has been argued that organizational change occurs within and through the use of paradoxical repertoires of talk and hence the consulting practice invites utilising contradictory discourses (Whittle, 2006). 'Mingling' various and opposing discourses are shown to constitute the 'invisible character' of consulting rhetoric (Berglund and Werr, 2000; see also Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). This study joins this strand of discursive research by being curious on the seen but easily unnoticed side of consulting (interaction) practice.

The discursive approach, particularly DA, opens up a strategic perspective to consulting conversation. Consulting can be approached as practice where various participants use language strategically, to achieve something by conversation. Within DA, the strand of rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1987) has focused on discourse as strategic action, claiming that talk consists of an argumentative organization. Discourse analysts, especially those who later developed the discipline of Discursive Psychology (DP) (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003b; Hepburn and Potter, 2003) have paid special attention to psychological concepts and terminology by looking at techniques by which language is used in 'reality producing' and 'fact construction'.

The term 'agenda' helps to approach discursive strategies in consulting conversation. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English, the term agenda refers to matters or list of matters to be discussed, for example, in a meeting. Agenda management refers to – and has also been a focus of research - how participants move through meeting from one topic to the next (Boden, 1994). The term agenda is also used to refer to specific goals that someone is having during an encounter. In fact, we can approach consulting as conversation where each participant has their own agendas that guide their orientation during a conversation (Gale, 1991). This is not to say that participants do or even can define their agendas during a conversation. Rather, the interaction agendas are more or less implicit, something that can be re-constructed retrospectively, by analytic methodology (Gale, 1991). An agenda requires discursive strategies, means by which one can strive for one's goal in interaction by language use.

The interaction research on helping institutions employs the term agenda to refer to professionals' claim to introduce topics during a professional encounter (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Institutional situations within medical, teaching, social work contexts or the like are viewed as asymmetric in the sense that the professional can strategically direct the talk within them. The professional can control the topics that are raised and can direct how these topics are handled in the discussion. Along the same lines, Silverman (1987, 184-185) launches the idea of "hidden agenda" to refer to doctors' invisible interactional dominance within medical interaction. Professional settings where various tasks and aims are to be taken into account are said to carry hidden agendas (Vehviläinen, 2003). Such agendas may consist of, for example, professional ideologies, moral stances or the like.

In this study, the term agenda is used in a twofold way. First, it is used to refer to the joint goals of the work at hand. The term *shared agenda* is used to refer to this whereas the term *hidden agenda* is used to refer to interactional goals that are present but not explicit for the conversationalists.

1.4 Challenges of consulting conversations

A consulting conversation, where participants from various positions meet to discuss organizational matters in the presence of an outsider, is a challenging situation in various ways. Participants in the conversation may hold different understandings of the state of affairs, they may have competing interests, and thereby they may view the focal point of change differently. In terms of the social situation, consulting participants have to find ways to discuss often emotion laden topics in a multi-party setting. Next, I will describe the conversational challenges from three different perspectives. The first deals with shared agenda building, the second with relationship negotiating, and the third perspective deals with the general aim of process consultation, namely promoting reflection.

1.4.1 Building a shared agenda

An organizational consulting conversation is a particular working setting, where participants from different organizational roles and positions come together for either solving actual problems or for developing future perspectives for the organization at hand. For this a shared agenda, i.e. a common interest and a joint goal, is required. However, in the consulting context, participants are often bound together by a mix of common and divergent interests and may also have competing definitions of the organizational situation as well as visions for the future. From this basis each participant or representative party (either consultant, members of management or employees) naturally have somewhat different working agendas, different interests for topics to be discussed during the consulting conversation. Moreover, each party may have different expectations as to the preferred and appropriate ways to discuss the topics in that particular situation. To bridge these differences, the consulting conversation, particularly at the early stage of the consulting relationship, needs to provide interaction through which parties can negotiate the goals and issues for their joint work. In fact, the key idea of process consultation is that it is the *process* that brings forth the shared agenda for the joint action throughout the consulting relationship. Agenda negotiation is thus a building block of the working relationship between a consultant and an organization.

The professional demands for the beginning of a consulting work are widely reported in practitioner literature, and the early stage is considered to be the key step in a successful working relation between the consultant and the client (e.g. Block, 1981; French and Bell, 1978; Jamieson, 1995; Neumann, 1997; Schein, 1987, 1999). The challenge of building a shared agenda is acknowledged for example by Schein (2002), who highlights the need for mutual exploring in contract negotiating. He suggests that the concept of contracting be replaced with the concept of "exploring mutual expectations" (p. 25) meaning that each party could 'test' others' expectations and reason as to what could be possible in that working relationship. He argues that "the best model for describing this process is to think of it as a series of mutual tests to see at what level each party can accept the other" (p. 26).

The social situation of negotiating the agenda is challenging, since topics to be taken onto the agenda may be threatening and thus difficult to discuss openly. There is a great potential that in consulting conversations participants have to face criticism and blame (Kykyri, Puutio and Wahlström, 2007a). This is why professional literature views contracting as "a complex human interaction process requiring skill and flexibility" (Jamieson, 1995, 134). The consultant needs to have means for 'face-work' (Goffman, 1963), actions that are made in the flow of the conversation that show acceptance and respect toward others (and one's own) image of self. A consultant thus needs to make situational judgement of what is appropriate, useful and possible to incorporate into the shared agenda.

Building an agenda might be challenging for another reason, too. The client may 'need' a consultant as a resource for the intra-organisational power game or for the political battles within the organisation (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995). The functionalist process consultation literature echoes the same by noting that "working in the field automatically places the consultant in a relationship to a complex social system with multiple political and psychological dynamics" (Neumann, Kellner and Dawson-Shepherd, 1997, xviii). This can mean that a consultant, aware of it or not, follows only the managerial agenda in his or her work. Sometimes managerial agendas are kept hidden from both employees and consultants themselves (Kaarst-Brown, 1999). When building a shared agenda for the consulting process, the consultant may thus be challenged by already existing hidden interests of organisational parties.

1.4.2 Negotiating mutual relationships within a multi-party context

Consulting conversations often require involvement of various groups and subgroups in the client organisation. Schein (1997) introduces 'basic types of clients' to illustrate the variation in clients in consulting projects. He names these types as contact clients (those who first contact the consultant), intermediate clients (those who get involved in consulting activities), primary clients (those who own the problem), unwitting clients (those who will be affected by the interventions but who are not aware that they will be impacted), indirect clients (those who will be affected but are unknown to the consultant) and ultimate clients (those, whose welfare should be considered by the consultant). According to Schein a consultant needs to distinguish between client types when having conversations with the client organisation. Defining various parties in relation to the consulting process is thus present from the very beginning of establishing a working relationship. When defining the role of each party, the actors simultaneously 'negotiate' and shape their relationships.

Consulting conversations are usually multi-party situations where, according to the typology of Kurpius and Fuqua (1993), three parties are involved: consultant, consultee and client system. In the consultancy process of this study, the triadic relationship was present between the consultant, managers and employees. This kind of a multi-party setting requires definition of relationships between various parties. This is particularly true for settings such as that of the current study, where the client participants in the consulting conversations were somewhat unknown to each other. It is natural to think that when meeting for the first time in a consulting context participants find it important to discuss how they are related to each other. The multi-party setting challenges all concerned since each might have preferences on who should be engaged, how the relationships between each party should be viewed, and what relationships should be addressed in the conversation.

In defining their mutual relationships in a multi-party conversation, interlocutors do not only respond to earlier addresses but also orient to the audience of the ongoing conversation. In a triadic system at least one party is always in the position of audience. Thus, a multi-party system with the presence of various 'audiences' challenges participants in terms of what one can or cannot, want or does not want to say (Kykyri et al, 2007b). This is particularly true when it comes to talking about sensitive topics. When addressing something to somebody, the present third party makes their own interpretations on what is essential message that one tried to convey.

Organisational asymmetry – the fact that organisational members' relationships are already defined as unequal in various ways – makes the consulting conversation particularly challenging. The existing asymmetries may hinder effective communication, mutual sharing and learning from each other – all essential ideals in process consultation. The consulting conversation deals with this challenge since each turn in consulting conversation shapes the present relationships. In a multi-party system this creates complexity: a conversational move aimed to reduce asymmetry in one relationship within the triadic system may lead to increasing asymmetry in another relationship of the triangle.

Acknowledging the multi-party nature of consulting conversations and the tensions embedded, the process consultation literature guides a consultant to take a neutral stance in terms of the goals and the participants' differing interests. The consultant should respect the client's ownership of the problem and its solution (Schein, 1987, 1997), s/he should respect each party's freedom to have a genuine choice regarding their involvement in a consulting process and his or her work should be driven by the client's agenda (Schein, 1995). The neutral position is by no means introduced as an easy position, on the contrary: "one of the most difficult aspects of consultation is how to balance the different agendas of different primary clients within the same company" (Schein, 1987, 192).

Even though there is literature available to managers on how to manage the relationships with consultants, coming from both academic base (cf. Clark, 1995; Martin et al., 2001; Mitchell, 1994; Mohe, 2005) and practical base (cf. Kurb, 1993; Zackrison and Freedman, 2000), it is surprising that the complexity stemming from the multi-party nature of consulting settings is overlooked (Kykyri, 2008).

1.4.3 Enhancing reflection

The process consultant's fundamental role is viewed as that of a process specialist who is dedicated to "helping the system to help itself" (Schein, 1988, 193) and who "attempts to involve the organization in self-diagnosis and enables the organization to give itself sound advice" (Schein, 1988, 192). This requires specific interaction practices that support the client's competency in thinking in new ways. Consulting clients are, however, often loaded with practical problems regarding organisational performance. This creates a challenge to a consulting conversation – how to build interaction that enhances the client's 'self-diagnosis' so that the client can apply it somewhat immediately and at the same time utilise it as a source of learning (Ellis et al, 2001).

Reflection is often viewed as the key element of a process oriented consulting conversation. According to Raelin (2001, 11), reflection is a "practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired". Reflection may occur before, during or after the experience and it can be individual as well as collective practice, structured in various ways and varied in depth (http://crcp.mit. edu/documents/whatis.pdf). Reflection may serve either purposes of understanding theoretical ideas and research findings in practice, building practical knowledge, 'rules of thumb' or seeking dialogical knowledge, which aims at transforming one's practice (Raelin, 2001). The core element of reflection is re-thinking and recognising something that was earlier unrecognisable: "it privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice" (Raelin 2001: 11).

While the terms 'reflex', 'reflection' and 'reflexivity' have the same etymological roots, there is a need to clarify the use of each term (cf. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Cunliffe 2002, 2004). *Reflex* interaction refers to instantaneous, unselfconscious, reacting in-the-moment type of interaction. This occurs when conversationalists respond to each other in the moment. *Reflective* interaction aims to make shared sense of the world by using explicit knowledge and practical theories either retrospectively or through in-the-moment consideration. In a consulting conversation reflection takes place when conversationalists start to re-think the reflex interaction around the topic with the help of conceptual knowledge at hand. *Reflexive* interaction places the conversationalists as "practical authors and critical questioners" (Cunliffe 2002, 52) for each other within the social experience and construction of reality. Reflexivity then refers to relational awareness of one's own agency within a complex system (see e.g. Cunliffe, 2002, Rennie 2004). Ideally, the reflective practice of a consulting conversation leads to increasing reflexivity, managers' increased ability to question their ways of making sense of the world and see their own part in creating organisational realities and relating this to their own behaviour.

However, the primary call for consulting conversations is not always reflection and reflexivity but rather, the need for finding advice to solve some organisational problem. The challenge for a consultant is to make reflective practice (Schön, 1983) present in ways that responds to the call for advice.

1.5 The aims of the study

Using empirical data from one case of process consultation, this study examines how the various challenges of consulting conversations are met by the consulting parties and how responding to these challenges builds particular situated interactional tasks for the consultant. The thesis aims to recognise and describe in detail these tasks as well as the use of various discursive strategies utilised by the consultant when accomplishing *in situ* the tasks in question. In particular, the aim is to show how the consultant, by orienting himself to the interaction with the client and by actively participating in the interaction, shapes agendas that are not articulated as open and shared targets for the work. This thesis aims to show how such 'hidden agendas' are important part of interaction and institutional practice of process consultation. By offering the situational task perspective to consulting conversation, the study seeks to contribute to discussions on consultant-client interaction in general, and to the debates on the role of consultants in particular. Moreover, the aim is to provide a description of process consultation practice that would be useful in finding new perspectives to approach consulting work within both research and practical contexts.

2 THE METHODOLOGY

2.1 Two research projects

The three original studies of this dissertation were completed during two separate but connected research projects. The first project, named “Linguistic interaction in organizational consultation” (grant 101360) was carried out during the years 2002-2005 and the second one “Problems, advice and end results in the negotiations between a consultant and a client” (grant 104383) during the years 2005-2006. These research projects were funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund.

Four Finnish organizations cooperated in carrying out the research. The organizations in question were Odeco, a management consulting firm located in Jyväskylä, the Personnel Department of the City of Kokkola, Click Consulting, a management consulting firm located in Kokkola, and the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä which offered the methodological guidance for the process. The two researchers, the author and Virpi-Liisa Kykyri[1] who were PhD students at the University of Jyväskylä and employees of Odeco and the City of Kokkola, were responsible for planning and accomplishing the actual research work. Both were half-time researchers for the program while working simultaneously as part-time (external and internal) organizational consultants. The methodological guidance was provided by professor Jarl Wahlström.

The two research projects were aimed at finding novel descriptions and insights about the discursive practices of process consultation work and at producing six empirical articles to be published internationally. Both researchers had a lead author role in production of three separate article

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1 Virpi-Liisa Kykyri’s (2008) thesis “Helping Clients to Help Themselves” was produced within the same research projects and shared the same data corpus. Therefore, descriptions of the two research projects, consulting case and participants as well as the idea on analysis process ‘through the insider and outsider views’ are in congruence with the sections of her dissertation.

manuscripts each. Both aimed at completing their PhD thesis based on these two research projects and the produced manuscripts. In addition, two students of psychology were involved and had completed their Master's theses through their involvement with these research projects.

2.2 Participants and data

2.2.1 Action research setting

As a study of living practice, the present study represents ideas pertaining to the action research tradition. According to Reason's and Bradbury's (2001) description, the action research study concerns practical issues, it is curious about knowledge in action, it is conducted by the research subject (the author) and – to some extent - it has an interest in enriching the author's own practice. Because as an author I held a practitioner-researcher position throughout the research process, the research setting represents action research approach in terms of both data production and the retrospective analysis.

In terms of data production, the process consultation case itself can be seen as participatory action research since it highlights the participation of all concerned and aims to empower their practice through dialogue (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). Process consultation, just as the action research ideal, (Kuusela, 2005), aims to "assist locals in extending their own understanding of their situations and helps them to resolve the problems they see as important" (Guba, 1999, xiii). This part of the study was initiated by the client and had followed the client's call for consultation even though data gathering was initiated by the consultant.

During the retrospective analysis of the data, the local practitioners, i.e. the organizational participants of the company at hand were not involved with the research. As the author I was involved in the analysis with the help of a research team. In these terms the study can be viewed as professional practice research (Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland and Cuskelly, 2004). This part of the study was data-driven and followed the research team's emerging agenda during the analysis process.

In this study, the action research agenda becomes perhaps most visible for its focus on social practice, i.e. situations where the action takes places. Several definitions of action research point out the centrality of practitioner's understanding of the situations they are involved in (e.g. Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Rapoport, 1970; see also McKernan, 1996).

In agreement with Torbert's (2001) notion of 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-person action research practices this study can be seen as 1st-person approach since as the author I am reflecting on my own professional practice as a process consultant. The 2nd-person perspective is fulfilled in that the inquiry process into the data is done with the help of a research team and aims to make sense of the practice of a broader community, those engaged in process consultation.

The 3rd-person perspective is represented by the pursuit of building theoretical concepts regarding 'talk at work' in consulting.

Typical to an action research setting, the data of this study is derived from a single consulting case. As a consultant of this case, I obtained the permission for data gathering for later research purposes. In the process of research this material proved to represent well the practices of the process consultation approach, which makes it reasonable to take this approach as the central focus of the thesis.

2.2.2 The OD consulting process and the participants

Considering the noticeable difficulties of management consulting researchers in defining what is being studied since consultants' practices are extremely varying (Fincham and Clark, 2002), it is of importance that the consulting approach to this case is well known and carefully defined.

The data for this study is based on a long-term (nine months) process consultation case which was carried out in a company within the pulp industry in Finland. The consultation process aimed at facilitating change in the organisation from a functional organisational model to a more customer oriented process organisation. This meant integration of the two previously separate R&D and Customer service departments. Technically, this change had already been made and people were already informed about their new roles within the organization. The need for consultation emerged as a result of the management's remarkable difficulties in establishing the 'new organization' within the day-to-day practices of the organization.

These difficulties arose due to various reasons. Firstly, the previously separate R&D and customer service departments had been merged to form a united 'customer process' aiming at better focus on customer needs. This resulted in a new organizational hierarchy which was reflected onto the daily practices and experiences of employees. Earlier, both departments had had an equal status and were managed by separate 'functional managers' whereas the erstwhile customer service employees, who worked at the customer interface, now became contractors for the R&D employees. This led to problems of cooperation since the R&D employees felt they were being 'bossed' by the customer service employees. This, in turn, created pressure towards the management to do something about the situation.

The members of the new organization, i.e. the employees and the management of the above mentioned R&D organization and customer service organization, became the participants for this consulting case. Based on previous cooperation with the consultant (i.e. the author of this dissertation) the director of the organization was already familiar with the consultant's professional approach and personal style. This made it easier for the client organization to give the permission to record all the consulting conversations of this consulting case (audio and video recordings) from the early beginning of the consulting process. I organised the recordings with the help of a research assistant. This was done after all the participants had given their written consent for videotaping of the meetings and events for research purposes. Thereafter, the presence of the research assistant with recording equipment was not raised for discussion and, as I interpreted it, it did not hinder our concentration on the consultation process itself.

The consulting case in whole consists of three meetings with the management conducted by the consultant and two two-day organization development (OD) events for the entire merged organization guided by the consultant. As a consultant I was responsible for the whole consulting process and I was present during all the sessions. The consulting process in itself was built so that during the first meeting with the management the first OD-event was agreed upon, whereas during the first OD-event the need for a second meeting with the management emerged. Again, during that meeting, the idea for a new OD-event with a new planning session with the management came up.

Two members of the management (the director responsible for customer process and the manager responsible for R&D operations) were present during the meetings with the management. During the consulting process, meetings with the management became an arena for handling the organizational problems from the managerial perspective. In addition, negotiating about the contract, planning and evaluation of the consulting process were also on the agenda for these meetings with the management which consisted of discussions and inquiries.

The total number of participants during the first OD event was 23, including four members of the management (the director responsible for customer process and the manager responsible for R&D operations, the director responsible for production and the manager responsible for HRM). Basically the same employees were present also during the second OD event, excluding the production director and the HRM manager.

The OD events offered a forum for all concerned (the managers and employees of the merged R&D and customer service departments) to discuss the ongoing change within the organization. Organizational roles and relationships as well as norms of co-operation were discussed and, as a consequence, some practical improvements were agreed upon. During the OD events, I was in charge of the proceedings and I was holding various working roles such as a chair, an interviewer, a facilitator of communication and a guide for working methods. Working sessions during the OD events consisted of discussions and interviews, group work sessions and applications of various special methods.

During the first OD event of this case in particular, the situation of the participating group somewhat resembled that of any group in its early stage of development. When a group begins, one of its primary challenges is how the participants get to know each other and how they learn to work together within the particular group setting. The participants of this consulting case were members of the same organization and therefore some of them were familiar with each other and shared some common background information about each other, and about the earlier group settings held within this organization.

However, not all of them were familiar with one another since they represented two previously separate units that had been merged only recently. Also, in practice, their work sites were divided into five separate places having a remarkable geographical distance from each other. This, in turn, meant that some of the participants met each other for the first time during the first OD event.

The consulting practice of the case followed the principles of the process consultation approach. The assignment in itself was to facilitate meetings which were aimed at helping the organisational participants representing various work sites and professional positions to share their views about the ongoing change. The employees were invited to 'slow down' their daily actions and to spend some time talking about the current situation and the future needs. From the early beginning of the consulting events, I as the consultant, worked to build an agenda which is based on the participants' concerns and contributions. These themes were explored collaboratively, by giving space for participants to contribute. There were no explicit 'steps' for action, but rather, the process itself guided what to do next. During the consulting process, the data gathering and intervention phases were not separate but instead, everything that was done was treated as intervention. As the consultant of the OD events I both defined my role and acted as an organiser of the inquiry process. The interviews I conducted had an explorative purpose with respect to all participants, and were therefore conducted in front of the participating group without the aim of gathering data for a written report. Thus, the explorative and interventive nature of the consulting action was somewhat clear for all. Again, I neither offered solutions, nor took the operative role in managing organizational actions or plans. Instead, as is typical for a process oriented helper, I offered various working methods. In this case I utilised methods and techniques from so called systemic approach to consultation (e.g. Campbell et al., 1991), and applied action methods (e.g. Blatner, 1973) and narrative techniques (White and Epston, 1990).

2.2.3 Data production

The data consists of naturally occurring talk within the complete consulting process. In a way, there is not one single data, but this data has various forms. During the analysis process, all of these versions were available. The very first version of data was 'born' from my immediate experiences as the consultant-researcher during the consulting process. The second version of the data was formed as all the consultation sessions were audio recorded (approximately 30 hours) and all the consultation sessions (except the first contracting meeting) were also video recorded. The third version of the data was formed as this recorded data was transcribed into textual form. And finally, the fourth version of the data was formed as the extracts were selected for the purposes of the six separate studies of the research program.

The transcription of the data was conducted using a modified version of Jefferson practices (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). The selected extracts were transcribed with extra care including the intonation, speed of talk and, to some extent, the non-verbal parts of conversation like gestures and facial expressions (transcription symbols are presented in the original articles of this thesis). The extracts were translated into English with the aim of preserving the meanings and the fluency of the Finnish originals, which were used in the primary analysis. To offer the reader the opportunity to view the original Finnish transcriptions, I have added them in appendix 1.

2.2.4 Data selection

During repeated listening and reading phases, the whole process consulting case was used to get the first impression of the data and to find the themes that were later translated into research questions of the original articles of this thesis. Later, the analytic insights and findings were checked against this large data corpus. However, the detailed analysis process was restricted to the smaller number of text extracts which formed the specified data of the separate research articles.

This thesis focuses on the conversations at the somewhat early stage of the consulting process. As multi-party settings each conversation represents typical stages of a consulting process, namely contract negotiation with the management (article1), the first OD event for the organisation (article 2) and the follow up and planning session for the management (article 3). The first and the third article deal with a small group setting (three participants) whereas the second article deals with issues in a large group setting (24 participants including the consultant). The consulting process procedure, the time schedule of the case and the text extracts chosen for three separate studies are illustrated in figure2

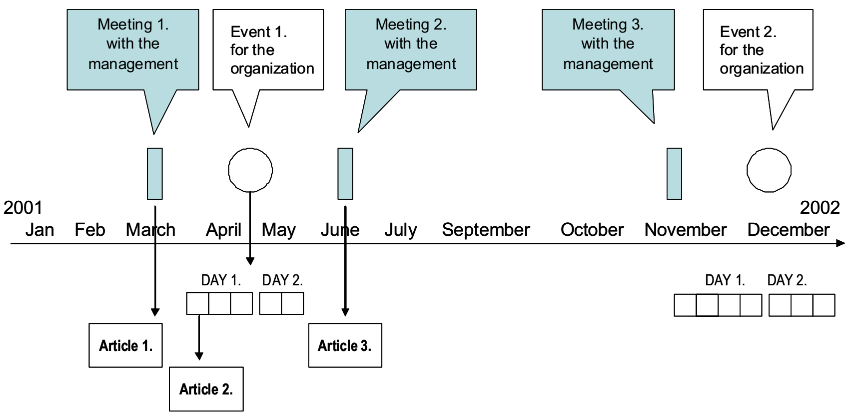

FIGURE 2 The case, time schedule and extract material used in each article

The extracts presented in article 1 come from the first meeting between the consultant and the two representatives of the management of the organisation. Factually, this meeting was the contract conversation with the consultant and included negotiation and planning of the consultation process. The article takes into scrutiny a three minutes and 10 seconds sequence originally located at about 15 minutes into the beginning of the meeting. This conversation is divided into four separate extracts (including one that is divided into three sub-extracts) suiting the purposes of the analysis presented.

The data extracts used in article 2 are drawn from the first consultation session with the employees (altogether 19) and the members of the management (altogether 4). The idea of the event was to collaborate with the customer process organisation in order to overcome the difficulties of the change process at hand. The article includes four extracts from the event. The first three extracts present single addresses of each representative position, namely that of management, consultant and employees. The director's and consultant's addresses represent welcoming words at the very beginning of the event, whereas the address of an employees is drawn 22 minutes later from a group interview conducted by the consultant. In this interview, each participant was basically asked to say something regarding their hopes for the event (e.g. "what do you hope to achieve during this event") and current thoughts or concerns (e.g. "what do you have in mind that you would like to say here"). Each of these three addresses represents more or less monologue structure, whereas the fourth extract represents a conversational structure. It is a 70 seconds episode located at 56 minutes from the beginning of the event where both the two present directors and one employee intervene in the interview.

The extracts used in article 3 are from the second meeting between the consultant and the management. The two client participants were the manager of R&D and the director of the customer process. The idea of this meeting was to reflect and discuss the outcomes of first consulting event for the organisation and to make planning for the next steps both in terms of managerial work and the consulting relationship. The article includes three separate extracts from the conversation during the meeting. The first extract is located at 35 minutes into the beginning (lasting 70 seconds), the second one half an hour later (lasting 40 seconds) and the third one at the end of the meeting (lasting 75 seconds).

In sum, the study focuses on the beginning of a consulting relationship and deals with conversations that occur when negotiating the contract, when starting work with the organisation and when discussing the change process with the management at the first follow-up. Although my initial intention was not to study the beginning of a consulting relationship, the selection of the data in the writing process of each original article led to this preference.

2.3 Methodological repertoire

2.3.1 Systemic frame

Systemic thinking provided one methodological frame for this study. Systemic thinking cannot be explained easily or understood comprehensively since its roots are multidisciplinary drawing from cybernetics (e.g. Wiener, 1948), biology (e.g. Maturana and Varela, 1980) social sciences (e.g. Burell and Morgan 1979; Luhmann, 1995) and anthropology (e.g. Bateson 1972). The systemic approach draws from the Aristotelian notion that "the whole is more than the sum of its part" (quoted in von Bertalanffy, 1972). The General Systems Theory presented by von Bertalanffy in 1950 was an early attempt to build a wider body of knowledge of systems. Since then, systemic ideas have contributed to various applied fields of human sciences like organization theory (e.g. Checkland, 1994; Miller and Rice, 1967), communication theory (e.g. Cronen, Chen and Pearce, 1988), management practice and development (e.g. Barge, 2004; Cecchin and Stratton, 1991; Senge, 1990), organizational consulting (e.g. Campbell et al., 1991; Kurpius, 1985; Oliver, 2005; Shaw, 1997) and family therapy (e.g., Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata, 1980; Hoffman, 1981). Within these multiple fields authors use various concepts to explain systemic principles, leading to plurality of systemic schools, like 'open systems theory', 'organizational cybernetics', 'interactive planning', 'soft systems approach' 'critical systemic thinking' (Flood, 1999). Overall, the systemic perspective views organizations as complex and emergent by nature (Flood, 1999; Stacey 1996).

This study follows ideas and conceptions from the 'systemic-constructionist approach' (e.g. Barge, 2004, 2007; Barge and Little, 2002; Campbell, 2000; Cronen and Lang, 1994; Oliver, 2005; Pearce, Villar and McAdam, 1992) which brings together social constructionist and systemic thinking. It highlights the emergence of language use, proposing that evolving conversations create new possibilities for meaning-making and action. Organisations can be viewed as evolving processes of actions and interpretations that inspire new actions leading to new interpretations (Silverman, 1970). Moreover, the systemic-constructionist approach underlines the context-bound and context shaping nature of all action. Every conversation should therefore be viewed as a unique intersection of various contexts (e.g. time, people, place, the topic). The situational perspective adopted in this thesis is drawn from systemic-constructionist ground by viewing the consultant's situational task in contexts of both professional role and institutional goal.

Another systemic frame for analysis of this thesis is to view the consulting setting as a social system that consists of multiple relationships. These relationships are seen as not stable but as 'living' and being continuously changing. Relationship constructions between various stakeholders in the system are therefore of importance. In this study a consulting system is viewed as a triangular system where the consultant represents one party, while the managers and employees represent the other two main parties (cf. Kurpius and Fuqua, 1993). Being a relational system a change in one relationship of the system enhances change in the other relationships. This is why consulting conversations are viewed as potentially epochal: they can re-construct relationships in the consulting system and, again, change the relationships within bigger organisational system creating new action and performance.

Moreover, it is the systemic awareness that helped me to see that participants in a consulting triangle position each other and become positioned by others in varying ways even during a single consulting conversation. This idea offered insight into the external consulting role: in a system the consultant as a third party can provide new positions for organisational members and thereby offer flexibility for the system to adopt itself to new circumstances. The idea of balancing between various consulting tasks is also drawn from the systemic idea of homeostasis.

2.3.2 Discourse Analysis

Another methodological frame and also more concrete analysis practice comes from Discourse Analysis (DA) (Potter, 1996; 2003a; 2004; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) which, as centring on the analysis of 'naturally occurring talk' (Potter, 2004), focuses on the fine details of interaction and sees discourses as action-oriented, situated, constructed and constructive (Potter 2003a). A consulting conversation is approached as action that is situated in the particular local context and interactional sequences. The interest here is to examine *how* consulting parties, through talk, construct the social worlds that then became real for them. This is done by taking a careful look at the rhetorical character of talk in sequences as well as the discursive strategies that participants employ in conversation.

DA can be viewed as "an umbrella which covers a wide variety of actual research practices with quite different aims and theoretical backgrounds" (Burr, 1995, 163). This study utilises DA as presented by Jonathan Potter and his colleagues, for example by utilising ideas and practices that are originally developed within the tradition of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Goffman, 1979; Peräkylä 1995; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Silverman and Peräkylä, 1990). In particular, by focusing on turn-taking and the sequential order of conversations and looking at how utterances are responses to earlier turns and how some turns construct certain preferences during a sequence, the study owes to practices of CA.

DA practitioners favour naturalistic interactional materials in their studies. Naturalistic materials document the interaction as it happens and retain the action-oriented nature of talk. Moreover, they show how participants orient to settings and institutions and call for centring to situated practices of the participants (Potter, 2003a). Thus, to examine consulting practice, the DA idea of using naturalistic materials suits well. Moreover, this perspective and the material of this study makes it possible to study the institutional character of consulting talk. Here, this study owes again to CA tradition (e.g. Drew and Heritage, 1992).

Discourse analytic perspective affords a researcher with many analytical options. Following the conceptualization of Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), a researcher makes choices in the dimension between local-situational and macro-system contexts, as well as in the dimension between transient meaning (e.g. emerging from specific interaction) and durable meaning (e.g. existing beyond specific interaction). While my choices regarding the original analysis of the sub-articles follow a micro-discourse perspective, the summary article also looks at the macro-perspective by connecting language use in local practice to the institutional interaction context.

2.4 Analysis process

2.4.1 Analysis through the' insider' and 'outsider' views

The fact that I had both the researching as well as consulting position has its consequences for both the access to the data and its utilization. Actually, I was involved with three different processes or contexts and – connected to them – I had different access to the experience and data in each as summarised in figure 3.

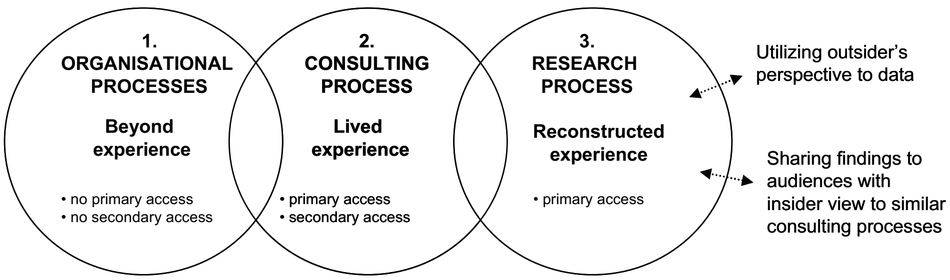

FIGURE 3 Various processes and the researcher's access to them

In relation to organisational processes to which the consulting process was connected I was an outsider without access to the day-to-day practice. I had neither primary access to visiting the organisation nor primary access to hearing what people talked about during their daily work or, what their thoughts on the consultancy process were. I also did not have secondary access that would for example enable me use of organisational documents, mails or other sort of data. Thus, this reality was beyond my experience. Instead, as a consultant in the consultancy process, I was a 'complete member' (Adler and Adler, 1987) of this system and had the insider view to it. As an 'insider action researcher' (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001) I was experientially immersed into the situations being studied and I had lived experience of them. I had primary access to consulting conversations and also secondary access in terms of having the recordings of the conversations. As the first author of the studies I had primary access to the research process.

Working in a research team actually meant that the analysis was done utilizing 'insider/outsider team research' (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). This has been a remarkable benefit for the production of the research since throughout the analysis process there was a possibility to verify the analysis, results and conclusions in discussions between the 'insider' and the 'outsiders'. I had also audiences, professional consultants and managers, with whom to share the findings of the original studies. This made it possible to verify the findings with others who had lived experiences from similar consulting settings. Both these outsider resources offered opportunities to reflect on and control how I was reading the material.

Practically, and to make use of this benefit, the majority of all analysis work was done within the regular pair work sessions which the two researchers ('insider' and 'outsider') arranged at least 20 days per annum. To utilize my 'insider' perspective to data (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), it was possible for us as a research pair to test whether the interpretations fit with the lived experience I had from the analyzed situation. This took place by pondering discussions of the type "if this reading of the data is sense making when considering the situation the conversation is drawn from". Discussions, observations and insights produced during these sessions were carefully documented in writing and these notes were actively used during the analysis and writing phases. Whilst writing has mainly been done separately, the two other members of the research team have regularly commented and provided their insights and suggestions for revisions concerning the manuscripts of the original articles.

To manage the potential shortcomings from 'insider' perspective during the overall research process and especially during the analysis sessions, we systematically used third person position to talk about the consultant ("the consultant") instead of using first person position ("I) or second person position ("you", "Risto"), which in itself created some distance and facilitated analysis and conclusions which were not tied to my subjective and personal experiences only. Also, on occasions where I noticed some interference caused by subjective thoughts and feelings, like embarrassment or defence, these issues were openly discussed in the team and they were taken into account as information from the system.

This arrangement was completed during the analysis process by utilizing data sessions and methodology seminars in which discursively oriented experts who were familiar with the methodological perspectives and analysis tools of this research provided their observations, insights and interpretations of the extracts which were selected for the original articles of this thesis. During the two research projects, 12 two-day seminars have been arranged and most of the extracts of this thesis have been worked on during these seminars. All the conversations including analytic observations, insights and concluding remarks made during these group sessions have been carefully documented in writing and these comments can be identified by the speaker.

Moreover, during the research projects, the researches attended several national and international congresses and seminars in which they gave presentations about the aims and preliminary insights and findings of these projects. Audiences of these settings included academics, consulting and organization development practitioners and university students. These settings were used for testing the findings and conclusions of the original articles within the wider communities.

2.4.2 Analytical concepts and tools

Whilst the idea of situationally emerging interactional tasks and hidden agendas was reconstructed during the writing process of this thesis in order to offer a wider perspective to all three articles, the analysis of the original studies benefited from more specified concepts.

In the first article, the focus of analysis was on the indirectness and extra cautiousness in language use by which consulting parties display *sensitivity* (Linell and Bredmar, 1996) of the topics or the meeting situation itself when potentially problematic or threatening issues are raised for discussion. The concept of *sensitivity marker* (or 'delicacy marker') (Adelswärd, 1989; Haakana, 2001; Linell and Bredmar, 1996; Silverman and Peräkylä, 1990; Suoninen, 1999) was used to point out these detailed ways of expressing sensitivity. The analysis of sensitive conversational sequences led to the observation that it is the meaning potential of the expressions that is managed by using delicacy markers. By using delicacy markers, the conversationalists can express that the topic at hand is connected to some particular meanings while by the same token they can suspend a more thorough *topic penetration* (Linell and Bredmar, 1996).

The second article applied the idea of consulting relationship as a *triadic system* (Kurpius and Fuqua, 1993; Sagar and Wiseman, 1982) between the consultant, employees and managers. The analysis was based on the observation that each consulting party seemed to build a different view of the triad depending on what interests (or agenda) they brought into negotiations. While doing so, each party *positioned* (Langenhove and Harre, 1999) themselves and others by their language use. When positioning each other, each party in different ways constructed *asymmetry* and *symmetry* of the relationships between themselves. The concept of asymmetry comes from CA based studies that examine institutional interaction and view asymmetry as an interactional achievement (Maynard, 1991). This article adopted the concepts of asymmetry and symmetry as analytical tools to examine inequalities and equalities of the situated descriptions of the relationships regarding either power, authority, knowledge, competence or other forms of hierarchy (Linell and Luckman, 1991). Moreover, it looked at how asymmetry or symmetry was displayed by communication patterns (Markova and Foppa, 1991).

The third article focused on the *discursive strategies* by which the *content and process of advice* was managed in conversations by the consultant and used for the consulting process purposes. The idea of discursive strategies stems from DA tradition that focuses on the rhetorical or argumentative organization of talk (Potter, 2003a). Distinguishing the process and the content of advice comes from current research on advising (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler and Budarz, 2004). Moreover, the analysis utilised the ideas of Positioning Theory (Harre and Langenhove, 1999) in showing that the consultant carefully positioned himself and the two managers in conversation to promote reflective practice, whereby the two managers could re-think their position, language use and action in the organizational system. While DA gave a general frame to the article to look at both the content of talk (i.e. what is said) and the process of doing it (i.e. how it was done), CA offered tools such as '*marked' and 'unmarked acknowledgement of advice'* (Heritage and Sefi, 1992) to look at how advice was received in each case.

3 SUMMARIES OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Article 1

Puutio, R., Kykyri, V-L. and Wahlström, J. Sensitivity and the Development of Meaning Potentials – Discursive Practices in a Process Consulting Contract Meeting. Submitted.

The first article examines discursive practices by which client managers and a consultant approach sensitivity, that is, discussions around topics that might evoke guilt, conflict or carry moral implications. Conversations during a contract meeting – which this study focuses on – offer a particularly interesting scope for this, since in it client participants for the first time introduce their concerns to the consultant. From the consultant's perspective, the contract meeting is important since in addition to being a negotiation of a concrete working contract with a potential client, it offers an opportunity to enter into a process of meaning negotiation with that client. With the help of three minutes data extract, the article asks how, during their first meeting, the consulting partners mark their addresses as sensitive and how they collaboratively deal with the sensitivity in terms of developing meaning potentials. In particular, the article explores the consultant's role in this action while also examining possible explanations as to why, in this case, the participants treat certain issues as sensitive.

The analysis shows the richness in the ways by which sensitivity becomes marked in the course of the conversation. Hesitations in articulation, using softening sentences, variation of vocabulary and intonation, speed of talk as well as topic penetration are examples of means that each conversationalist used in their talk. The analysis shows that indirectness of talk has interactional functions in the meeting. In particular, it is used to negotiate the meaning potentials of the topics at hand. The analysis pays attention to the particular interactional task of the consultant to manage the situation in a way that helps clients to raise matters of concern for discussion on the one hand and to actively develop the meaning potentials of the topics on the other hand. The consultant's external position seems to make it possible to enable the consulting meeting to proceed fluently and thereby strategically utilize the meeting situation in order to construct a safe enough and a shared goal for working with the organizational topics at hand.

The article discusses the functionality of indirect language use in consulting conversations, in particular at the early stage of the consulting relationship. It suggests that even though momentarily hesitative or stammering talk may at first sight appear as if there is a lack of professional competence to discuss difficulties, in a local interaction process it can communicate mutual understanding and hence portray the consultant as one who can work sensitively and respectfully. In these terms, the article contributes to the understanding of institutional practices of process consulting. Moreover, by showing the reciprocal nature of sensitivity, the article challenges the idea of a consultant as a supreme rhetorical expert who can have control over the client as claimed by the critical authors. The article points out that expressing and handling sensitivity may be less conscious than what it looks like in retrospect, and that skilful consultants manage to do this with and among their clients even though they are not aware of doing so. As a practical conclusion, the article underlines the importance of the beginning of a consulting process in its fine details. It concludes that consultants need to take the indirectness of the client's discourse into account as meaningful action rather than handling it as harmful social friction. Consultants need to sensitively respond to delicacy delivered, realizing this as a part of collaborative meaning work.

Article 2

Puutio, R., Kykyri, V-L. and Wahlström, J. (2008) Constructing Asymmetry and Symmetry in Relationships Within a Consulting System. Systemic Practice and Action Research 21(1), 35-54.

The second article deals with relationship building at the beginning of a consulting process with an organisation. The materials, conversations between a consultant and organisational members during the first consulting session, are analysed from the perspective of asymmetry and symmetry. Asymmetry refers to one hierarchical characteristic of organizational relationships and to an unequal communication whereas symmetry refers to equality in both how relationships are viewed and how communication works. The former is viewed as important for organisational management while the latter is viewed as essential in providing commitment and mutual learning. The article asks how speakers in three different participant categories of the consulting system (the consultant, management and employees), construct their relationships as asymmetric and symmetric. In addition, the article asks how symmetry and asymmetry of the relationships are negotiated in course of the multi-party consulting conversation.

The analysis of the three single addressees shows that when issues on the formal agenda are being talked about, organizational members discreetly orient to the organizational relationships and make the current asymmetries and symmetries visible from their perspective. This takes place by the ways speakers position each other in talk. Each party of the consulting system views the relationships differently and constructs the asymmetry and symmetry of the mutual relationships differently. Each party also communicates in both asymmetric and symmetric ways. The analysis of a multi-party interaction episode shows the delicacy of negotiating asymmetry and symmetry of relationships in the system. In conversations, consulting parties mutually produce and reproduce the asymmetry-symmetry balance of their relationships from one moment to another. For a consultant, whose only means of contributing is the consulting conversation, this means an opportunity to become actively involved in the relationship construction between the participants. The consultant's status offers a privileged position from which to offer temporary amendments regarding the balance between asymmetric and symmetric relationships in the system. The consultant's role is important in facilitating flexible shifts (i.e. regulation) between symmetric and asymmetric relationships and communication within an organization.

The article suggests that the symmetry-asymmetry dimension is a notable issue in understanding consulting relationships and interaction. By having illuminated the special position of a consultant in allowing asymmetry and enhancing symmetry the article contributes to research that approaches consulting as a form of institutional interaction. For a practising consultant the article offers conceptual tools and questions for reflecting one's own practice. It highlights that being curious about one's own contribution to relationship constructions within the consulting system is one part of the professional reflexivity that every process consultant should engage in.

Article 3

Puutio, R., Kykyri, V-L. and Wahlström, J. (2009) The Process and Content of Advice Giving in Support of Reflective Practice in Management Consulting. Reflective Practice 10 (4), 513-528.

The third article examines advice-giving conversations in consulting practice. Surprisingly, this empirical perspective is novel even though consulting work as advice-giving activity has recently became under scrutiny in research from many other perspectives. By focusing on a single consulting session between two managers and a consultant the article asks how the process and content of advice support reflective managerial practice.

Providing detailed analysis of the discursive practices in three conversational episodes the article illustrates that both content and process of the advice can be used to offer reflective perspectives to management. From the content perspective the analysis illustrates three different sort of advice for reflective practice, i.e. regarding managerial position, language use or managerial action. From the process perspective, the analysis shows some varieties in the discursive strategies available to the consultant, including strategic use of preceding talk, use of a pondering style of talking and employment of psychological terminology, cautious ways of starting with questions when offering advice, as well as downplaying the consultant's expert role. In the flow of the conversations, inviting a reflective perspective to managerial practice seems to be strongly on the agenda of the consultant who explicates a reflective stance as an essential aspect of the managerial position.

The article claims that that the two different agendas of consulting – advising and supporting reflective practice – need not exclude each other as suggested in process consultation literature but rather they can be woven together by appropriate use of language. Supporting reflective practice calls for offering challenging perspectives that suit the managerial concerns, interests and abilities, as well as interaction that delicately considers the management's discourse. In this sense, as the article suggests, giving and receiving advice is a collaborative pursuit where the consultant needs the client's initiatives and responses to formulate and fine-tune the fit between the advice and the client's discourse. This contributes to our understanding of the institution of process consultation.

By increasing empirically based knowledge on the practice of process consulting, the article contributes to debates on theory and practice in consulting. Furthermore, by showing some of the complexities in promoting reflective practice in OD-consulting, the article discusses the learning of reflection. A reflective stance is not easy to attain, even when managers acknowledge its importance and their own need for gaining new perspectives. The article concludes that consulting conversations may offer a specific arena for situated learning of these skills, enabling managers to apply similar discursive strategies in their own managerial practice.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Main findings

The aim of this thesis was to examine process consulting practice. It was asked how responding to various interactional challenges builds particular situational tasks for a consultant. The thesis aimed to recognize these tasks and the use of various discursive strategies that became employed in accomplishing the tasks. The study focused on conversations when negotiating the contract, when dealing with the organizational members during a consulting event or when advising the management during a follow up discussion. As a result, the analysis showed that a process oriented consultant became a container of various simultaneously emerging tasks. A variety of discursive strategies were employed. Managing situational tasks required more or less implicit targets and strategies, which hence became 'hidden agendas' of the consulting conversations. The presence of hidden agendas can be portrayed as a salient constitutive element of institutional interaction in consulting practice.

The first article examined a sensitive discussion episode during the contract meeting where two participants (both holding a managerial position), talked about their organization and planned a consulting event for it. The consultant and the client faced the challenge to build a shared agenda for their co-work. The analysis showed how, on the one hand, the consultant supported the participants to raise sensitive topics for discussion and how he actively managed the development of emerging meaning potentials on the other hand. Avoiding and suspending topic engagement that would appear conflicting or face threatening, i.e. guilt or shame evoking appeared to the task for the consultant. It was carried out by the use of discursive strategies which show carefulness and indirectness on the one hand and purposefulness on the other. Utilizing clients' formulations, using first person voice as well as professional vocabulary, proved to belong to the discursive strategies of the consultant. The consultant's external position seemed to make it possible to strategically utilize situations in order to offer a future perspective that each participant could accept as a shared and an open goal for working. The consultant's hidden agenda appeared to make the consulting event look as a remedy for the difficult matters at hand. He portrayed the organizational situation with psychological language thereby making it look manageable. Moreover, the consultant did constructive work to make the social situation of negotiating safe and the future perspective promising enough.

The second article took a step forward in the consulting process and focused on the beginning of the consultation event where both employees and managers met the consultant in order to talk about the current organizational situation. This situation challenged each party to define and negotiate their mutual relationships in a multi-party context. In the conversation, the consultant became actively involved in the reconstruction of the organizational relationships in terms of the asymmetry-symmetry dimension. The article showed how the consultant, on one hand, took the current asymmetries of the organization into consideration and even supported them while on the other hand he built symmetric relationships between all concerned. The consultant's strategy to do this was to take the chair role whereby he could define his own as well as others' positions in a discussion and to offer space for certain perspectives (e.g. for employer's wishes) while temporally ignoring other perspectives (e.g. that of managers). Facilitating flexible shifts between the polarities describes the consultant's hidden agenda in a situation were enough clarity between different organizational roles as well as enough mutuality and sense of sharing resources (e.g. observations, opinions, ideas, learning points) were needed.

The third article took the meeting with the management after the consultation event under scrutiny and focused on advice-giving situations. The article showed how enhancing reflection became the challenge in a conversation. The consultant responded to this challenge by supporting the client's own agency in leadership position on the one hand and by offering alternative perspectives on leadership practices on the other. These tasks were managed, as the article showed, by particular reflective practice whereby the management could re-think its position in regard to the organization. Both the contents of advice and the process of advising seemed to support this constructive work of building such reflective positions to the management. From the content perspective, the advice focused on the managerial position, the language use and the details of actions. Various discursive strategies were employed for this purpose, including for example, strategic use of preceding talk, use of a pondering style of talking and employment of psychological terminology, cautious ways of opening up with questions when offering advice, as well as downplaying the consultant's expert role. In the flow of the conversations, the consultant seemed to orient himself following the more or less hidden agenda of making reflective practice as high priority of leadership.

The findings of the original studies are in the following related to the idea of consultant's interactional tasks during consulting conversations. These tasks seem to have a twofold character which makes it justifiable to view them as *dual tasks*, meaning that the consultant had to work simultaneously in two different directions, as summarized in the figure 4.

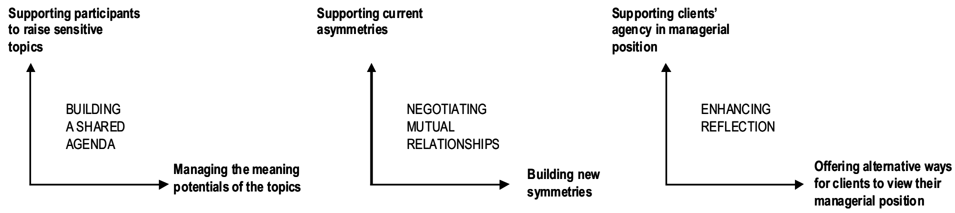

FIGURE 4 Dual tasks as dilemmas in responding to interactional challenges

Meeting the challenges of the interaction situations of consulting conversations thus means that a consultant holds a dilemmatic position from which to focus on varying perspectives. I argue that this balancing activity requires the employment of hidden agendas, which, in turn, illuminates the institutional character of process consulting. Next, the dual task perspective and the functions of hidden agendas are discussed in more detail and related to wider perspectives on consulting role, institutional interaction and the ideal of neutrality in process consultation.

4.2 Balancing activity, dual tasks and the functions of hidden agendas

The finding of dual tasks and the consulting position as balancing between differing and even opposing agendas resonates well with the idea of consulting work as managing the balance between order and chaos. Indeed, Clegg et al (2004, 34-35) suggest that: ″consulting need not be seen as just organizing in the sense of the creation of a new order, but also as disruption of order, an exploration and exploitation of the spaces in between present order and potential, future order″. Several other authors introduce the consulting position from a similar kind of duality perspective. Ellis et al (2001) suggest that a process consultant needs to manage tensions between resolving here-and-now problems and engaging the client's system capacity to learn. Church et al (1994) find that OD consultants often struggle with dual values: wanting on one hand to foster human concerns while responding to client call to focus on outcomes on the other hand. Overall, the functional literature describes the consultant's ambiguous position of simultaneously developing empathy for and maintaining distance from the key players (Glasser, 2002). What this study adds is the systematic illustration of micro-practices by which dual tasks are performed through talk and how balancing between the polarities takes place from early beginning of a process consulting relationship.

The finding of the variation of discursive strategies in responding to interaction challenges of consulting conversation resonates well with the idea of 'paradoxical repertoire' and its use for consulting purposes. Differing and even opposing discourses can constitute resources for doing consultancy (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Whittle, 2006). Using language strategically – in order to balance between situational demands - can thus be viewed as a key ability of a process consultant to manage the dual tasks. Ospina, Dodge, Godsoe, Minieri, Reza and Shall (2004) showed empirically, how the dilemma between authority and democracy can be faced and solved in change programs on a situational basis: an authority position can be used strategically for enhancing democratic spaces for organizations. This is in congruence with the findings of the current study. Depending on the situational context, a consultant can, for example, adopt a strong expert position from which s/he can offer perspectives as factual and indisputable or s/he can downplay the expert position and offer his/her view as an optional perspective to be considered along with the client participant's own views. The position of both expert and outsider makes it possible for a consultant to 'test' varying strategies and make situational judgments on what interactional strategies to use. However, as the original analysis argues, we need to realize that producing particular tension or dilemma, or balancing between the bipolar pairs of the duality is not a simple matter of individual choice (see also, Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004) but rather a question of mutual activity.

As a living system an organization must adapt itself to changes in the environment. The consultant's balancing activity becomes meaningful by the fact that the organization has to balance between various demands anyway. A consultant may be hired in critical moments when there is a need to find a new balance between stability and change. The dual task perspective can help us to see that by taking a balancing position with the opposed needs of a consulting situation, a consultant might (either consciously or not) come to help the organization in its need to balance, for example, various interests. Even though this study does not primarily focus on the political nature of organizational change (Buchanan and Badham, 1999), a consultant's contribution could be seen as political activity, contrasting the views that tend to deny this aspect of OD work (e.g. French and Bell, 1995). Successful balancing, for example, between organizational coherence and diversity is found to be essential success factor for organizations (Butcher and Clarke, 2006). This study illuminates consultants' functional role in these balancing processes.

Organizational ambivalence and tension between various interests during a change process create challenges for consulting conversations. Against this background it is meaningful that the consultant employs interactional tasks and discursive strategies that do not make all agendas openly articulated. Collaboration in multi-party settings without any hidden agendas would make the consulting relationship appear not mutually appreciative, responsive and polite. Both the managerial and the employee position in any change situation is ambivalent and therefore avoiding facing too conflicting or ambiguous conversations can be functional. Similarly, mutual relationships can be organized more flexibly and a reflective perspective can be embedded to the conversation by keeping the conversational moves partly covert.

For a client, observing a consultant in dealing with challenges of a consulting conversation and managing situational tasks, may be a learning experience that can be transported to managerial work. Seemingly, managers face similar challenges in their organizations: they are supposed to raise sensitive matters, to deal with opposing interests and build shared agendas. Moreover, they are supposed to give advice and help people to reflect on their own practices. Consulting conversations can thus enrich the 'linguistic abilities' of managers by offering practices that can be transformed into meta-skills for managerial use (Clark and Salaman 1998b). In functionalist literature terms, a consultant offers a role model to management in dealing with complex issues (Jamieson, 1995, Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986, Schein, 1987).

4.3 On the institution of process consultancy

In viewing consulting practice from role, goal and task perspectives, this study shows that each perspective is different in terms of what is open or hidden in consulting practice. Figure 5 below illustrates the variation in each perspective.

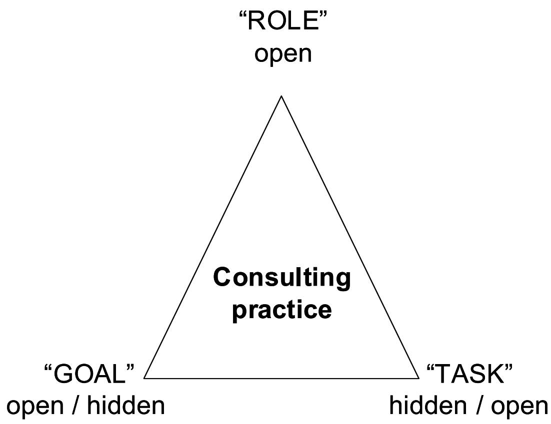

FIGURE 5 'Open' and 'Hidden' in consulting practice

The role perspective stands for an open agenda: a consultant can agree openly with the client that his or her role is, for example, to 'facilitate change' whereas the institutional perspective (goal) might contain both open and hidden elements. The parties might have the somewhat same understanding on the purpose of the consulting, for example to 'transform the organization' but the consultant might also have – as a part of this goal - a parallel hidden goal of making the management more reflexive concerning their own ways of thinking and acting. When it comes to interactional tasks in consulting conversations, a consultant might hold more hidden than open agendas in order to find ways to respond to the clients within interactional practice.

Viewing consulting work as carrying out 'hidden agendas' does certainly not mean that the goals from the consultant's side are purposefully hidden or secret in their own right for the client. Rather, by taking a researcher's retrospective perspective, we are able to see (i.e. reconstruct) that the interaction can contain such qualities and that these qualities are needed, too. Hidden agendas are simply employed to bring forth the shared agenda for the consulting relationship and, thereafter, to 'get things done' in that context. Owing to the research on the institutional interaction within various professions we can see that the presence of invisible interactional dominance, 'hidden agendas' in terms of this study, need not be viewed as a problematic side of interaction, but rather as a salient feature of the institution itself.

Based on the studies from the same research projects as the original articles of this study (Kykyri, Puutio and Wahlström, 2007a, b; Kykyri, Puutio and Wahlström, 2009), Kykyri (2008) has suggested that the particular institutional task of a process consultant is to set conversational norms for the multi-party consulting interaction. Moreover, our research team has illuminated the institutional goal of consulting by showing that re-languaging the organizational realities is present in consulting (Puutio and Kykyri, 2007). What this study adds is the situational character of consulting work and the essential role of covert communication that establishes the practice as process consulting.

The finding of hidden agendas in consulting interaction challenges the idea that a consultant can be a neutral agent in a system that only helps "the client to perceive, understand, and act upon the process events that occur in the client's environment" (Schein, 1987, 34). Consultants might portray themselves, as critical research shows (Bloomfield and Danieli 1995), as neutral conduits of aid. In the process consulting literature, there is a strong professional ideal of putting the client's agenda first and therefore warning words are expressed: "facilitators make a huge mistake by coming in with their own agendas, rather than facilitating the leader's agenda" (Schein et al., 2001, 14).

It is not that the practitioner literature overlooks the consideration of complexities in consulting position. Rather, it acknowledges that consulting work easily evokes ethical dilemmas and that the consultant's responsibility of managing these is of importance (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Lynch, 1997; Ozley and Armenakis, 2000). Moreover, Schein (1988, 1995, 1997) underlines the interventive nature of all consulting activities as 'diagnosing' the organizational problems. However, the professional literature stands for neutrality, even though there are challenging voices, too. Huszczo and Sheahan (1999, 264), for example, point out that the concept of neutrality is an illusion in a reciprocal system and that claiming neutrality leads to uncaring relationship that overlooks the key task of "enhancing organizational effectiveness and improving the quality of the work lives of the people involved". This study accords with the critical notion that the consultant is an active participant and should therefore not be viewed as a neutral agent in terms of setting goals for the consulting work, in terms of defining the relationships and in terms of content, i.e. what perspectives or actions are seen as relevant. To 'be helpful' (Schein 1999) simply means accepting a position that is loaded in favor of agendas that the consultant sees helpful.

To re-think the ideal of neutrality in consulting work, we can turn to debates of other helping institution, namely systemic family therapy. Originally, the systemic approach highlighted the ideal of neutrality (Selvini-Palazzoli et al 1980) meaning that a helper should avoid the acceptance of any position in a system as more correct than another. However, during the development of systemic practices it was soon realized that one cannot hold a neutral position since language use *per se* creates preferences and make some explanations, moral positions or points of departure more relevant than the others (for recent debates, see e.g. Kurri, 2005). The ideal of neutrality has transformed into the ideal of curiosity – the assumption that appreciating multiplicity of 'stories' and possible actions are more helpful for client systems (Cecchin, 1987). A curiosity approach in process consulting work could mean that the consultant, instead of trying to be neutral, makes initiatives for the client system to reflect on the variation in explanations of difficulties, ways of seeing the future as well as possible actions to be taken. This way, the client might also view the consultant as one enriching the ways of seeing realities and finding options for action.

Thus, we should not overlook the power position of a consultant. In accordance with Linell's (1990) notion on various ways to dominate we can think that even though the consultant does not speak the most during the consulting conversation, s/he may use power in other ways. Making initiatives in interaction, setting positions for conversationalists, preferring certain perspectives on the topic, using particular concepts for talking about issues at hand and fostering some meaning potentials over the others are ways to dominate from a consultant's position. The critical consulting literature explicates this power position well (e.g. Clark and Salaman 1998a; Fincham, 2003; Fincham, and Clark, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2003) and this study illuminates the practices by which such domination takes place in process consulting practice.

4.4 Contribution to author's own practice

This study has focused on consulting work that is drawn from my own consulting practice with a client. Adopting such action researcher's position has offered a specific reflective stance to observe, analyze and conceptualize the action that I was personally involved in. Even though this research did not follow the 'self reflective spiral in action research' (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998, 22) including systematic planning of a new action, the practice of doing the research has influenced my own professional orientation and practice as a consultant and a scholar in consultation practice in various ways.

The analytical work with the material of this study has raised my own sensitivity to the details of language use and broadened my conceptual repertoire for reflecting on the ongoing action. When having consulting conversations, I nowadays find myself observing the words and concepts by which I am inquiring into social realities of a client organization or through which I am commenting on client descriptions. Increasingly, I tend to call my own observations into question by inviting the client to reflect on the language being used, by asking "what kind of conversation have we entered in this far". The reflection concerns also the client's language use and the mutual responding to each others' addresses. By doing so, I attempt to enhance the organizational members' reflexivity in the given moment enabling them to become "practical authors and critical questioners to each other within the social experience" (Cunliffe, 2002, 52).

Nowadays, when ever possible, I also tend to video-tape consulting sessions and to utilize this material for reflection with those who take part in the sessions. This practice has deepened my professional belief that new social arrangements can be called into being by reflecting on the coordination of action with clients. Reflecting on 'here-and-now' practice is a powerful method as it helps all participants to step away from their first-person position and move to second- and third person positions. Furthermore, when having client consent, I show examples of my own practice to students when teaching consultation in academic or professional contexts. Doing research has thus become a part of my consulting practice and reflecting on consulting practices has become an essential part of my scholarship in consulting. In fact, the research process has clarified my professional identity as a scholar-practitioner, one who is interested in theory in order to develop practice and vice versa (Wasserman and Kram, 2009). Currently, when doing consulting processes, I try to position myself as a co-operative researcher with the client and build structures that enable co-researching practice within the process. To build active involvement and co-operation I, for example, invite a client representative to build a consulting team with me, thus building an insider-outsider consulting setting for the process. From this stance, I can agree with other authors who encourage process consultants to become aware of their own practice and its impact on the client (e.g. Ellis, Kiely and Pettigrew, 2001; Lambrechts et al., 2009; Schein, 1995).

This study has helped me to identify the tension between the professional ideals and practices. Functionalist literature present ideals for consulting work and these inevitably have a role in terms of building professional identity and orienting to work in practice. For example, literature on process consultation highlights an ideal of open communication, equal relationships and avoidance of advice giving. This study shows that these professional *ideals*, as important as they may be, are somewhat impossible to follow. Rather, it is the *situation*, its challenges and complexities that guides how professional ideals can be practiced in culturally and locally coherent ways. This, I think, is a contribution of this research to my practice, not only as a consultant but a scholar of consulting work, too. Abstract ideals are somewhat meaningless unless they can be made specific to some particular situation. Moreover, we cannot know beforehand what ideals we might make relevant when practicing consultancy. What then becomes important is the reflexivity of the consultant – ability to reflect on one's own participation in the situation and to use this insight to guide further actions. Reflexivity, at least for me, represents a new ideal or a narrative for consulting work. This ideal may find various realization depending on the living moments of practice (cf. Oliver, 2005).

Another learning point deals with the early stage of a consulting relationship. This study shows the consultant's key position in making choices on how topics are approached, and how meanings become negotiated, as well as in defining organizational relationships and managerial position from the very beginning. It accords with the complexity perspective to consulting (Shaw, 1997) by claiming that all participants deal with many simultaneous challenges that contextualize the consulting conversations. As an outcome, this insight has made me become more aware of the importance of the beginning of the consulting relationship. The same observation is made by Glasser (2002, 38-39), who points out that "new consultants should be well acquainted with the power of first impressions and schooled in preventing the minor mishaps that can become major detractors in the early minutes or even seconds of a consulting relationship".

This contributes to practice. What we can do is handle consulting conversations and their outcomes as something that can be negotiated and re-negotiated. A reflexive exercise with a client could be to inquire into the following questions as a part of the contracting process: "what relevant topics have we approached this far and what topics should we engage in or suspend?", "what kind of a relationship are we engaging in this far and what might it make other organizational relationship look like?", or "what impact has our conversation had on how you as managers see your own position in the system – what perspectives should we re-think?". These kinds of questions regarding topics, relationships and managerial position, are something that a consultant could bear in mind at the beginning of a relationship. Raising these kinds of questions might help both parties to find a suitable ways of working together. Moreover, the consultant could expand his or hers views on the emerging tasks and could collaborate with the client in order to be more reflexive with the potential hidden agendas.

4.5 Reflections on the production of the research

4.5.1 Action research

This study represents an action research setting where I was an outsider for the organization being consulted but an insider when it comes to the consultancy process in the organization as well as the institutional practices of process consultancy. Action research is said to provide the simplest basis for insider research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), which is normally not only concerned with studying some aspects of organization but also with changing it (Coghlan, 2003). In the case of this study the focus of the change efforts was guided by the process, but when entering the consultancy process, I had no expectation about what the research output would be (cf. Marshak and Heracleous, 2005). From these perspectives, insight and changes of my consulting practices as well as the usefulness of the new knowledge created through the study set the criteria to evaluate the research at hand.

The fact that the client participants were not involved in the production of the original research papers can be viewed as a weakness of the study if we see full participation as an ideal, as for example Whyte (1991) does. However, as noted for example by Huxham and Vangen (2003), the action research approach does not imply inherently that the organizational members should be concerned with the research aspect of the intervention. The primary interest for this study was neither to examine nor change the client organization. Instead, the target was to investigate the consulting practice. Therefore, communities of practice in consulting were occupied to reflect on the findings from the practitioner point of view (including the consulting team to which I belonged and consulting workshop audiences in professional meetings in Finland and in England). In each context, the feedback was that the workshop participants were able to connect to the findings by means of their own working situations. Other audiences for evaluating the findings have been the post-graduate student groups to whom I have been teaching consulting skills during the years of writing this thesis. The discussions with these audiences have strengthen my impression that the findings of the original studies communicate with experiences of those working in the field and offer useful ways to examine the practice. The evaluation of the practicality of the findings is eventually left to the wider community of practitioners and researchers.

My own position as both the consultant and the researcher of the case raises the question of managing this dual role (cf. Ramirez and Bartunek, 1989). To manage such challenges, action research tradition highlights the need for the researcher to reflect on the experience and to distinguish the researcher's own pre-understanding and biases regarding the action (e.g. Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985; Gummesson, 2000). In this research process self-reflection became possible in three ways. First, by listening to the tape-recorded material and watching the videotapes again and again I was able to 're-member' myself to the discussions. This recalling work, often shared with the research pair, helped me to verbalize, 're-tell' my own experience. In fact, this helped me see that it was not just me who talked, but rather the institution of process consultation. Second, analyzing materials with an outsider research pair as well as by sharing the material in data sessions with other DA researchers enabled me to get a more complex view of the consulting process than my memories from the situation could have done. Third, through the analysis process and the writing process I was forced to re-think consulting activity and to develop a conceptual understanding of it.

In reflecting on the production of the study, we can ask how the awareness of data gathering during the consulting process shaped the participants' behavior and what effect it might have had on the data corpus itself. Also, one can ask what effect my interest to study consultancy work had on my own practice during the actual consulting process. My experience was that the presence of video and audio taping did not disturb the process neither from my own nor from the participant's perspective. The participants seemed to forget the equipments quickly and none commented on the data-gathering during the process. This is understandable, since it was the client who initiated the consulting process and the process would have been conducted anyway. Further, for the same reasons, it is justifiable to consider the case to be a real life instance for research. Also, the fact that naturalistic materials gathered from this kind of consulting process are very scarce justifies its use as data. In addition, we need to see that this sort of data, naturally occurring talk, gives more detailed knowledge on practices than do inquiries and retrospective interviews (Potter, 2004). The data itself is thus dependent neither on memories and normative assumptions of participants, nor on the researcher's presumptions on what might be relevant in the consulting process.

4.5.2 Single-case study

Rather than aiming to produce generalized knowledge on how consultants tend to work, this study takes a single-case perspective aiming to explicate the "the richness and particularity" (Chen and Pearce, 1995, 141) of consulting practice within a given case. Rather than claiming what is general in consulting, I have tried to show what interaction *is possible* in process consulting.

However, if we consider the case at hand as one sample of practice, generalizations can be made. First, by utilizing my own case-documentation of nearly all consulting processes from more than ten years period as a comparative reference point, it is justifiable to claim that case reflected in the study represents what literature describes as *process consultation*. The outset, a situation where management faces difficulties and social 'friction' in leading a change process while employees report experiences of 'bad feelings' at their work is typical to process consultation. Similar to my earlier cases, the consulting methodology including preliminary tasks, group interviews, action methods, narrative and reflective techniques is also typical to process consultants. Most importantly, compared to my reference cases, there was similar kind of intention of encouraging participation, reflecting on the existing organizational system and re-negotiating the meanings emerging in the conversations. Second, it can be generalized that even though there are many case-specific features on *what was done* during the conversations in this case, there is generalizability on *how it was done.* The discursive strategies identified in this study can fit other instances since they represent institutional practices on how 'talk at work' (Drew and Heritage, 1992) occurs. Third, the findings provide researchers with ideas and tools to investigate interaction in professional settings, and offer *theoretical generalizations* that can be used as viewpoint in further research or as vehicles for the examination of other cases, as pointed out by Yin (1994).

4.5.3 Systemic frame and the use of discursive methodology

The use of the systemic frame and discourse analytic methodology in this study runs in interesting parallel to the actual consulting process of the case. As a consultant I worked to help the client participants find new connections between language use, meaning making and action. I also tried to create a social situation where participants could become positioned in new ways in relation to each other. As a researcher, I took a meta-position and utilised the same theoretical ideas to examine the consultancy practice.

Brown, Pryzwansky and Schulte (1987, 99) state that "whether implicitly or explicitly, current models of organizational consultation are based upon systems theory" (cited in Fugua and Kurpius, 1993, 607). From this perspective one can even claim that in order to understand the consulting practice a researcher should be informed by the pre-assumptions of the actual practice. This is why I see it as an advantage for this study to adopt the systemic frame. In fact, the systemic frame would have been somewhat impossible for me to overlook since it is the way I view the world. Similarly, since consulting in general, and process consultation in particular is discursive practice based on the presumption that a consultant can help the organisation by discussing with its members, discursive methodology is suitable means for analysing it.

The use of analytical tools in this study shows well the nature of discourse analytic research practice. As each original article represents analytical concepts that are drawn from a variety of research literature during the analysis process, the craftsmanship of analysis is very evident. Overall, discourse analytic tradition applied here does not offer ready-made tools for a researcher but rather a methodological frame from which to 'craft' the tools for use.

From the epistemological point of view it is worth noting what Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam (2004, 14) have said on discourse methodology: "There can never be only one discourse that characterizes an organizational setting. Nor is there ever a definitive reading on organizational discourse. Researches are only able to observe some of what is going on as a result of their methodological choices; and they promote particular readings of it depending on academic and professional considerations". The current research is no exception. The methodological repertoire of this study has been influenced by a particular discourse analytic tradition and its applications. Again, my reading of the data was guided by my own understanding of this particular tradition. Certainly, my own reading of the data has been also intertwined – more or less unconsciously – with my professional experience. It is thus understandable to say that "any particular research approach cannot but fail to capture the complexity of language use that occurs over time, in multiple sites and in hidden ways: we make choices and trade-offs, some of which we are not even aware of" (Clark et al, 2004, 14).

Taking the notion of reciprocality of consulting relationships (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Clark and Fincham, 2002b; Fincham, 1999a; Sturdy, 1997, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2003) the focus on the consultant's perspective can be seen as a limitation of the analysis in this study. Even though the analysis focused on sequences where consultant and clients respond to each others' moves, there remained a risk of overlooking the dialogical nature of all talk as well as the working relationship. More emphasis could have been placed on the fine details of the mutual responding by using video material more extensively (e.g. Wortham, 2001). Here, the in-depth analysis of each original study was conducted using textual material even though the primary analysis was completed using video and audio material.

4.6 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to debates on consulting work raised by both functionalist and critical literature and partakes in creating interconnections between theory, research and practice in OD-work (e.g. Bunker et al., 2004; Czarniawska, 2001; Fincham and Clark, 2002; Kaplan, 1979; Ridley and Mendoza, 1993; Sebring 1979; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003).

The model of three varying perspectives to consulting practice helps differentiate a more general 'role perspective' from the institutional 'goal perspective' and from that of the situational 'task perspective'. This differentiation of perspectives offers one categorisation in viewing consulting. In a way, each represents different logic to approach consulting. Czarniawska's (2001) has applied Bourdieu's (1990) idea of three different logics in use in management consultation. The 'logic of practice' is situated in time and place and is used for pragmatic purposes in everyday organisational life. The task perspective of this study, focusing on actual situations can be seen as depicting this logic. The 'logic of theory' is abstract, has an objectivistic assumption and is used for discovering the 'truth'. The role and the goal perspectives as abstract illuminations of consulting can be placed under this logic, whereas the role perspective can also be seen as an example of 'logic of representation', since it stands for narrative knowledge and is used to explicate why something is done. This study has argued for the need to use different perspectives or logics to enter into consulting practice. This could contribute to decrease in dichotomous use of either functionalist perspective or critical perspective when approaching consultation. Thus, we can take a pro-consultancy stance (aiming to understand why consultants do what they do) and be critical at the same time (aiming to show the bigger picture and to challenge the practice under scope). Rather than polarizing the consulting phenomena into either/or notions, we need to handle the varying perspectives and logics as complementary (c.f. Lewis, 2000).

The idea of dual tasks as dilemmas in organizational practice (such as consulting) is not new in the field. A wide strand of literature exists pointing out that conflicts, dilemmas and tensions describe the organizational change and that organizational change occurs through the dynamics of paradox and contradiction (for a good review, see Lewis, 2000). Seo, Putnam and Bartunek (2003) have, for example, categorised dimensions and dualities in planned organizational change. According to them, "managing various dualities and tensions inherent in the process is a core element of organizational change and can serve as essential criteria for evaluating approaches to planned organizational change" (p. 101). From this perspective consulting practice should *apriori* be viewed as tensioned and dilemmatic.

Seo et al. (2003) call for, what they refer to as 'connection approach to managing dualities'. Dualities should not be viewed as alternatives, but as connected. They argue: "When dualities are treated as mutually reinforcing, they remain connected, use each other to generate insights, and are open to multiple and evolving interpretations" (p. 101). Applied to this study, we ought to be inquisitive as to the interconnections of various dual tasks identified. It is justifiable to assume that, for example, the way sensitive topics are addressed informs how the dual task of managing the asymmetries can be managed, which reflects back on how the dual task of enhancing reflection becomes manifested and accomplished. Needless to say, the dual tasks listed in this study are not the finite set of all potential tasks to be handled in consulting position. No doubt, our understanding of dilemmas and their interconnections in consultation work will continue to evolve as the consulting work becomes more and more complex in the course of organizational environments and as further research identifies new dilemmas.

This study has addressed the practices of process consultation. This choice is based on the fact that the data is drawn from process oriented practice and on there being a body of professional literature pertaining to this field. While creating some clarity to the focus of the study, process consultation perspective is also limited one. Lambrechts et al. (2009) point out that the practice of the process consultation is difficult to grasp and the ideas of process consultancy are often misunderstood, not the least due to the lack of research. They offer relational constructionism as a proper theoretical approach for grounding the essence of process consultation. Meanwhile, we can ask whether it is the relational practice itself that should be set as a highest context for theorizing consultation rather than various types of it (e.g. either process or expert oriented). From relational perspective, the key point is not the type of consulting practice but rather the interaction that constitutes a consulting relationship. This study hints, that practices carried out in process consultation as well as ways of theorizing it, could be of us a resource for understanding consulting in general.

The idea of asymmetry is one that contributes to consulting research in general. Regardless of consulting approach, consultants and their clients had to deal with asymmetries on various levels. They had to deal with the asymmetries in organizational structures and communication practices, with asymmetries regarding the use of external resources and consultants' positions within client system and with asymmetries that become constructed and re-constructed through consulting interaction itself. Even asymmetry is beyond the main interest of this study, it provides a conception for us to understand the complexities of the client consultant relationship, not least from the triadic, multi-party perspective.

4.7 Future research directions

This study provides insight into the details of conversation through which the realities become constructed in consulting settings. In this sense, the study deals with the critical question of how rhetoric works in consulting activity (Fincham and Clark, 2002). Research with additional process consulting materials would offer us a wider scope to further explore how power is negotiated, how the consultant's knowledge claims are legitimated and what persuasive tactics are used to influence client participants in process consultation settings. Analyses of discursive practices from expert oriented (in contrast to process oriented) consulting would also offer comparative material and thus support the same goal.

One interesting perspective for further studies would be the question, how institutions are referred to in consulting conversations and how meaning potentials emerging from these references are managed between the consultant and the client. This perspective would generate our knowledge on how institutional ideologies or constellation of values become accomplished and utilized at local practice level.

Even though this study has looked at consulting from the interaction perspective, its analysis has focused on the consultant's point of view. We could enrich this perspective by asking what hidden agendas the clients employ in the relationship and how consultants may became 'utilized' for these purposes, as pointed out by for example Kaarst-Brown (1999) and Williams (2001). Additional research could thus approach hidden agendas as mutual practice.

This study has explored the challenges of the consultant-client interaction at its early stage. Analysis with additional materials from the beginning of a consulting relationship would be welcomed in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the critical factors for successful beginnings, in other words, what does a good working relationship require. This would be of importance particularly for the practitioners. Meanwhile, this study has overlooked the question of how consulting tasks or discursive practices may vary, change or evolve during the consulting process. It is justifiable to assume that during an entire consultancy process, a greater variation of discursive practices and dilemmas than that found here, exists. What we do not as yet know are discursive means by which the relationship can be terminated. The theoretical frame developed in this study could be of use in such additional studies. Similarly, Lewis (2000, 769) suggest that "Using paradox framework, in future studies researchers can explore organizing as on ongoing process of equilibrating opposing forces and detail its tensions, cyclical dynamics, and management".

The outcomes of the process consulting case are beyond the scope of this study. We cannot answer whether the consulting situations helped the organizational participants to improve their day-to-day practice. Even though some positive effects were recognised during the course of this case (the participants evaluated that improvements in management as well as co-operation between the employees and the management had taken place during the nine months period of the consulting process), we are left unaware as to the process. This raises a question for further research: how do discursive practices carried out during process consulting interventions change the discourse of the day-to-day work. Further reflection on the effect of how "changes in the use of language bring about changes in practices" (Tsoukas, 2005, 99) will continue to yield fruits in developing knowledge on consulting work and its impact on organisations.

4.8 Concluding remarks

By focusing on the "practitioner-situated problematics and struggles" (Grant and Iedema 2005, 37) in naturally occurring talk this thesis has provided a window to less studied area, discursive practices in process oriented consulting. In brief, it has illuminated how work based on interaction is done. Based on a single case study this thesis has offered perspectives and analytical viewpoints from which consulting practices and interaction can be approached. In its way, the study depicts a metacommunication (Bateson, Haley, Weakland and Jackson, 1956) of communication.

This study has portrayed the momentary and situated nature of consulting work in which the use of knowledge 'from within' (Shotter, 1993, 2006) is essential. It highlighted the idea that conversations themselves are generative and interventive by nature: they shape the relationships and construct the realities that are investigated and being changed. In training new professionals in the field, we need to remember: rather than informing them of ideals about what one should do during a consulting conversation, we should turn to real life practice and be curious about what it can teach us. Wittgenstein noted that practice is a kind of logic that has to speak for itself and therefore cannot be learned by hearing the rules of it. Analysing retrospectively one's own responsiveness and the 'joint action' (Shotter, 1993) between the consulting parties would be, I believe, an essential way on learning (reflecting, critiquing and developing) the practice of consulting.

Kurpius (1985) pointed out over 20 years ago that it is essential that the consultant's definition of consultation is articulated to the consultee. This study raises the question as to what extent this is possible. Process consultancy principles like the role of the consultant as an inquirer certainly can (and usually need to) be explained. However, as this study has shown, process consultation work means dealing with ambiguity and therefore requires responsive practices that cannot be explained beforehand. This, I suspect, might apply in general to professional services that help clients by talking. We cannot tell in detail, what we will do, but we can, together with a client, reflect on what was done and the impact the doing had, thus making the hidden more shared and transparent.

It was the practice that provided the rationale for the study and made me ask “what’s going on when I talk with clients”. As an answer I discovered a new dual task and hidden agenda perspective to consulting. Moreover, I found that it is the institution that talks in consulting conversations. Based on his own experience, Argyris (1961), points out that a consultant holds a difficult position and that one has to find ways to go on in dilemmatic situations. Now, nearly 50 years later, this empirical research confirms just how correct his assumption was. Now we know slightly more about what constitutes this position and how it can be used for consulting purposes. Sometimes, insightful practitioners can distinguish essential matters, only later to be discovered by researchers.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämän tutkimuksen aiheena ovat prosessikonsultoinnin keskustelut. Siinä tarkastellaan yksityiskohtaisesti sitä, miten vuorovaikutukseen perustuvaa työtä käytännössä tehdään ja kuinka toimijoiden jaettu ymmärrys rakentuu dynaamisten vuorovaikutuskulkujen kautta. Pyrin tutkimuksellani osoittamaan, että konsultointikeskustelun osapuolet kohtaavat moninaisia keskustelullisia haasteita ja valinnan paikkoja, joihin vastaaminen rakentaa konsultille erityisiä tilanteisesti vaihtuvia vuorovaikutustehtäviä. Keskeinen päätelmäni on se, että kulloisenkin tilanteisen tehtävän täyttäminen edellyttää piiloisten agendojen toteuttamista keskustelussa. Kuvaan ja selitän piiloisten agendojen olemassaoloa konsultointiin liittyvänä institutionaalisena käytänteenä. Taustoitan tutkimustani kuvaamalla konsultointia ja sen tutkimusta ammattiroolin, institutionaalisten päämäärien ja tilanteisen tehtävän näkökulmista. Ammennan tietoperustani yhtälailla konsultoinnin ammattikirjallisuudesta kuin uudemmasta, kriittisestä tutkimusperinteestä.

Tutkimuksen aineisto on peräisin teollisuusyrityksen asiantuntijayhteisölle toteuttamastani konsultointihankkeesta. Tarve ulkopuoliseen apuun kumpusi muutostilanteesta jonka osa työntekijöistä koki oman asemansa kannalta uhkaavana. Ääni- ja videotallensin konsultointikeskustelut, joita sittemmin olen tutkinut yksityiskohtaisesti hyödyntäen yhtäältä systeemisen tradition sekä toisaalta diskurssianalyysin piirissä kehiteltyjä aineiston lukutapoja. Laajasti ottaen tutkimus ankkuroituu sosiaalisen konstruktionismin tiedonkäsitykseen. Kohdistuessaan oman käytäntöni tarkasteluun, tutkimus sijoittuu myös toimintatutkimuksen kehykseen. Hyödynnän aineiston analyysissä sekä sisäistä toimijan näkökulmaa että ulkoista, aineistoa etäämmältä tarkastelevaa näkökulmaa.

Väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta artikkelista, joissa kaikissa osoitetaan konsultoinnissa olevan kyse tasapainoilusta erilaisten vuorovaikutuksellisten positioiden välillä. Ensimmäinen artikkeleista tarkastelee keskustelua toimeksiantotilanteessa. Analyysin keskiössä on se, miten asiakkaan kannalta arkaluonteisia aihepiirejä käsitellään vuorovaikutuksessa. Artikkeli osoittaa konsultin tehtävän syntyvän arkaluonteisiin aiheisiin liittyvien merkityspotentiaalien kanssa toimimisesta. Toisessa artikkelissa analyysin kohteena on työyhteisön konsultointitilanteessa käyty keskustelu, jossa keskustelijoiden väliset suhteet ja niiden määrittelyt tasavertaisuus-eriarvoisuus (symmetria-asymmetria) näkökulmasta muodostuvat konsultointityön keskeiseksi tasapainoilutehtäväksi. Kolmas artikkeli puolestaan tarkastelee työyhteisökonsultaation jälkeistä johdon konsultaatiokeskustelua, jossa neuvon annon hetkinä tasapainoillaan johdon oman toimijuuden edistämisen ja itsereflektoinnin aikaansaamisen välillä. Artikkelien valossa konsultin edustama institutionaalinen rooli ei näyttäydy ylivertaisen tiedon tai etukäteen määritellyn vuorovaikutuskäytänteen areenana. Sen sijaan kyse on elävän vuorovaikutuksen hetki hetkeltä synnyttämien dilemmojen kanssa toimimisesta.

Kuvatessaan konsultin työtä hetkittäisten valintojen tekemisenä ja vuorovaikutusprosessin piiloisena säätelynä tutkimus luo aiempaa vivahteikkaampaa ja kontekstuaalista kuvaa prosessikonsultoinnin käytännöistä.

Esitettyä kuvaustapaa voidaan hyödyntää analyyttisenä työkaluna konsulttien työnohjauksessa ja koulutuksessa. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen kontribuutio on kuvaus rooli-, tavoite- ja tehtävänäkökulmien erilaisuudesta ja piiloisten agendojen funktionaalisuudesta. Piiloiset agendat eivät sulje pois näkyvää roolia eikä avoimeksi tehty työrooli piiloisia tehtäviä. Tämä yleisempi näkökohta avaa uusia kysymyksiä prosessikonsultoinnista instituutiona sekä auttaa kyseenalaistamaan ammattikirjallisuudessa esitettyjä ihanteita. Lisäksi tulokset puhuvat ammatillisen vuorovaikutuksen sävykkään tulkinnan tarpeellisuuden puolesta. Konsultointitutkimuksen kannalta on uutta myös se, että tutkimus asettaa ammattikirjallisuuden edustaman soveltavan ja kriittisen tutkimusnäkökulman keskinäiseen vuoropuheluun.

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APPENDIX 1

The Finnish text extracts of the original articles

M= Manager, T&K henkilöstön esimies (Artikkelissa 1 pseydonyymi ”Mari”, artikkelissa 2 ja 3 ”Aili”)
C = Consultant, Konsultti
D = Director, asiakaspalveluprosessin johtaja (Artikkelissa 1 pseydonyymi ”Daniel”)
D2= Director, tapahtumaan 1 osallistunut toinen johtaja
E = Employer, osallistujaryhmän jäseniä (E4, E11, E13)

Article 1

Näyte 1

1	M	et jotenkin pitäs (.) meidän pitäs järjestää joku sellanen (.)
2		tilaisuus jossa (.) jossa käytäis näitä (.) e-e nimenomaan
3		just [(.)] just näitä asioita läpi
4	C	[°joo°]
5	M	koska mää oon saanu siitä (1) kun ku mää taas koen (.)
6		sillä tavalla omaksi tehtäväkseni (.) e-e hallinnollisena
7		elikkä siis niinkun näitten ihmisten esimiehenä
8		nin (.) nin e-e laatia sen T&K:n osaamiskeskuksen
9		>sen kotipesän eli<
10		se että [(.) että] meille tulee profiili meille tulee ninkun (1) e-e rooli
11	C	[°joo°]
12	M	et meille tulee (.) arvo (.) arvo
13		myöskin ninkun näitten meidän (.) muitten osaamiskeskusten silmissä eli että (.)
14		et meidät tunnistetaan tee et kooksi et noi on niit tee et koo ihmisiä et
15		noi (.) noi on niinkun n-noi on niinkun niitä jotka tietää
16		(1) elikkä (.) mä koen että se on niinkun mul-mulle silleen
17		tärkee tehtävä

Näyte 2
(10 riviä poistettu)

28	C	tota Daniel (1) mitä sä ajattelet siitä
29		ku mulle tulee mieleen toi (.) kun Mari puhu
30		ku mul on vähän niinku semmone (.) kä-käsite päässä heh
31		että niinkon (1) identiteetti että ketä me ollaan
32		identiteettihän jotenkin vastaa [siihen] ketä me oikein ollaan
33	D	[joo]
34	C	mä kuulen jotenki Marin puhuvan vähän siitä että [(1) tavallaa]
35	D	[joo joo]
36	C	hän niinko kantaa (.) kantaa (1) aa-a vastuuta
37		siitä että hänen ihmisensä tuntee olevansa
38		ninko (.) jotakin [siis niinko] ammatillinen [(.) profiili tai (.)]
39	M	[nii justiin]
40	D	[kyllä]
41	C	miksi sitä identiteettiä nyt sanotaankin [(.)]
42	D	[niin]
43	M	[kyllä kyllä]

Näyte 3 a.
(5 riviä poistettu)

48	D	tossa sit matkalla juteltii siitä että (.) ne meijän (.) (naurahtaen)
49		meijän niinku tota (1) tietyt tietyt käytännöt
50		nii ei oo mitenkään tätä asiaa tukenu että et et me ymmärrettäs ne ( )
51		tämä identiteetti syntyy hirveen pienistä asioista [(1)] ninku ju-jus just
52	M	[nn-n]

Näyte 3 b.

53	D	semmosesta asiastaki keskusteltii tos noi että kun (.)
54		kun tehtiin näitä muutoksia (.) nin nin (.) tää asiaa ninkun näk-näki
55		ihmisten nimiä ei ollu lehdessä (.) jot-joka sinänsä on ninku typerää
56		[(1) mut] emmä ymmärrä mistä se mistä se johtu että näin ei ollu (.) ollu tota
57	C	[joo]
58	D	(1) se oli musta vaan typerää

Näyte 3 c.

59	D	ja samantein me keskusteltii siitä että että nyt ku (.)
60		tämmöne muutos (.) muutos ku tehdään ni (.) meiän pitää
61		nyt esmerkiks semmone asia tehdä kun (.) työsopimusten uusimine
62		tavallaan se (.) ku he he ovat tavallaa niinku muuttaneet työpaikkaa et (.)
63		et tämmösistä pienistä asioista (.) e-e tämmöne identiteetti (.) muodostuu
64		ja [(1) >ja katotaan mitä sieltä sitte tulee<]
65	M	[nn-n?]

Näyte 4

66	C	[se on (.)] se on mun mielestä hirveen hyödyllinen tapa ajatella
67		et se just noin (.) et (.) pienistä asioista (1)
68		et vois niinku sanoo että (.) vois aatella et tämmöset ninko
69		(2) tai yks tapa ajatella on tämmösiä (1) tämmöset niinko (3)
70		niinkö arjen kautta siirtyy tämmöset kokemukset
71		että ollaanko me arvokkaita tai [(1)] tai ol ar- ollaanko me arvokkaita
72	M	[aivan]
73	C	ja ollaanko me päteviä ja [ja tuota ylipäätään ketä me ollaan
74	M	[nn-n
75	C	et se liittyy tämmösten arkisten tilanteiden
76		[(1)] se on hyvä tapa [ajatella]
77	D	[joo] [joo joo]
78	C	et sä hahmotat sitä koska tuota (.) se tekee myöskin tän meijän tilanteen (2) ninko tärkeäksi [(1)]
79	M	[nn-n]
80	C	mitä siellä tapahtuu (.) on merkityksellistä
81	D	joo (.) joo
82	C	jos siellä kyetään jotenki avaamaan jotakin puolta tai tuomaan joku (.)
83		luomaan semmone (.) yhteinen kertomus siitä et
84		ketä me [ketä me ollaan ni se voi]
85	D	[joo (.) joo joo]
85		[nn-n]

Article 2

Näyte 1 "teidän suosiollisella avustuksella päästään eteenpäin"

D: toivottavasti että niinku Riston ja teijän (.) teijän niinku suosiolla avustuksella
niin ni tässä keskustelussa päästään niinku (.) päästään niinku hyvään alkuun
ja sanotaan että saadaan niinku mahdollis mahd kerääntyneitä paineita purettua
ja ja tota päästään niinku (.) positiivisella mielellä tästä sitte eteenpäin
suunnitelemaan että miten miten jatkossa (.)jatkossa asioita hoidetaan ja (.)
toss on on nyt Ailin ja Riston kanssa ollu vähä puhetta siitä että että tota (1)
että jos varsinki jos tää tilaisuus osottautuu hyväks jos tää toimii
sillä tavalla niinku (.) niinku me ollaa Ailin kanssa toivottu tän toimivan (.)
niin tota vois hyvin hyvin miettiä tälle jatkoa

Näyte 2 "mulla ei tosiaankaan oo tavoitteita"

C: joo meijä on hyvä varmaa puhua nyt aluksi tosiaanki ihan siitä että (.)
että mikä tän tilaisuuden jotenki et miten tästä ett
miten tästä te voisitte hyötyä parhaiten
(.) ett sää kysyit tossa ruokapöydässä multa niin että must se oli hyvä kysymys
johonka sä sanoit että että mikäs
(.) sä taisit kysyä jotenki että mikä mun tavote on tai
(1) ja mää vastasin siihe aluks jotain semmosta että tuota
(1) ett että mulla ei tosiaankaa oo tavotetta
(2) ja sit mää tarkensi sitä kun sää kysyit lisää että tuota
(.) että että mihin mää oon tyytyväinen mä sanoin että mää oon
tyytyväinen sillo kun mää nään että käydään rakentavaa keskustelua
(1) että että jotenki mää työskentelen siltä pohjalta ett
mull ei oo tavotteita sisällöllisesti
teillä on teil on omat johtajanne joilla on tavotteita siitä
että mitä minkälaista työtä te teette ja ja teillä on tavotteita

Näyte 3 "sattuneista syistä niin kaipaisin kovasti resursseja"

E4: tuota nin (.) vähä samat ajatukset kun kollegallani ((E3)) tuolta
nin kokonaisuuden hahmottaminen tietenki päällimmäinen kysymys
sitte mulle on tullu kaks kaks sanaa mieleen jotka just liittyy toi toisiin
tää fokusointi ja resurssointi (1) ett tuota nin (1)
tämän runsaan puolen vuoden toiminnan jälkeen
mä nään edelleenkin sen että ei uskalleta (.) keskittyä asioihin
vaan innostutaan joka puolelle ikään kuin häsäämään
(2) pitäis aina muistaa ja tuota olla rohkea
että panna asioita sivuun kylmästi ja keskittyä niihin olennaisiin
(3) että tää mun vanhan johtajan (.) periaate tulevasta postista
ett hän nostaa aina tulevan postin lähtevän postiin
jos on riittävän tärkee ( ) tulee takas
((naurua))
sama sama rohkeus pitäis meilläkin olla asioitten hoitamisessa
jos me priorisoidaan kyll sieltä ne riittävät merkit nousee pikku hiljaa
(2)
C: ja kun sää sanot että tämmönen (.) fokusointi olis tärkeetä
niin kerropas vähän sun työn kannalta miks se olis tärkeetä (1) että näin tehdään

19	E4:	(1) joo mää tietysti (.) sattuneista syistä niin kaipaisin kovasti resursseja
20		koska on niinku kitkaa asiakaspinnassa aika runsaasti
21		((naurua))

Näyte 4 **"mut voimavara – oks se parempi"**

1	C	onks jotaki (1) Oula ((E11 nimi, muutettu)) mitä haluut vielä sanoo
2		voidaanko mennä eteenpäin (1)
3	E11	no e- (.) no jos hän oli sanansaattaja niin mehän ollaan
4		sit taas käytetty tätä sanaa <u>resurssi</u> (.)
5	C	aha (.)
6	E11	ni (.) se ei oo minusta yhtään sen kauniimpi
7		ku tuo sanansaattaja
8		((ryhmän naurahtelua))
9		resurssi on myös (.) pikkusen negatiivinen=
10	T	=mut voimavara onks se parempi (.)
11	E11	no ehkä sekin on parempi (1)
12	C	joo (2)
13	D2	kehitetään hyvää sa- (.) hyvä niinkun=
14	E11	=sana (.)
15	D2	nii=
16	D	=sanotaan että organisaatiokieli mä muistan
17		sää oot sitä joskus tutkinu eikö vaan [ja tota (.)]
18	C	[(näin on)]
19	D	ja (.) ja (.) se on (.) <u>todella tärkee</u> asia (.) asia tota (.) miettiä sitä
20		et mi- millä millä tavalla toinen toisiamme kutsutaan
21		koska (1) ne saattaa saattaa tarkottaa ihan samaa
22		mut niis voi olla aika lailla [erilainen vivahde]
23	C	[mm (.) mm]
24		(1) tota onks sulla (.) Oula itselläs ehdotusta
25		sen resurssi-sanan tilalle (.)
26	E11	no varmasti tuo voimavarakin sana vois [olla]
27	D	[joku] joku (.)
28		joku heitteli voimavara-sanaa sillon siellä [(1) () (.) joo]
29	E11	[se näytti positiivisemmalta]
30		kun [kuullostaa (.)]
31	C	[mm (.) mm (.) mm] (.) resurssista tulee vähän passiivinen mielikuva että (.)
32		se on vaan niinku muiden (.)
33	E11	se vain tekee niin mitä käsketään (.)
34	C	nii et sen takia on on tärkee miettiä et mikä (.)
35	D	joo (.)
36	C	mikä luo teille niinku semmosen (.) auttais teitä (.)=
37	E13	=nii yks yks ongelmahan on ollu just se että tässä ei oo (.)
38		yhessä yritettykään tehä asioita (.) vaan vaan
39		me ollaan itse asiassa nyt jouduttu semmoseen
40		vähän niinkun resurssi (.) mentaliteettiin (.)
41		ei oo yhessä (.) yritettykään hoitaa asioita (.)
42	C	m-h (.) okei (.) saat kohta puhua tuosta lisää mut mennään sitä ennen=
43	E13	=joo=
44	C	=vielä sun vieruskaveriin eli sun [nimes on]

Article 3

Näyte 1 **”te ootte eräänlaisella näköalapaikalla”**

1	D	(.) hei (.) yks ajatus tuli tossa mieleen (.) just täst nakittamisesta
2		ja resurssista ja muusta ni (.) pitäsköhän meiän istuu alas (.)
3		sen jengin kanssa joka nyt on ollu tätä
4		Tehtaan ((mainitsee tehtaan nimen)) (.) lanseeraushommaa tekemässä (.)
5	M	mm (.)
6	D	keskustella niinku tää et onko ne kokenu tän (.) nakittamisen ja
7		((heikohko naurahdus))
8		ja muun (.) et miten ne on kokenu niinku roolinsa
9		(6 riviä tekstiä poistettu, D puhuu henkilöistä ja heidän rooleistaan)
10	D	nii onko ne kokenut että niitä on nakitettu ja
11		onko nää kokenu et ne on nakittanu ni (.)
12		se ois ihan ihan mielenkiintonen asia keskustella (.)
13	C	joo (.) tota (.)
14	D	=et jos miettii kato sitä (.) jos miettii sitä (.) karonkkaa esimerkiks
15		[niin] nehän vois pitää (.) pitää (1) vaikka tämmösen (.) sanotaanko
16	C	[mm]
17		(1) teemalla (.) kaks tuntia asiaa kuus tuntii hauskaa (.)
18	M	mm (.) ((nouseva äänenpaino))
19	C	=joo (.) tota (.) jotenki sama ajatus rupes elää munkin mielessä
20		et siis <u>sillä tavalla</u> että (1) vähän niinku semmosena kysymyksenä
21		että (.) mitä te ootte onnistuneet jotenkin (.) <u>esimiehinä tekemään</u> (.)
22	D	mm (.)
23	C	joka on (.) niinkö (.) <u>edistäny</u> tätä ihmisten välistä yhteistyötä (.)
24		mitä sellasta <u>te</u> ootte tehneet
25	C	koska [<u>te</u> ootte siinä (.)] systeemissä niinku erityisasemassa
26		[mm mm]
27		teillä on [niinku] mun ymmärryksen mukaan laajin (.) näköala ja sit[teillä on]
28	D	[mm] [mm]
29	C	myös te ootte ollu itse rakentamassa sitä (.) kent- tätä kok ajattelutapaa
30		ja se on teille (.) sisäistynny paljo aikasemmin kun (.) ku välttämättä muille
31	D	joo (.)
32	C	te ootte eräänlaisella näköalapaikalla (.)

Näyte 2 **”ne on melkeen sivulauseita mut niillä voi olla suurempi vaikutus”**

1	C	oikeestaan (.) jos mää vähän (.) niinku sanon miten minulle hahmottuu
2		että niinku <u>pelkästään</u> kiinnostuksen ilmaiseminen (.)
3	D	mm (.)
4	C	miten se projekti etenee (.) mä haluan kuulla ja (.) ja sit
5		palautteen antaminen ja sit kun sä Aili sanoit et raportit oli hyviä=
6	D	=joo=
7	M	=nn (.)
8	C	ni ne on (.) ne on (.) s- ne on melkein sivulauseita=
9	D	=mm=
10	C	=mut niillä voi olla niinku [suurempi] vaikutus [kun me]
11	D	[joo] [nii var-]
12	C	tullaan ajatelleeks=
13	D	=kyllä (.) miettii miettii (.) sitä ei ees ehkä aina osaa sillai miettiä (.)

14 miettiä sitä et ku (.) pitäis aina (.) muistella ite (.) ite itteesä joskus (.)
15 viistoista vuotta sitte (.)
16 M aivan=
17 D =et jos jos o- ois saanu joltaki (.) joltaki tehtaanjohtajalta
18 taikka taikka joltaki=
19 C =nii=
20 D =joltaki tota niinku palautetta hyvin tehdystä työstä
21 niin sitähän ois (.) leijunu (.) ilmassa pitkän aikaa et (.)
22 [oikein] (.) [( ) rinta rottingilla joo]
23 M [nn]
33 C [joo (1) rintakaa-(.)] nii joo]

Extract 3 ” kaikella toiminnalla mitä te teette”

1 D sen kiteytit kyl siinä mielessä hyvin just et (.)
2 et mitä mä sillä rooli (.) rooli (.) viittauksellani tarkotin
3 on just se että nähtäs asia (.) e- ettei nähtäs asioita niinku
4 C =mm
5 D valta- (.) [suhteellisina asioina vaan] vaan vaan
6 C [mm (.) mm (.)]
7 M [mm]
8 D yhteistyö (1) [työhön] liittyvinä asioina
9 C [joo]
10 C joo (.)
11 D et jos (.) jos siitä niinku opitaan pois (.)
12 C kyllä
13 D =koska sehän on sellanen funktionaalisen organisaation (1)
14 C =kyllä
15 D =toimintatapa ja >tietenki (.) okei se on
16 [varmasti kyllä ihmisiin niin syvään] rakennettu
17 C [mm (.) mm (.) joo]
18 D asia että et siitä poisoppiminen (.) voi olla (1) <mahdotonta>
19 C =mutta tota (.) niin (.) mutta sitte (.) voi kysyä ehkä se (.)
20 voisko se olla hyödyllinen kysymys että (.) että
21 kaikella toiminnalla mitä te teette suhteessa tähän organi[saatioon]
22 D [mm]
23 C (1) te joko (1) niinkö (.) tuette jompaa [kumpaa tapaa] hahmottaa
24 D [mm (.) joo]
25 C (.) joko (.) joko yhteistyöasetelmaa tai valta-asetelmaa=
26 D [=mm=]
27 M [mm]
28 C =ja sillon mä aattelen että (.) että (.) että (.)
29 voi olla hyödyllistä olla tarkkana sen suhteen että miten
30 minä [(1) miten me ja miten miten te] (1)
31 D [joo (.) joo (.) joo]
32 C esimiehinä (1) ikäänku puututte tai
33 M aivan (.) ((nouseva intonaatio)
34 C koska se (.) se (.) teiäthän vaan todennäköisesti mielletään
35 niinku [vallankäyttäjinä tässä systeemissä että] (.)
36 D [joo (.) joo (.) joo]
37 C niinku miten teiän tavat (1) puuttua (.) teidän tavat antaa (.) antaa (.)
38 tehtäväksiantoja (1) niinku (.) kielisivät semmosesta=
39 D =mm=
40 C =niinku yhteistyö-

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

I

SENSITIVITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING POTENTIALS – DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN A PROCESS CONSULTING CONTRACT MEETING

by

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Submitted

Sensitivity and the Development of Meaning Potentials – Discursive Practices in a Process Consulting Contract Meeting

This qualitative case study explores sensitivity in interaction and its use in managing meaning making. Using naturally occurring talk in real life organizational consulting contract meeting as the data, the authors show how both the consultant and the consultees in interaction express sensitivity, deal with the expressed, and how, by doing so, they introduce and manage the meaning potentials of the topics at hand. The findings suggest that indirect and complex discursive practices act in a particular way when meaning making is concerned. The practices afford the participants the possibility to exhibit wider but prospectively threatening meaning potentials of issues under discussion, while suspending a more thorough topic penetration. In addition to the theoretical contribution, the authors suggest practical implications concerning a consultant's specific role in managing the development of meaning potentials.

Key words: *sensitivity, meaning potential, contract meeting, discursive methodology, process consulting*

Within communication research the idea of sensitivity is discussed in connection with the need for face work in communication (Goffman, 1967) and the need for expressing politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Workplace interaction research has addressed the expression of politeness and its functions, among others, in meetings (Holmes, 2000). Another research tradition explores meaning making at the workplace (e.g. Cooren, 2004; Weick, 1995). Both approaches are interested in details of language use, and draw their methodology from discursive traditions such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis or conversational analysis. However, display of sensitivity in meetings is rarely connected to the meaning making processes. This study aims towards bridging this gap by looking at interaction in the consulting contract meeting. Our analysis has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it strives to show how sensitivity becomes marked in a meeting context, and on the other, it attempts to demonstrate how expressing sensitivity is used when various meaning potentials of topics being raised are introduced. We will argue that a consultant has a particular role in introducing and developing the meaning potentials in such conversations.

Contract meetings between consultants and their clients is an underresearched area especially since, in the practice literature, the early stage of consultation is recognized as the key moment in establishing a solid working relationship (e.g. Block, 1981; French & Bell, 1978; Jamieson, 1995; Neumann, 1997; Schein 1987, 1999). Process consulting authors, e.g. Schein (2002), describe contracting as a "series of mutual tests" (p. 26) whereby clients and consultants create their relationship through the moments of a more or less sensitive interaction during a contract meeting. Although there are in-depth case studies available on discursive practices in meeting interaction (e.g. Castor, 2007; Cooren, 2004; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Poncini, 2002, 2004; see also Firth, 1995) and sales negotiations (e.g. Charles, 1996), empirical studies that examine communication in contract meetings in consulting contexts are extremely few (for one exception, see Adamson, 2000). This is somewhat surprising since the research has shown the importance of contracting in terms of a successful consulting relationship (e.g. Edvardsson, 1989; Freedman & Stinson, 2004; McGivern, 1983). The confidential nature of contract meetings however makes it understandable why researchers seldom obtain access to such materials.

The consulting approach called *process consulting* (Schein, 1987, 1988, 1997, 1999) has paid attention to the sensitive nature of consulting interaction. The starting point for process consultants is that topics concerning human issues in organizations are difficult to define clearly and thereby difficult to handle easily. This is why consultants are needed; to help the organization to explore, name and work with the difficulties at the workplace. In other words, consultancy work aims at helping the organizational client to gain understanding of the problem at hand, to adopt a responsible relationship with respect to the problem, and to assume agency when it comes to finding ways of resolving the issue. This calls for sensitive practices that not only address the openly expressed concerns, but also the latent personal meanings that these may have for the client.

A consulting contract meeting thus makes it possible for a consultant and a client to negotiate not only the working contract itself, but also to enter into a process of meaning negotiation. Various meaning potentials of the topics at hand will be introduced, sometimes in a quite indirect way. *Meaning potentials* here are understood as options for constructing meanings by language use (Muntigl, 2004). In other words, meaning potentials stand for the variety of possible interpretations, by means of which the issues at hand can be seen in new light. Meanings thus become discursively negotiated through the details of interaction. This notion owes to social constructionist authors that have addressed the role of negotiation in meaning construction (Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993) and developed organizational analysis based on this insight (e.g. Chia, 1995; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Gergen, Gergen & Barret, 2004; Weick, 1995). Talking in different ways about an organizational topic during a contract meeting may introduce new meaning potentials previously not acknowledged by the participants. The fact that many of the topics raised in a process consultancy setting may be threatening calls for active management of the emerging meaning potentials. Suspending topic engagement or *topic penetration* (Linell & Bredmar, 1996) regarding sensitive issues may turn out to be a useful strategy for managing meanings.

The presence of *topical sensitivity*, i.e. the fact that some topics are more threatening for participants than the others, makes the contract meeting "a complex human interaction process requiring skill and flexibility" (Jamieson, 1995, p. 134). Schein (1987), for example, points out that "the person with a problem is exposing his face in admitting a problem. He is saying that he is not as good as he thought he was and is thereby making himself vulnerable" (p. 86). This creates a challenge for the contract meeting: how to raise potentially threatening topics and deal with them sensitively enough to create a shared agenda for the business relationship. A contract meeting offers a particularly interesting scope for examining the sensitivity in language and its use in meaning negotiation, since it is a place where clients for the first time introduce their concerns to the outsider consultant.

MARKING TOPICS AS SENSITIVE

A *sensitive* (sometimes referred to as a *delicate*) *topic* is one that "cannot be addressed directly or explicitly by the speaker without endangering the interactional harmony of the encounter by threatening the listener's face (and therefore also the speaker's own face)" (Linell & Bredmar, 1996, p. 347-348). In particular, raising sensitive topics calls for 'face work' (Goffman, 1955; 1967), i.e. practices that save the interlocutors' dignity. Research on institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992) shows that sensitivity is expressed through 'expressive caution' (Silverman, 1994) or 'indirectness', indicating "any type of deviation from a straightforward ('bald-on-record'), immediate (e.g., nondeferred), explicit, and unambiguous expression of the things and issues meant (including their implications)" (Linell & Bredmar, 1996, p. 348; see also Brown & Levinson, 1987). By varying their use of language, conversationalists express sensitivity and manage the demands of a delicate or tense interactional situation. Sensitivity or delicacy markers include pausing and other perturbations of delivery, limited depth of topic penetration, use of special vocabulary, restrained interactional style, laughter and other use of neutralizing activity (e.g. Adelswärd, 1989; Linell & Bredmar, 1996; Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990; Suoninen, 1999). Brown and Levinson (1987) have introduced the notion of 'negative politeness' to describe this kind of indirectness where speakers discreetly avoid addressing topics and creating situations that could constitute a face threat for others.

Generally speaking, issues concerning ethnicity and race, gender, health and disability, sexuality or age are acknowledged as topics that can evoke conflict or carry moral implications, and therefore might become sensitive topics in conversations. In organizational life sensitive topics can also concern issues like falling below targets, negligence or failures in task performance, negative customer feedback, or the like. However, as Suoninen (1999) points out, "there are no universal, clear-cut rules laying out what is delicate. *Negotiating what is a delicate matter and what is a routine issue is always a local process*" (p. 104). We thus 'do' sensitivity; it is an action that has functions in interaction (Suoninen, 1999).

We cannot know beforehand what issues become sensitive in conversation. There is also variation in local cultures in terms of how straightforward styles of talking are preferred. Indirectness in language use can also represent personal styles of communication. Moreover, features seen as delicacy markers do not always indicate topical sensitivity – they can for example reveal cognitive work in trying to remember a correct word or fact. To understand whether language use actually expresses sensitivity, we need to look at it in detail in local contexts.

It is not only the topics that can introduce sensitivity into consulting contract conversations. A *situation,* in which participants from various positions meet, in the presence of an outsider, to discuss organizational matters, can become tense in itself. Participants in a consulting conversation may represent different understandings of state of affairs, they may have competing interests, or they may view the focal point of change differently. When talking about organizational issues in a consulting context, participants certainly have concerns regarding how others make sense of their voice, and how the consultant acknowledges and appreciates their respective viewpoints. In a successful case, a consulting contract conversation manages to tackle both the current topics, and handle the situation at hand in a manner that shows tact, politeness and appreciation.

The interaction and language use perspective itself is well established in consulting research (e.g. Clark & Fincham, 2002; Sturdy, 1997; Whittle, 2006). The discursively oriented consulting research has addressed for example the rhetoric by which consultants make themselves indispensable and their knowledge legitimate for the client (e.g. Alvesson & Johansson 2002; Kitay & Wright, 2007; Legge, 2002). However, there seems to be a lack of empirical analyses that would open up the variation and reciprocity in language use and its connection to managing of meaning between consultants and their clients. In particular, in depth studies on process consulting interaction are called for (for some notable exceptions, see Ellis, Kiely & Pettigrew, 2001; Marshak & Heracleous, 2005; Kykyri 2008).

In this study we look in detail at communication in one process consultancy contract meeting episode to demonstrate how 'extra moves' in language use can be functional in 'doing sensitivity'. By taking one consulting contract meeting as our empirical material, we ask how, during their first meeting, the consulting partners mark their addresses as sensitive and how they collaboratively deal with the sensitivity in terms of developing meaning potentials. In particular, we explore the consultant's role in this action while also examining the possible explanations as to why, in this case, the participants treated certain issues as sensitive.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data for this study consists of audio recordings of the contract meeting that led to the consulting process with the R&D operations in a globally operating European wood processing company. We were given this unique access to the data as the leading authors of this paper is also the OD consultant in question. Since the company has its R&D operations in Finland and the participants involved in this consulting case were all Finns, the meeting was carried out in Finnish. The audio recordings were transcribed using a modified version of

Jefferson practices (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; for transcription symbols see Appendix 1). The selected extracts shown below have been translated into English with the attempt to preserve the meanings and the fluency of the Finnish originals, which were used in the primary analysis.

In the present case, the client initiated the negotiation regarding the consulting relationship. Prior to the meeting, during a telephone discussion between the director of the customer process and the consultant, the latter was asked to offer help in implementing a change in the customer process practices. Relevant to the matter at hand is the fact that the organization had recently faced the challenge of moving from a function and location based organization towards a customer based 'process organization'. In adopting a process organization model, R&D units in various local factories were merged into a new 'knowledge centre', which was integrated into the organization's newly designed customer service process. This sort of change was a considerable one, taking into consideration the traditionally fairly stable and authoritative social and structures within wood processing industry in Finland (Ainamo & Tienari, 2002). Technically, the change had already taken place and people had already been informed about their new roles within the organization. The need for the meeting with an outsider process consultant emerged as a result of difficulties experienced by the management in establishing the 'new organization' in the day-to-day work of the R&D employees, whose position as independent specialists had been altered into that of a service-oriented network together with the customer service employees. This change in the position created dissatisfaction and irritation among the R&D employees who felt that the organizational change had a negative effect on their work. During the contract meeting, the concerns regarding R&D employees' new role and the potential help of the consulting process became the main focus of attention.

The text transcription of the contract conversation between two organizational members (one being the head of the global customer process, the other being the manager for the R&D employees) and the consultant create the material for the study at hand. The transcription of this one and a half hour meeting was carefully read and reread by the research team that included both an insider researcher's perspective – that of the main author, who worked as the consultant in the case, and an outsider perspective – that of the remaining two authors. The insider perspective provided us with contextual understanding from the consultant's position while the outsider perspective allowed us to study the material from a more theoretically informed professional practice research (Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Cuskelly, 2004) framework. In our analysis, we utilized both local perspective, i.e. how participants communicate in 'naturally occurring talk' (Potter 2004), and our understanding of the wider contextual matters (contract meeting situation, organizational change process, relationship between conversationalists, wood processing industry culture). Thus knowledge on wider contexts as well as a careful look of talk as dynamic interactional process where meanings are jointly and progressively negotiated between the individuals (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), guided our analysis.

Moreover, our analysis was monitored by the earlier observations on how sensitive topics are dealt with in professional settings (e.g. Drew & Heritage, 1992; Haakana, 2001; Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990; Suoninen, 1999).
For the purposes of this article, we selected *one three minute meeting episode* which we found to be representative of discursive moves present in several instances of the data, where the participants marked topics as sensitive.

Our methodological approach to read the data owes to discourse analysis (DA) (Potter, 1996, 2003a, 2004), and discursive psychology (DP) (Edwards & Potter, 2001; Potter, 2003b) which, by centering on the analysis of naturally occurring occasions, focuses on the fine details of interaction. Potter's and his colleagues' blend of analysis is not guided by strict methodological rules but rather "it is an approach embedded in a web of theoretical and metatheoretical assumptions" (Potter, 2003b, 784-785) "which can be introduced by way of three fundamental principles: discourse is action oriented, situated and constructed" (Potter 2003a, 609). In essence, the discursive methodology developed by Potter and colleagues addresses the active use of language in a given context. In our analysis we looked at the activity by which certain topics were *marked* as particularly sensitive, and how this sensitivity was *handled in each situation* between the three consulting parties (a consultant, a director and a manager), and how this became used in *constructing* meanings, i.e. managing the meaning potentials of these topics.

During the analysis, we paid attention to sequences that seemed to imply 'something extra' which we connected to the sensitivity of topics that the conversationalists were dealing with. Based on the earlier research on professional interaction (Haakana, 2001; Linell & Bredmar, 1996; Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990; Suoninen, 1999), we identified as sensitivity markers features of talk that include:

- episodes of disturbances and hesitations in articulation (e.g. use of extended pauses, stuttering, repetition of words, use of additional fillers)
- delays of delivery of issues (e.g. use of complicated, softening sentences or structures)
- variations in vocabulary (e.g. use of diminutive or extenuating words)
- variations in other forms of language use (e.g. variations in intonation, speed of talk, voice level and overlapping speech)
- variations in the depth of topic penetration, hints of non-verbal expressions (e.g. laughter)
- variations in the use of contexts (e.g. use of confronting or neutralizing activity or cognitive contexts)

Realizing that almost any piece of routine communication in organizational life may contain the need for sensitive language use, we focused on episodes that seemed to involve more expression of sensitivity than the surrounding talk. Rather than assuming beforehand what the sensitive topics that the participants might face are, we consulted our data to see how the participants in local context constructed some issues and situations as sensitive.

FINDINGS

In what follows, we will show how sensitivity becomes marked in the conversation and how we make sense of why this takes place. We will then analyze in detail how expressing sensitivity is used by the conversationalists in attempts to manage the developing meaning potentials of the issues under discussion. We will present the selected episode divided into four consecutive text extracts. In the episode the manager of R&D (here referred to as Mari), her superior and the director of the customer process (here called Daniel), and the consultant discuss the need for an OD-event for the organization.

Expressing sensitivity through sensitivity markers

In the beginning of the contract meeting the consultant introduces himself as one willing to listen to the needs of the potential client. As the contract meeting commences, the meeting parties have a rather lengthy discussion concerning issues in the company in general and the change of the organizational structure in particular. Approximately 20 minutes into the meeting the manager Mari (M) introduces to the consultant (C) the idea of organizing an OD-event for the organization; an event that both she and the director Daniel (D) would attend.

Extract 1.

M somehow should (.) we should arrange some sort of (.)
event where (.) where we'd go through these (.) m-m exactly
these [(.)] these very things through
C [°yeah°]
M because from that I've got (1) when y´see I feel
in a way as my duty (.) m-m as an administrative
so as a supervisor to these people in a way
so (.) so m-m to outline for the R&D centre of expertise
>its home turf so<
so that [(.) that] we shall attain a profile we shall have like (1) m-m role
C [°yeah°]
M so that we can have (.) value (.) value
also in like these our (.) the eyes of other centers of expertise like so that (.)
that we'll be recognized as r et d ((R&D)) that those are the r et d people so that
they (.) they are like t- they are like those who know
(1) so (.) I feel it's like to m- me in a way
an important task

In her address, Mari connects the idea of organizing a consulting session with the need to support the R&D employee's visibility in the organization. However, she does not formulate her message briefly 'to the point' but explicates her idea in a way that refers to other possible meaning potentials. She uses a variety of sensitivity markers in her address, namely perturbations, hedging or softening words and softening explanations.

Mari's perturbations in her address can be identified as follows. She uses repetitions of words a number of times in her address:

- line 1: “should we should”
- lines 2-3: ”these…exactly these these very”
- line 8: ”so so”
- lines 10-12 : ”we shall attain…we shall have … we can have”
- line 12: ”value value”
- line 14-15: ”those are … they they are like…t-they are like”

Mari displays hesitations in articulation and stammering:

- lines 2, 6, 8 and 10: “m-m”
- line 15: “t- they”
- line 16: “m- me”

In her vocabulary, Mari uses words that soften the message.

- line 1: “some sort of”
- line 3: “these things”
- line 6: “in a way”
- line 16: “in a way”

In parallel with softening words, Mari uses softening explanations. For example, when talking about her role as a manager, Mari uses the terms “administrative manager” and later “as a supervisor to these people in a way (lines 5-7). Mari’s address also includes some other variations in language use. In line 9 her talk is noticeably faster than the surrounding talk. As a response to Mari’s address the consultant takes over:

Extract 2. (10 lines removed)

```
28  C   listen Daniel (1) what do you think about that
29      since it came to my mind (.) when Mari spoke
30      since  I have a little that kind of a (.) co- concept in my head heh
31      that like an (1) identity that who are we
32      identity somehow corresponds [to] what are we really you know
33  D                               [right]
34  C   I somehow hear Mari talk a bit about that [(1)] in a way
35  D                                             [right right]
36  C    she like bears (.) bears (1) em responsibility
37      for that her people feel themselves
38      like (.) something like [that’s like] professional [(.) profile or] (.)
39  M                           [right exactly]
40  D                                                      [yes]
41  C     however you name that identity [(.)]
42  D                                    [just so]
43  M                                    [yes yes]
```

The consultant’s turns also include several sensitivity markers. His formulation repeats some words, such as “like something that’s like” (line 38), “bears bears” (line 36) and displays some hesitation, as in “co- concept” (line 30) and “em” (line 36). Vocabulary-wise, the consultant opts for softening words “a little” (line 30), “somehow” (line 34), and “a bit” (line 34). There are also pauses in speech (lines 34 and 36) and slight laughter (line 30). The overlapping speech by both Mari and Daniel in various parts of the address can indicate not only the agreement but also the delicacy of the situation. When dealing with the topic, the consultant's use of term "we" (lines 31-32) functions as softening device: it avoids specifying anyone in the system. Moreover, the concept of identity is offered here as a somewhat neutralizing cognitive context for the issues at hand. The marking of sensitivity continues when Daniel takes turn and joins the conversation.

Extract 3a. (5 lines removed)

48 D there on the way we talked about it that (.) those our (.) ((chuckling))
49 our kind'f like (1) certain certain practices
50 em have in no way supported this that we would understand those
51 this identity is born from very small matters [(1)] like ju-jus just
52 M [mm]

Here Daniel relates to Mari's earlier address by starting to discuss some organizational practices that had failed to meet the needs of the new situation in the organization. When stating that these have not helped the employees to build a meaningful working identity for themselves, his repetition of words "certain certain"(line 49), the use softening words "kind'f like" (line 49), slight laughter (line 48) as well as stammering "ju-jus just" (line 51), function as sensitivity markers. Daniel continues his address as follows.

Extract 3b.
53 D we did discuss back there also such a matter that when (.)
54 when these changes were made (.) that that (.) this thing like wa- was seen
55 people's names weren't in the ((news))paper (.) whi-which is in itself like <u>stupid</u>
56 [(1) but] I don't understand why it was that it wasn't so (.) wasn't em
57 C [yeah]
58 D (1) in my opinion it was just stupid

Daniel develops his dissatisfaction concerning the disregard for communication pertaining to the employees' new appointments. Again, he uses sensitivity markers such as repetition, e.g. "that that" (line 54) and "it was that it wasn't so wasn't em" (line 56), as well as stammering, e.g. "whi- which" (line 55) to display perturbations in articulation. Along with pauses in lines 56 and 58 all this communicates the delicacy of the situation. Daniel continues:

Extract 3 c.
59 D and likewise we talked about that that now when
60 this kind of a change (.) change is made the (.) we have to
61 now for instance do that kind of thing like (.) update the contracts of employment kind of (.)
62 when they have kind of moved their workplace that (.)
63 that from these kinds of small things (.) uh that kind of an identity (.) is formed
64 and (1) [>and we'll see what will happen then<]
65 M [mm-m?]

Daniel refers to another issue that he had discussed with Mari on their way to meet the consultant. Here, he uses delicacy markers such as repetition of words "that" (lines 59 and 62-63), "change", (line 60) and "kind of", (lines 61-62). Also, the use of extenuating words ("kind of", lines 61-62), one one-second extra pause (line 64), as well as Mari's response "mm-m" (line 65) which is displayed with rising intonation and which overlaps with Daniel's turn, can all be read as a response to the potential critique and thus indications of the tension in the situation. At this point of the conversation, the consultant too overlaps and takes turn.

Extract 4.

66	C	[it is (.)] it is in my opinion a really useful way to think
67		that it's just like that (.) that (.) from small things (1)
68		so that you could say that (.) you could think that these kinds of
69		(2) or one way to think about is that these kinds of (1) these kind of like (3)
70		like it's through <u>everyday actions these kind of experiences are transmitted</u>
71		that are we valued or [(1)] or ar- we val- are we valued
72	M	[right]
73	C	and are we competent and [and well] on the whole who are we
74	M	[mmm]
75	C	that it's connected to these kind of everyday situations
76		[(1)] it it's a good way [to think]
77	D	[yeah] [yeah yeah]
78	C	that you perveive this since this also makes this <u>our situation</u> (2) like important [(1)]
79	M	[mm]
80	C	what happens <u>there</u> (.) will be significant
81	D	yeah (.) yeah
82	C	if we are able there to somehow open up some side or to bring
83		something (.) to construct a kind of (.) shared story about
84		who we [who we are so that can ( )]
85	D	[yeah (.) yeah yeah]
86	M	[nn-n]

Here the consultant formulates a cautious address including several sensitivity markers. His delivery displays overall difficulty to locate the main point (lines 68-69). There are also several long pauses (line 69), small extenuating words like "these kind of like" (line 69) and stammering (line 71). The overall topic engagement is made with a softening way of talking. For example, the use of the pronoun "we" to refer to the employees' experiences (lines 71 and 73) can act as a neutralizing context for discussing the topic at hand. Moreover, softening words "somehow" (line 82) and "kind of" (line 83) indicate sensitivity of the address.

In hindsight, and with the researcher's spectacles on, it is discernable why the episode during the contract meeting was particularly sensitive. We identified three different contextual readings with respect to the sensitivity in our text extracts. The first concerns the *organizational situation*. As pointed out earlier, the organizational structure had been changed, and the R&D employees no longer had as independent a position as they enjoyed earlier. This uncertainty of R&D employees' position was reflected in the manager Mari's talk as she opened discussion on the topic of how "her people" should be recognized in the midst of changes to organizational structures. This topic is understandably a sensitive one, both due to the experience of not having been heard and a need for adopting a new organizational position in relation to customer service at the same time. From Daniel's side, the difficulties in implementing the new organization model reflect inappropriate actions in managing change with Mari.

The second reading focuses on the fact that *entering into a consulting process* creates sensitivity in itself, since consulting means talking about potential tensions at hand and aims at re-evaluation of the current status quo. Consulting in itself carries a demand for the client to reflect –and change - one's own behavior in some respect. A consulting setting calls for talking about opposing interests. Being subordinate to Daniel, Mari held a different view as to what needs to be addressed. Since Mari and Daniel as individuals represented opposing positions with regard to the organizational change, they had different agendas for the contract meeting. This makes it understandable why Mari, as the consultant was later informed, harbored hope for a change regarding Daniel's behavior. When one considers her role as Daniel's subordinate as well as a manager whose employees seem to resist the organizational change (by expressing their dissatisfaction at being now rendered actors within the 'service chain'), it becomes understandable that she displays sensitivity. Potentially, she might be concerned whether Daniel can share her observation on the role of the R&D employees. From Daniel's perspective, on the other hand, the focus of change was more or less Mari and "her people". Their different positions, and at least to some extent their differing interests, introduced some complexity and made the issues to be taken to the consulting agenda sensitive.

The third reading helps see that the *social context of a multi-party meeting* itself created tension. Both Mari and Daniel had to justify the need for help to a third party, the consultant. They had defined the problem in a way that made their perspectives acknowledged, without threatening their relationship or their individual social and moral statuses. The need to defend the social and moral status of both consultees, and the need to build and preserve the working relationship between them, and with both of them, clarifies why the consultant approached the situation and the relationship between Mari and Daniel as sensitive. In order to manage the situation, the consultant was simply obliged to preserve the face of both consultees and avoid evoking guilt within a problematic organizational context.

Expression of sensitivity and the management of meaning potentials

The extracts above show several indications of sensitivity marking in talk of each participant. However, expressing sensitivity is not solely an individual act. Rather, as the conversationalists respond to each other's turns in a particular context, they 'do' (construct) it to communicate with each other. In the process of mutual constructing, the conversationalists depict some of the meaning potentials as more and some as less relevant for each other. Next we focus on how the conversationalists, by expressing sensitivity and by responding to others' expression of it, develop meaning potentials over the course of the conversation.

In extract 1 Mari explains her perspective that a consulting event should be organized to "go through these …things" (lines 2-3) , "so that we shall attain profile…role… so that we can have value also in…the eyes of other centers of expertise" (lines 10-13). Primarily, she seems to worry about how the R&D employees will find their place in the new organization. However, by marking in many ways her address as sensitive she hints at other meaning potentials. Her own leadership status "as a supervisor to these people" (line 7) is one such meaning potential. Expressing sensitivity can be read here as a display of vulnerability, and a call for support, as Mari expresses her feelings towards her role: "I feel it's like to m- me in a way an important task" (line 16-17). Showing vulnerability in itself can be a delicate matter, and here Mari does it in front of her superior Daniel. At the same time, Mari has to discuss the difficulties without jeopardizing her own or Daniel's professional face (Charles, 1996) as leaders. Expressing sensitivity can also be understood as a communication of her moral awareness of representing an unwanted change for the R&D employees, since she herself is accountable to them for the 'planned change'. The consultant displays minimal response (stating "yeah" two times in a low voice) to Mari's address indicating encouragement of talking about her concern.

The consultant's strive to actively handle the ambiguous meaning potential of Mari's turns becomes more evident in extract 2, where he formulates his comments in a complex manner. It seems that the consultant responds to the potential moral dilemma of Mari's address by avoiding responding to any line that would introduce her as an inadequate leader. First he offers a point of departure for the discussion that could neutralize the issue. By launching the term "identity" to talk about the situation of the Mari's subordinates (lines 31-32) who lack the profile, the role and the value in Mari's terms, the consultant constructs a more positive connotation. Again, his wording that Mari "bears responsibility" (line 36) for her subordinates' "professional profile" (line 38) opens up the meaning that Mari holds her leaderships position in an appropriate manner. Mari's overlapping response "right exactly" (line 39) supports this interpretation of the situation. Thus, the meanings potentials that would challenge Mari's position as a manager or underline her vulnerability in the current situation are overlooked at this point, and are substituted by the sensitive wording and responding that creates a constructive starting point for the consulting process.

The extract 3, where Daniel takes over, makes the varying meaning potential more visible. In extract 3a, Daniel grasps the term identity and explicates that the "identity is born from very small matters" (line 51). He admits that mistakes have been made in building support for the change process, but at the same time (extract 3b) he constructs a critique. He does not specify that his critique points at Mari but this meaning potential is obvious. Certainly Mari was in charge of taking care of the nomination papers of the subordinates. Therefore

Daniel's comment "people's names weren't in the paper … in my opinion it was just stupid (lines 55, 58) constructs a meaning that Mari has failed in one aspect of her role within the change process. In extract 3c, Daniel mitigates his critique by sensitively using the first person position "we" (lines 59-60) to share the agency position with Mari. Thus, sensitivity helps Daniel to open up his dissatisfaction, and to soften it in a way that makes it possible to talk about the management and the details of practice with which they have had difficulties. The moral dimension is made explicit without disrupting the conversation.

Extract 4 shows how the development of the meaning potentials continues. In his formulation, the consultant utilizes ideas from earlier turns and offers the planned OD-event here as a remedy, somehow along the following lines: 'Everyday actions of the management are crucial since they build identities for the employees. Therefore, it is meaningful to think about the consulting event as an opportunity for the managers to find correcting actions that would create positive meanings among the employees'. The consultant's suggestion offers Mari and Daniel an opportunity to take responsibility for better leadership. Thus, the way the consultant offers a future perspective encourages all three to focus on the opportunities of the event since "what happens there will be significant" (line 80, emphasis on the word "there"). Again, sensitivity here plays an important role and supports the rhetoric, by which the consultant balances between taking seriously the moral challenge of both Mari and Daniel, and offering opportunities for positive leadership. By formulating his interpretation as "my opinion" (line 66) rather than a strong argument, the consultant avoids confrontation and arguing comments. By taking the first person perspective, he validates that different meanings are possible and that nobody owns the truth. Along with the use of sensitivity markers this way of responding downplays the consultant's expert role, neutralizes the situation, and makes it possible to respond positively to the addresses of each participant. He works to avoid getting stuck with negative descriptions, and to construct an outlook for the future which is respectful of both participants' perspectives, and provides an alternative meaning of what is going on at the moment, and what can still be done for the organization.

However, developing the meaning potentials in the conversation presumes interactional validation. In order to be convincing the consultant has to appropriate his own initiatives to the clients' responses. This is visible in extract 4 where Mari responds approvingly to the consultant's idea of the meaning of everyday actions (line 72). The minimal response "mmm" by Mari (line 74) also bears a sound of approval. However, it seems that the consultant needs to repeat his positive feedback to Daniel "it it's a good way to think" (line 76) and obtain his acceptance ("yeah… yeah yeah" line 77) before he can turn the focus to the consulting event.

In sum, the episode shows how sensitivity becomes marked in various ways in discourse and that this is used in communicating and developing the meaning potentials. In particular, the extracts show that the consultant is actively managing the meaning construction work in the meeting. This is achieved by 'regulating' the depth of topic penetration. In this case, it seemed to be important that the sensitive, yet also relevant, topics were introduced during the course of contract meeting without being addressed too forcefully. Later in the consulting process, these topics were further developed and dealt with in greater length.

DISCUSSION

Why do meeting partners use indirect and complex (i.e. sensitive) rather than plain-spoken and straightforward language when raising topics to be discussed in a consulting process? Our analysis of one case suggests that sensitivity, displayed in various ways in language use, was not an insignificant feature but a meaningful activity through which meaning potentials became introduced and developed throughout the consulting contract conversation. The presence of expressions of sensitivity in this particular case can be understood with the help of different contextual circumstances. The situation stemming from the organizational change process, the tension of the contract meeting context itself, and the multi-party setting in which participants from various positions needed to communicate, all called for sensitivity. From the client's perspective, marking topics as sensitive served the function of taking up matters that are significant but potentially threatening, thus helping to introduce potential meanings related to these issues. From the consultant's perspective, the key function of sensitivity talk was to broaden particular meaning potentials and deemphasizes others in order to (re)direct the conversation, while enabling the consulting meeting to proceed fluently. Overall, the function of sensitivity marking was to enable the conversation to continue without 'turn-off' reactions. The consultant seemed to utilize expressing sensitivity in offering a future perspective that each participant could accept as a shared agenda. He construed the consulting event as an opportunity for the managers to make corrective efforts in relation to the employees, and their identity within the new organization. Later on in the consultation process, when the working relationship was established, the sensitively expressed meaning potentials, such as the employee's dissatisfaction with leadership styles of both superiors, became available for deeper exploration.

Our analysis shows that the consultant has a particular task in managing the evolving meanings 'in situ'. A consultant has a key position from which to make some meaning potentials more relevant and ignore certain other meaning perspectives. Moreover, avoiding too deep a penetration of threatening meaning potentials appears to be meaningful in terms of ensuring the working contract, and of keeping the discussion on an optimal level of generality. This illuminates a strategy of 'getting things done' (c.f. Holmes and Stubbe, 2003) in a situation that calls both for recognizing the sensitivity and building a future perspective (i.e. collaboration) with a client. Our observation of the consultant's active role in meaning management accords with earlier observations on consultants' work (e.g. Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Berglund and Werr, 2000), and adds one empirical study to the understudied process consulting practice.

Following Czarniawska-Joerges's (1990) notion on consultants as 'merchants of meaning', this study sheds the light on how the meaning making takes place through details of language use. It helps us to understand the complexities of meaning making practices and the presence of mutuality (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002, Edvardsson, 1989) and uncertainty (Fincham, 2003, Sturdy, 1997) in consultancy work.

From the contracting-work perspective, our analysis illuminates what "building a helping relationship" in consulting (Schein, 1999) could mean in terms of local practice. By careful language use, a consultant can create positive atmosphere between the conversationalists and support the smoothness of a social situation. Even though momentarily hesitative or stammering talk may at first sight appear as if there is a lack of professional competence to discuss difficulties, in a local interaction process it can communicate mutual understanding and hence portray the consultant as one who can work sensitively and respectfully. By underlining the reciprocal responsiveness, this study challenges the idea of a consultant as a supreme rhetorical performer presented in earlier studies (e.g. Berglund & Werr, 2000; Clark & Salaman, 1998, Legge, 2002) and addresses the need for being sensitive to local discourse. Our findings support Alvesson's and Johansson's (2002) point that "the more adaptive the consultant is to change behavior that fits the context the better the possibilities for consultancy work. Professionalism always has to be balanced with anti-professionalism" (p. 243).

Expressing sensitivity and developing meaning potentials may be less conscious than what it looks like in retrospect, wearing the researcher's spectacles. It might be more apt to think that the participants of the contract meeting just happen to engage in this sort of activity spontaneously, in the way people unknowingly live by the rules of social interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kurri & Wahlström, 2000) and of the institutional setting at hand (Drew & Heritage, 1992). From the consultant's perspective, utilizing sensitivity in meaning construction could then be viewed as a somewhat tacit ability to utilize certain rhetoric (see, Berglund and Werr, 2000). As suggested by Pellegrinelli (2002) a consultant "needs to be able to understand and empathize with the various personal concerns, ingrained beliefs and political agendas, even if they are not raised formally nor fully articulated" (p. 335). Skilful consultants, we believe, manage to do this with and among their clients even though they are not aware of doing so. Their actions are guided by their practical observation that positive social exchanges and managing the interaction are necessary for a good business relationship. Similarly, this kind of hidden dynamics might illuminate work in teaching contexts, too. To be able to work efficiently in a multi-party teaching situation, one has to be able to deal with sensitivity and to avoid entering into too threatening topics while developing the expressed meaning potentials.

A careful reflection of one's own consulting practice, as done here with the help of audio-recorded materials and a research team, can be an insightful exercise for practitioners who wish to enrich their professional thinking with the help of action research. As this study shows, research on practice enhances making the seen but often unnoticed discursive practices in communication visible (c.f. Clifton, 2006). This study then offers one framework that can, as Rogers remarks, "enable practitioners to see more clearly the organizational communication situations in which they are embedded, including constrains and opportunities those situations afford, and to analyze those situations more effectively" (as cited in Suchan & Charles, 2006, p. 394).

The theoretical value of this study is that it combines perspectives from two somewhat distinctive research traditions: that of investigating the functions of sensitive interaction (i.e. politeness studies at the workplace) and that of exploring meaning making in organizations. Sensitivity is viewed as action that has functions wider than the simple politeness. Meaning making then can be viewed as detailed practice, where sensitivity plays a role. By utilizing discursive methodology this study has demonstrated that it is possible to connect the two previously not connected fields of research.

Limitations and Future Research

Our reading of the authentic material from contract meeting has been guided by our observation that sensitivity in interaction has an important function. This is not to say that other frameworks for analysis would be less appropriate. Rather, as pointed out by Holmes and Stubbe, (2003, 8) "almost every example of authentic discourse has several layers of meaning and yields different insights depending on the analytical framework adopted". The approach of this study does not offer such firm frame for analysis like, for example, politeness theory would have offered. Moreover, the methodology adopted from Potter (1996, 2003a, 2003b) does not follow as structured and disciplined practices as for example conversation analysis does. However, the adopted approach and methodology of this study seemed to be of use in gaining understanding of some salient aspects of professional practice.

The limitations of focusing on discursive practices of only one contract meeting need to be recognized too. First, we cannot make generalizations of how consulting contract meetings in other instances are conducted and what particular challenges those meetings might contain. Second, because the communication of sensitivity takes place in the situational context of a specific case, we cannot make any statements on what topics are generally sensitive in consulting settings. Rather, the findings of this single-case study are case-specific showing how sensitivity was apparent and in use of developing meaning potentials within this particular episode of this particular contract meeting. However, our analysis illustrates some discursive practices that may occur during a contracting meeting. As such, the study illuminates actual communication practices of managers and consultants. Further research on other comparable encounters would help us gain more understanding of how sensitivity is used in the service of meaning making in business communication. Research using other materials pertaining to the process consulting designs would offer more perspective on how sensitivity becomes a relevant communicative vehicle in this kind of consultation were addressing difficult and potentially threatening topics is the core working focus. Moreover, analyses of contract meetings other than the process oriented consultation would provide insight into how using discursive resources creatively to manage meanings in contract meetings builds the ground for business relationships in consulting work.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to examine how sensitivity in interaction can be of use in meaning making purposes in consulting contract meeting, known as the crucial point of a consulting relationship. By having shown in detail how sensitivity can be expressed and how it can be in use of meaning construction, the paper has contributed to the need, as put forth by Winsor, to "better understand what actually happens with communication in the business workplace" (as cited in Suchan & Charles, 2006, p.391). Therefore, our recommendation for practicing consultants is to acknowledge the importance of the entry stage and to take the indirectness of the client's discourse into account as a meaningful action, and handle it as a part of collaborative meaning work rather than as irrelevant social friction.

By having shown that the process consultant has a specific interactional task in managing evolving meaning potentials in conversations that are tense for multiple reasons, we suggest our perspective as one heuristic way to approach consulting interaction. The local interaction perspective makes sense of how sensitivity can be used for consulting purposes. This perspective is overlooked by practice oriented authors (e.g. Block, 1981; French & Bell, 1978; Jamieson 1995; Lippit & Lippit, 1986; Neumann, 1997; Schein, 1988, 1997, 1999). Thus, rather than assuming that a consultant can follow premeditated roles or strategies, we should see that helping requires following situational tasks in moments of interaction with a client (Marshak & Heracleous, 2005).

Similarly, we can compare the role of a consultant to that of managers in organizations: in their day-to-day work, managers have to deal with difficult issues and hence they are able to address sensitive topics. In these situations, managers have the role of managing the meaning potentials at hand (c.f. Clifton, 2006). The communication of sensitivity may thus be a relevant perspective when it comes to understanding the challenges of managers in organizations. Detailed study of how sensitivity is communicated may help to understand that the advice of "…early notification, and discussion of just about any topic that any stakeholder wishes to raise" (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens & Weir, 2006, p.130) during processes of organizational change is evidently well grounded, but may turn out to be a more complex process than the text books would have us understand.

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APPENDIX 1

TRANSCRIPT NOTATIONS

The audio-recorded materials analyzed in this article are transcribed according to the modified version of Jefferson practices (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The following notations were used in this article:

Symbol	Represents
yes (1) me too	Figures in rounded brackets represent inter- and mid-turn silences, hand-timed in seconds
yes (.) me too	Period in rounded brackets are 'micro-pauses' of less than 0.2 seconds
°yeah°	Degree signs enclose significantly lowered volume
( )	Unrecoverable speech
yes ((clap)) me too	Double rounded brackets contain relevant contextual information, added by the transcriber
what if (manager M) answers	Text in rounded brackets represents a real name changed by the transcriber in order to preserve anonymity of the person named
[and well on the whole] [mmm]	Overlapping utterances are marked by single square brackets. The left-hand bracket shows where the overlap began, the right-hand bracket shows where the overlapped speech is terminated
I think- I think so	A single dash following a word or letter(s) indicates an abrupt cut-off in the flow of speech (stammering)
>yes me too<	'less than' arrows enclose faster-paced talk than the surrounding talk
our project	Underlining signals emphasis
=	Equal signs indicate no gap between utterances
mm?	A question mark indicate rising intonation

APPENDIX 2.

COMPLETE ORIGINAL FINNISH TRANSCRIPT WITH INTERLINEAR ENGLISH TRANSLATION

1 M et jotenkin pitäs (.) meidän pitäs järjestää joku sellanen (.)
somehow should (.) we should arrange some sort of (.)
2 tilaisuus jossa (.) jossa käytäis näitä (.) e-e nimenomaan
event where (.) where we'd go through these (.) m-m exactly
3 just [(.)] just näitä asioita läpi
these [(.)] these very things through
4 C [°joo°]
[°yeah°]
5 M koska mää oon saanu siitä (1) kun ku mää taas koen (.)
because from that I've got (1) when y´see I feel
6 sillä tavalla omaksi tehtäväkseni (.) e-e hallinnollisena
in a way as my duty (.) m-m as an administrative
7 elikkä siis niinkun näitten ihmisten esimiehenä
so as a supervisor to these people in a way
8 nin (.) nin e-e laatia sen T&K:n osaamiskeskuksen
so (.) so m-m to outline for the R&D centre of expertise
9 >sen kotipesän eli<
>its home turf so<
10 se että [(.)] meille tulee profiili meille tulee niinkun (1) e-e rooli
so that [(.)] that we shall attain a profile we shall have like (1) m-m role
11 C [°joo°]
[°yeah°]
12 M et meille tulee (.) arvo (.) arvo
so that we can have (.) value (.) value
13 myöskin ninkun näitten meidän (.) muitten osaamiskeskusten silmissä eli että (.)
also in like these our (.) the eyes of other centers of expertise like so that (.)
14 et meidät tunnistetaan tee et kooksi et noi on niit tee et koo ihmisiä et
that we'll be recognized as r et d ((R&D)) that those are the r et d people so that
15 noi (.) noi on niinkun n-noi on niinkun niitä jotka tietää
they (.) they are like t- they are like those who know
16 (1) elikkä (.) mä koen että se on niinkun mul-mulle silleen
(1) so (.) I feel it's like to m- me in a way
17 tärkee tehtävä
an important task
M ( ) mä koen että mun (.) ihmisille on o-o-on tärkeetä kuitenki
( ) I feel that for my (.) people it i-i-is important anyhow
sitten koska he joutuu jokapäiväsis toimissaan
then because they have to in their daily actions
toimivat (.) kaiken aikaa näis asiakasrajapinnassa
they act (.) all the time at these client interfaces
näis ketjuissa (.) ja ja sit tosiaan ninkun
within these chains (.) and and well really like
näitten tuotepäälliköitten kans
with these product managers too
että kun se (1) ketju (.) on (.) on silleen (.) tärkee
and as the (1) chain (.) is (.) in that way (.) important
[että se konkretisoituis] ja että ihmiset pääsis [niinku]
[so that it would become more concrete] and that people could [kind of]
C [joo] [joo]
[yeah] [yeah]

M siihen m-myös sit (.) tähä linkkiin mukaan
become connected also w-with (.) this link
28 C tota Daniel (1) mitä sä ajattelet siitä
listen Daniel (1) what do you think about that
29 ku mulle tulee mieleen toi (.) kun Mari puhu
since it came to my mind (.) when Mari spoke
30 ku mul on vähän niinku semmone (.) kä-käsite päässä heh
since I have a little that kind of a (.) co- concept in my head heh
31 että niinkon (1) <u>identiteetti</u> että ketä me ollaan
that like (1) <u>identity</u> that who are we
32 identiteettihän jotenkin vastaa [siihen] ketä me oikein ollaan
identity somehow corresponds [to] who are we really you know
33 D [joo]
[right]
34 C mä kuulen jotenki Railin puhuvan vähän siitä että [(1)] tavallaa
I somehow hear Mari talk a bit about that [(1)] in a way
35 D [joo joo]
[right right]
36 C hän on niinko kantaa (.) kantaa (1) aa-a vastuuta
she like bears (.) bears (1) em responsibility
37 siitä että hänen ihmisensä tuntee olevansa
for that her people feel themselves
38 ninko (.) jotakin [siis niinko] ammatillinen [(.) profiili tai] (.)
like (.) something [that's like] professional [(.) profile or] (.)
39 M [nii justiin]
[right exactly]
40 D [kyllä]
[yes]
41 C miksi sitä identiteettiä nyt sanotaankin [(.)]
however you name that identity [(.)]
42 D [niin]
[just so]
43 M [kyllä kyllä]
[yes yes]
C siis tätä on sanottu identiteetiksi (1) mutta se voi olla sit [( )]
so this has been named identity (1) but it can be then [( )]
M [mm-m nimenomaan]
[mm-m just so]
C [tehtävä joka muuttuu ( )]
[a work task that is changing ( )]
M [nn-n just nii]
[ss-s just so]
D kyl se on (.) niinku selvästi aattelis niinkun tänä päivänä ja
yes it is (.) like you would clearly think like today and
48 D tossa sit matkalla juteltii siitä että (.) ne meijän (.) ((naurahtaen))
there on the way we talked about it that (.) those our (.) ((chuckling))
49 meijän niinku tota (1) tietyt tietyt käytännöt
our kind'f like (1) certain certain practices
50 nii ei oo mitenkään tätä asiaa tukenu että et et me ymmärrettäs ne ( )
em have in no way supported this that we would understand those ( )
51 tämä identiteetti syntyy hirveen pienistä asioista [(1)] ninku ju-jus just
this identity is born from very small matters [(1)] like ju-jus just
52 M [mm]
[mm]
53 D semmosesta asiastaki keskusteltii tos noi että kun (.)

we did discuss back there also such a matter that when (.)
54 kun tehtiin näitä muutoksia (.) nin nin (.) tää asiaa ninkun näk-näki
when these changes were made (.) that that (.) this thing like wa- was seen
55 ihmisten nimiä ei ollu lehdessä (.) jot-joka sinänsä on ninku typerää
people's names weren't in the ((news))paper (.) whi- which is in itself like stupid
56 [(1) mut] emmä ymmärrä mistä se mistä se johtu että näin ei ollu (.) ollu tota
[(1) but] I don't understand why it was that it wasn't so (.) wasn't em
57 C [joo]
[yeah]
58 D (1) se oli musta vaan typerää
(1) in my opinion it was just stupid
59 D ja samantein me keskusteltii siitä että että nyt ku (.)
and likewise we talked about that that now when (.)
60 tämmöne muutos (.) muutos ku tehdään ni (.) meiän pitää
this kind of a change (.) change is made the (.) we have to
61 nyt esmerkiks semmone asia tehdä kun (.) työsopimusten uusimine tavallaan se (.)
now for instance do that kind of thing like (.) update the contracts of employment kind of (.)
62 ku he he ovat tavallaa niinku muuttaneet työpaikkaa et (.)
when they have kind of moved their workplace that (.)
63 et tämmösistä pienistä asioista (.) e-e tämmöne identiteetti (.) muodostuu
that from these kinds of small things (.) uh that kindl of an identity (.) is formed
64 ja [(1) >ja katotaan mitä sieltä sitte tulee<]
and [(1) >and we'll see what will happen then<]
65 M [mm-m?]
[mm-m?]
66 C [se on (.)] se on mun mielestä hirveen hyödyllinen tapa ajatella
[it is (.)] it is in my opinion a really useful way to think
67 et se just noin (.) et (.) pienistä asioista (1)
that it's just like that (.) that (.) from small things (1)
68 et vois niinu sanoo että (.) vois aatella et tämmöset ninko
so that you could say that (.) you could think that these kinds of
69 (2) tai yks tapa ajatella on tämmösiä (1) tämmöset ninko (3)
(2) or one way to think about is that these kinds of (1) these kind of like (3)
70 niinkö arjen kautta siirtyy tämmöset kokemukset
like it's through everyday actions these kind of experiences are transmitted
71 että ollaanko me arvokkaita tai [(1)] tai ol- ol- ollaanko me arvokkaita
that are we valued or [(1)] or ar- we val- are we valued
72 M [aivan]
[right]
73 C ja ollaanko me päteviä ja [ja tuota] ylipäätään ketä me ollaan
and are we competent and [and well] on the whole who are we
74 M [mmm]
[mmm]
75 C et se liittyy tämmösten arkisten tilanteiden
that it's connected to these kind of everyday situations
76 [(1)] se on hyvä tapa [ajatella]
[(1)] it it's a good way [to think]
77 D [joo] [joo joo]
[yeah] [yeah yeah]
78 C et sä hahmotat sitä koska tuota se tekee myöskin tän meijän tilanteen (2) ninko tärkeäksi [(1)]
that you perveive this since this also makes this our situation (2) like important [(1)]

79 M [mm]
[mm]
80 C mitä <u>siellä</u> tapahtuu (.) on merkityksellistä
what happens <u>there</u> (.) will be significant
81 D joo (.) joo
yeah (.) yeah
82 C jos siellä kyetää jotenki avaamaan jotakin puolta tai tuomaan
if we are able there to somehow open up some side or to bring
83 (.) joku (.) luomaan semmone (.) yhteinen kertomus siitä
(.) something (.) to construct a kind of (.) shared story about
84 et ketä me [ketä me ollaan ni se voi ( )]
who we [who we are so that can ( )]
85 D [joo (.) joo joo]
[yeah (.) yeah yeah]
86 M [nn-n]
[nn-n]

II

CONSTRUCTING ASYMMETRY AND SYMMETRY IN RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN A CONSULTING SYSTEM

by

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Constructing Asymmetry and Symmetry in Relationships Within a Consulting System

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Abstract Asymmetry is viewed as one characteristic of organizational relationships. Organizations need power structures, hierarchies and other sort of inequalities. However, symmetric relationships are also needed, at least for providing commitment and learning between people. This article focuses on the nature of asymmetry and symmetry in consulting settings. It draws from the social constructionist point of view and examines the variation of asymmetric and symmetric relationship construction within a single multi-party consulting situation. Through data collected from an authentic consulting process and methodology derived from Discourse Analysis, the article argues that asymmetry-symmetry dimension is present for consulting parties and that the parties mutually produce and re-produce the balance between the polarities. The paper discusses the role of a process consultant in the re-construction of organizational relationships.

Keywords Asymmetry-symmetry · Process consulting · Consultant-client relationship · Multi-party system · Discourse analysis methodology

Introduction

Organizations are asymmetric in many ways. There are variations between people in terms of power, hierarchical status, authority, professional competence and forms of knowledge, as well as interactional styles with which people dominate each other. These inequalities are part of the social realities of the organization, which inform members on how they are positioned in relation to each other and what sort of relationships they can build. Since power and discourse are mutually constitutive (Hardy and Phillips 2004; see also Clegg 1989) are asymmetries interactively produced and reproduced in day-to-day communication between people. A consultant who works with an organization cannot avoid dealing

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with asymmetries. Rather, within the consulting system, the consultant has to respect and take them into consideration. The multi-party consulting system itself, as an arena for facilitating change, will display asymmetry and symmetry within the relationships between members of the management, the employees and the consultant. When successful, the constructions within that system will make a difference which also reverberate in the day-to-day relationships within the organization.

The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of asymmetry and symmetry in consultancy settings. Drawing from the social constructionist point of view, we explore in particular at how asymmetry and symmetry become constructed and re-constructed in relationships by details of interaction within a consulting system. The paper presents an action research where a consultant—with the help of a research group—reflects upon his own practice by studying the relationship negotiations within a consulting system. The article conceptualizes and describes a consulting practice (see, Clegg et al. 2004) on the basis of empirical data.

The article is organized as follows. We start by introducing the concepts of asymmetry and symmetry and then discuss how they are present in a consultancy setting. After this, we introduce the consulting relationship as a multi-party setting and explain how consulting parties, by positioning each other, construct asymmetry and symmetry in their relationships. A review of current research literature from the perspective of our topic is presented next, as well as the statement of our research question. This is followed by the materials and methodology section as well as the findings from consultancy practice. Finally, we discuss our findings and draw conclusions from both the researcher's and the practitioner's perspectives.

Asymmetry and Symmetry in Consulting Settings

Concept Definition

The concept of 'asymmetry' and its counterpart 'symmetry' are used to express how hierarchy and/or domination is or is not present in a relationship (Linell and Luckmann 1991). Literally the term asymmetry refers to an objective lack of proportion between the parts of an object, but its use in the literature connotates a subjective and moral lack of equality (Robinson 2001). Asymmetry can be characterized by 'status inequality', in other words, differences in e.g. hierarchical position, knowledge or formal power. Asymmetry or symmetry in relationships should not, however, be viewed as 'fixed' characteristics but rather as qualities that can vary over time within the same relationship. For example, the working relationship between a management and a consultant may turn into a more symmetrical one during the course of mutual working.

Asymmetry and symmetry become manifested by the social processes of people relating to one another. These processes can be identified by the structures of dialogical participation within a specific social situation, i.e. by the communication patterns that become alive in practice (Markova and Foppa 1991). For example when A takes an initiative to ask a question requiring an answer from B (for as long as B responds without making a competitive initiative), interactional dominance and thus asymmetry exists (Linell and Luckman 1991). A more symmetric pattern of communication occurs when both speakers respond to what their partner has just said and introduce something new for the other to respond to.

Basically, all interactional moves can be seen either as symmetric or asymmetric depending on how much direction, control and compliance are incorporated (Linell 1990).

However, each move derives its meaning from how it becomes received by others, in other words, asymmetry and symmetry are collaboratively accomplished in and through interaction in each situational context (Linell and Luckmann 1991; Maynard 1991). Moreover, as Linell and Luckmann (1991, p. 8) point out, "asymmetries must be taken as a concept that is neutral with respect to success or non-success in communication". In other words, both asymmetric and symmetric communication is needed and one should not be viewed as better than the other.

Linell (1990, p. 169) states that "asymmetrical interactions are extremely common, particularly in situations where parties differ in status, competence and responsibilities", which undoubtedly is the case in most organizational contexts. For this reason, there is a fundamental need for communication, because "if there were no asymmetries between people…there would be little or no need for most kinds of interaction!" (Linell and Luckman 1991, p. 4). Organizations are primarily asymmetric systems.

Consulting Setting and Organizational Asymmetry

It is understandable that whenever organizational members come together their orientation to one another is informed by their awareness of the asymmetries of the organization. A consultancy setting should not make an exception even though as a new social context, drawn by the presence of an external consultant, it might offer opportunities to practise differing ways of relating to each other. Organizational asymmetries may thereby become 're-negotiated' and 're-lived', i.e. re-constructed in situ by the language exchange with the consultant.

Hiring a consultant can itself be part of the dynamics around organizational asymmetry. The client may 'need' a consultant as a resource for the 'intra-organizational power game' or the 'political battles' (Alvesson and Johansson 2002, Bloomfield and Danieli 1995). The consulting practitioner literature recognises this: "Working in the field automatically places the consultant in a relationship to a complex social system with multiple political and psychological dynamics" (Neumann et al. 1997, p. xviii). Therefore, consultants are recommended to be sensitive to the potential 'social and political processes' of the organization which may influence their professional role (e.g. Lippit and Lippit 1986; Martin et al. 2001; Miller 1997; Pellegrinelli 2002; Schein 2003). Understandably, it has been stated that not only professional expertise but also social competence—in our terms the ability to recognize the asymmetries of the organization and relate to them—bring about good results in consulting (Edvardsson 1989).

Asymmetry is also related to the consulting relationship itself. It has been argued that consultants use power over their clients: by offering leadership recipes, a rhetorically skilled consultant can subordinate the client who becomes a dependent and passive party in the relationship (Berglund and Werr 2000; Clark and Salaman 1998a). Some researchers (e.g. Sturdy 1997) have pointed out that the client's anxiety and uncertainty offers the consultant a power position and makes the relationship asymmetric by nature. On the other hand, since the consultants needs the management for their business, the relationship can be asymmetric also in the opposite way (Fincham 1999a). The consultant-client relationship is an interdependent relationship (McGivern 1983) where asymmetry may vary between the parties and become manifested in different ways (see, Fincham 1999a).

The variation of domination is evident when looking at the process of the consultant-client relationship. The client who asks for consultancy is usually holding a power position and may communicate asymmetrically when choosing a consultant. However, after having been hired, i.e. having received the task to help the client, the consultant's power position in relation to the client organization is altered. This altered power position allows the consultant to communicate asymmetrically and take initiative by giving advice, structuring conversations or even placing the client under an obligation to act according to given instructions.

Asymmetry becomes embedded within every consulting situation in one way or another. Within the so called process consulting practice (Schein 1987, 1988), which this article explores, this challenge is faced in a special way. When consulting is seen as an activity that helps the client organisation to help itself (Schein 1987, 1988, 1999, 2002) there is a need for building a collaborative relationship between the consultant and the client. Symmetric relationships that enable members to participate equally and learn together by sharing their observations, thoughts and interpretations, are called for. This makes the consulting position challenging: one has to deal with the existing asymmetries of the organization and invite symmetry at the same time.

Asymmetry and Symmetry as Positioning in a Multi-Party System

We can understand the nature of asymmetry and symmetry when we approach the consultant-client relationship as a system that is embedded within several relationships or different sub-systems (see, Argyris 1961; Schein 1987). Usually, consulting work is done within multi-party settings where the consultant meets organisational members from varying positions. At its simpliest, there are three main positions of a consultant-client system, consultant, management and employees (see, e.g. McKinney Kellog 1984). This multi-party nature of the consulting relationship creates interactional complexity, as acknowledged within the systemic approach to consulting (e.g. Campbell et al. 1991; Friedman 1986; Lang et al. 1990; McChain 1982; Oliver 2005). For example, when a consultant strives for a symmetric relationship with the management, an asymmetric relationship with the employees might emerge as an unintended outcome.

When representing various organizational roles with different tasks and obligations, the consulting participants orientate themselves to, and view the multi-party system differently. They have different concerns over the relationships within the system. This means that they also talk differently about them, being more or less aware of the fact that their words give qualities to and make some relationships more visible than others. Moreover, as speakers in a multi-party situation, each conversationalist's addresses become received and responded by the others. Thus, when talking together in a consulting context, each of the three parties mutually reconstruct their relationships and the asymmetries or symmetries between them.

When talking about their relationships, participants position each other (Langenhove and Harré 1999). In discursive practice "within a conversation each of the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself" (Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 22). Even when two parties define their dyadic relationship, parties outside the dyad become positioned. The following quotation from our data illuminates this. In a two-party planning session with the consultant regarding an organizational event, the director suggests a preparation task, a personal writing task, for the employees:

> I feel like people have a lot of these kinds of ((concerns)) in their minds
> so they could write them down anonymously so that they come to your knowledge
> only

When suggesting this task the director positions himself as an outsider and the employees as those who should tell their concerns to the consultant privately. The consultant becomes here positioned as the only one with access to the employees' stories. This idea of offering access to the consultant does not only reflect the director's experience of the daily practices in the organization but also constructs symmetry between the consultant and the employees and asymmetry between the management and employees as well as between the consultant and the management.

The Need for Practice Research

Surprisingly enough, we found no research that elaborates on the practice of consulting relationship negotiations from an asymmetry perspective. Likewise, the multi-party nature of consulting relationships has raised relatively little research interest although it is very obvious in almost every consulting case. Only a few studies (e.g. de Castro et al 2005; Martin et al. 2001) have looked at consulting work as interaction between multiple stakeholders, while the main part of existing research into consultant-client relationships handles it as a two-party relationship. Overall, there is lack of empirical research on the consulting practice (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2004, see also Alvesson and Johansson 2002). In particular, we need more information and evidence on "what do consultants do when they work, what do they accomplish and how do client-consultancy relations look like at the levels of meaning and actor involvement where the voices of consultants as well as client people are being considered" (Alvesson and Svenigsson 2004, p. 2).

The present study takes the interaction perspective to the consultant-client relationship by looking at how asymmetry and symmetry can be a matter of collaborative construction. We look at consulting relationships as a social composition created in the interaction between parties. Recent research has underlined the need to study the consulting relationship from an interaction perspective and to acknowledge the collaborative, reciprocal nature of the consultant-client relationship (Alvesson and Johansson 2002; Edvardsson 1989; Engwall and Kipping 2002; deCastro et al. 2005; Fincham 1999a; Pellegrinelli 2002; Sturdy 1997, 2002; Werr and Styhre 2003; Williams 2001). Our on-going research project, of which this study is a part, has this far shown how client "ownership" of a consulting process as well as the outcome are actually negotiated during consultancy discourse (Kykyri et al. 2007a, b).

One reason for the lack of research on consulting practice is that there is no easy access to authentic materials—consultants are neither willing to share their materials with researchers nor willing to take researchers to observe their practice. On the other hand, consultants themselves seldom practise as action researchers who would carefully document their practice (e.g. by videotaping it) and then conduct studies on the materials (for some noticeable exceptions, see, Marshak and Heracleous 2005; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003) Not until recently has the need for studying real practices in consulting been acknowledged and taken as a starting point for empirical work (Adamson 2000; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2004; Berglund and Werr 2000; Chao 2005; Gbadamosi 2005; Johansson 2004; Handley et al. 2005; Kipping and Armrüster 2002; Kykyri et al. 2007a, b).

With authentic data from an early stage of a consulting project, this study offers an analysis of the discursive practices concerning relationship constructions within a consulting system. We ask how the participants of the system, by positioning each other in conversation, construct their relationships as asymmetric and symmetric. In particular, we ask, how the consultant's turns within the interactions are related to the variations of asymmetry and symmetry in the consulting situation, and why this might be so.

Materials and Methods

Materials

The material for this case study was drawn from an OD consulting process, carried out in a private sector manufacturing company in Finland. The process aimed at facilitating change from a functional towards a customer-oriented organization. Technically speaking, the change (where the Research and Development, R&D, department was merged with the wider customer service process) had already been accomplished and people had already been informed about their new roles within the organization. The need for consultation emerged as a result of the management's difficulties in establishing the 'new organization' in the day-to-day work of the employees. In particular, the management had become worried when learning that the R&D employees felt dissatisfied with their new role. In this situation the director responsible for the merged R&D and customer service departments as the process owner asked for consultation. The consultation process engaged four members of the management, twenty employees from the two departments (R&D and customer service), and one consultant.

The consultation process was carried out over a nine-month period and included three two-hour planning and evaluation sessions for the management, and two two-day out of house events for all members of the organisation, including the management. The members of the management had two different positions during the process. On the one hand, as purchasers of consultation services for the employees, the director and manager in charge were involved in the planning sessions with the consultant. On the other hand, as participants of the consultation events the management presented itself as users of the consulting services.

For us as researchers, access to such authentic consulting conversations became possible since the first author had already established a working relationship as a management consultant with the company in question and had also obtained permission to gather data through the process. After first working in the consultant position in the system, he then took the researcher position and established a research team with the other two authors.

The consulting process followed the principles of process consulting, defined as the building of a helping relationship (see, Schein 1987, 1988, 2002). This means that the case is relevant from the viewpoint of the central theme of this article, namely relationship construction. The consultant in the case was a professional trained in systemic practice with long-standing consulting experience.

All the consultation sessions were both audio- and video-recorded. The recorded data, approximately 30 h altogether, was transcribed using a modified version of the Jefferson practices (see, Atkinson and Heritage 1984). For a discourse analytic researcher a detailed transcription including both verbal and prosodic features of talk is essential, as it represents interaction accurately and in sufficient detail (Potter 2003a). The reader should be aware of the fact that compared to normal conventions of written dialogue, punctuation marks are not used in the same way. The transcription symbols used in this paper are given in Appendix 1.

Method

Our methodology takes the organisational discourse approach (Grant et al. 2004) as a general framework for analysis. With its emphasis on discourse and the socially constructed nature of organizational realities, this approach opened up a new perspective for the researchers representing different disciplines to explore organizational action. Not surprisingly, this perspective has recently been used to explore consulting work. Language use and rhetoric have been identified as core issues of consulting by several authors (e.g. Alvesson 1993; Berglund and Werr 2000; Clark and Salaman 1998b; Fincham 1999b; Sturdy 1997; Meriläinen et al. 2004).

More specifically, we utilized the methodology of Discourse Analysis (DA) (Potter 2003, 2004), which, as centering on the analysis of 'naturally occurring talk' (Potter 2004), focuses on the fine details of interaction and sees discourses as action-oriented, situated, constructed and constructive (Potter 2003). Whatever is constructed in interaction is done through talk; things become real as they are performed through talk. Therefore, we looked at how symmetry and asymmetry became constructed in the consulting conversations as existing qualities of the organizational relationships and how they were re-defined in the course of these conversations between the three consulting parties.

We chose the material from an early stage of the consulting relationship as the case material for this paper. This selection was done because our analysis showed that when building their working relationships parties tend to define them, and when defining them the asymmetries become easily visible. From the practitioner's point of view we wanted to show how important the beginning of a consulting process really is.

Analysis

This study represents an action research orientation to professional practice. The first author was initially practising and gathering data from the field, while afterwards he joined a research group with whom the analysis was done. In fact, our research group provided the opportunity to combine an insider's and outsider's perspectives of the process under analysis. The analysis included the input of the practising consultant as well as the academic research point of view. The procedures of reading the data varied somewhat during the different phases of the analysis. The analysis process consisted of pair work readings, and of data sessions with a research group involved in the analysis of qualitative data from a discourse analytic perspective.

The analysis was carried out using the original Finnish transcript. Here, the extracts are translated into English with the aim of preserving the fluency of talk and the emerging meanings as they were displayed in the Finnish original.

We started our exploration from studying how participants (i.e. consultant, directors, manager, R&D employees and Customer Service employees), when talking about their goals and interests regarding the consulting event, put into words the relationships within the multi-party situation differently. After this, we focused on how single addresses positioned the participants in the system in terms of asymmetry and symmetry. We defined asymmetry as any form of inequality in the relationship descriptions (in terms of e.g. power, authority, knowledge) and symmetry as a counter-concept for asymmetry, thus indicating equality. We adopted the communication perspective to our analysis assuming that asymmetries in dialogue are not only inequality descriptions but acts of communication by which people dominate over one another (Markova and Foppa 1991; Linell and Luckmann 1991).

Thus, we looked at how asymmetric and symmetric interactional 'moves' constructed the relationships along with the content of the discourse. Finally, we looked at how different relationship definitions were interrelated when participants responded to each other's addresses in a multi-party conversation during the consulting session. For the purposes of this paper, we focussed our analysis to concern three 'main positions' within the system, namely the position of the external consultant, of the management (i.e. the director in charge of the customer process and his subordinate, the manager in charge of R&D employees) and of the employees (i.e. those present during the OD event).

Constructing Asymmetry and Symmetry in Consulting Conversations

In the following, we will explore in detail four extracts from the beginning of the consultation event under analysis. The first three extracts present three single addresses, each with a monologue structure, representing the key positions of the persons involved in the consulting relationship (director, consultant and employee). By looking at relationship constructions within each address in comparison with the other two, we will show how each speaker, by positioning other participants, constructs symmetry and asymmetry into the relationships within the system. Finally, by showing an extract from a multi-party conversation of the same consulting session, we will show how management of the symmetries and asymmetries is a matter of multi-party collaboration where the consultant has a particular role.

The Director's Address: Calling for Symmetry Within an Asymmetric Working Context

Right at the beginning of the first consultation event the director (D), in his welcoming address, presents his understanding of the situation and his wishes concerning the session (Extract 1).

When presenting his notion of the basic concerns of the event and a shared goal for the meeting (in lines 2–5) the director is referring to all participants in the situation. He mentions the consultant by name and organisational members by "you" (line 1) and includes the management in the description by using the word "we" (lines 2,3,4 and 5). What is asked for is mutual help of all. Thus, through the director's words, it is made clear that everyone is needed to achieve successful outcomes and that the management is willing to contribute to this. This description positions each party as equal and thus refers to the director's hope for symmetric relationships within the system.

The relationship between all participants is not the only one that the director points out as relevant. By talking about clearing the air, moving forward with a positive attitude, and planning how things could be managed in the future, the director seems to focus on the relationship between the management and the R&D employees, whose dissatisfaction was the background for the consulting project. Judged from his description on lines 3–5 there is something that he wants to remedy in this relationship. A symmetric kind of relationship with the employees seems to be on his agenda.

When talking about his wishes regarding the consulting session the director points out, however, that each participant is not equal. His wording *"if this event works out if this is works in the way ((manager's name)) and I wished for it to work"* (lines 7–8) positions the director and the manager as superiors entitled to evaluate the ongoing consultation process and later on to make the decision on continuation (line 9). By this move, the director reminds the others of the basic asymmetry of this particular organisational setting. When doing this, he marks the manager (his subordinate) as an equal managerial partner with him. Also, even though the relationship with the consultant is marked as somewhat symmetric (by the notion of having a *"some talk"* with him, in line 6) the director makes it clear that it is he and the manager who make this decision. Thus there is also asymmetry in the relationship between the management and the consultant.

All together, the director seems to call for a symmetric relationship with all participants of the consulting event but makes the basic organizational asymmetry real at the same time. By opening the session and by setting the context for others to engage in, the director fulfills his organizational task and—by the same token—shows the basic asymmetry of the situation.

The Consultant's Address: Careful Balancing Between Symmetry and Asymmetry

Our next quotation is from the consultant's opening address soon after the director's opening turn presented above (Extract 1). In his turn, the consultant brings up the aim of the event and defines his own goal for co-operation.

Like the director's address, the consultant's one calls for collaboration between all participants. The use of the pronoun - we (*"for us"*, line 1) obviously refers to all participants present and marks "we" as those who decide what issues are handled during the OD event. The symmetric character of the multi-party situation is thus made visible and noteworthy. The consultant's notion *"how best you could benefit from this"* (line 3) obviously refers to the collaboration between the management and the employees who become positioned as clients for him. The consultant's invitation to talk about how to benefit from the event can be read as an attempt to define a symmetric relationship within which each can participate and contribute equally.

Next, the consultant turns to one single employee and mentions a discussion they had together during lunch before the start of the event. Here the use of *"you"* (lines 4–6), i.e. the one single participant, and *"I"*, i.e. the consultant (line 7), creates a one-to-one relationship. The consultant's quotation of his conversation with one single participant is addressed to the audience and can be seen as his attempt to show them that everyone's talk is to be heard and to be taken seriously. Although this might communicate symmetry on one hand, it promotes asymmetry on the other hand, since the consultant positions himself as one who can decide what conversations and relationships become chosen as relevant to talk about.

The consultant's account *"I don't really have an aim"* (line 8) serves to construct a symmetric relationship since a clearly defined goal would do the opposite: it would put the others in an object position which would construct asymmetry. The consultant's notion *"I'm satisfied when I see a constructive kind of a dialogue is going on"* (lines 10–11) makes the relationship between the management and the employees as a noteworthy relationship to be focussed on, which, again, positions the consultant as a knowledgeable evaluator of whether the discussions are constructive or not. This builds asymmetry between the consultant and the client system. The consultant constructs asymmetry within the client system, too. When talking about his aims to the employees he puts emphasis on the obvious fact that *" you have you've got your own leaders who have aims"* (line 14). This formulation marks the management as superior in relation to the employees.

The consultant's balancing effort between symmetric and asymmetric relationships becomes visible when he expresses his lack of objectives for the event. As noted earlier, particular objectives would make this relationship an asymmetric one. However, the lack of objectives is problematic too. Would the client be satisfied with a consultant who does not have any agenda for his work? The consultant seems to recognize this denial of goals as problematic and repairs it. His pauses (lines 7–9) and hesitation (*"something like that um well"*, line 7, *"um well um what makes me*, lines 9–10 and "*that that somehow"*, line 12) show the sensitive nature of this balancing activity. His repairing expression "*I don't have any aims from the content's perspective"* (line 13) keeps his symmetric relation description valid but also gives an option for him to act in more asymmetric ways when leading the process towards a "*constructive kind of dialogue*" (line 11). The consultant seems to define the relationships carefully both as symmetric and asymmetric. His interactional moves—by giving attention to one single participant's concern on one hand and by keeping the right to define his own role on the other hand—can be read also as balancing between symmetry and asymmetry.

The Employee's Address: Calling for More Asymmetry

After the director's and consultant's addresses in the very beginning of the first session, the consultant starts to interview each participant in a circle. The interview includes both open questions, such as *"what do you hope to achieve during this event"* or *"what do you have in mind that you would like to say here"*, and clarifying questions in response to given answers. The aim of such a group interview—following the principles of systemic consulting—is to make each voice valid and meaningful in terms of building a shared agenda for the consulting event. Extract 3 quotes an R&D employee's (E4) turn when addressing the open question concerning his hopes and goals for the event. Before him, the other three participants have talked about the need for more clarity in the current organization.

At the beginning of the extract, the employee refers to the previous turn by his colleague and expresses agreement with it regarding the situation in the organization. This relationship is marked as a symmetric one both by using the word colleague and by referring to "*somewhat similar thoughts" (line 1).*

When making a discreetly critical point regarding "*focussing and allocating resources"* in the organization (line 4) the employee seems to refer to the relationship between employees and the management. By his open critique (from line 6) the employee points out that the management has failed to provide a clear focus and adequate resources needed to deal with the new situation of the organization. E4's complaint *"there's excitement everywhere like there's some kind of hastle"* (line 7) can be read as indicating a lack of order and use of managerial power in the organization. More asymmetry is called for: the management should take a stronger position and have courage to focus things and, as a result, allocate more resources for the employee E4 (or perhaps for all the employees). E4 then illuminates the courage by telling a story of his former boss (from line 10). The group around responds to this story by laughing. Although E4 is using the word *"we"* (in lines 14 and 15) when talking about the need for being more courageous his address can still be read as a blame and the use of the word *"we"* as an attempt to hedge the blame. His story as well as the laughter from the audience work as an asymmetric communication pattern: the management has to hear critical evaluations but they are not asked to respond.

A pause after E4's address (in line 16) indicates the delicacy of the situation. The consultant takes the turn and asks for clarification, whereby E4 raises up a totally new relationship for the listeners, namely that with external clients. The extended relationship with the client organization in E4's address becomes defined as asymmetric: this relationship is superior to all other relationships since it becomes used as a reason for getting more resources from the management. This turn which brings the voice of the client to the discussion can be read as E4's strategy to build for himself a special asymmetric position.

In sum, the employee's address compared to the director's and consultant's ones can be read as an address that constructs new variation in positions within the system and calls for more asymmetry, especially to the relationship between the management and the R&D employees. Paradoxically, this call for more asymmetry is made to obtain more resources from the management.

The Symmetry-Asymmetry Balance Within The Relationships in Multi-Party Conversation

Above, we have looked at the individual addresses from the early stages of the consulting session. We will now turn to a multi-party conversation that took place 45 minutes later, during the group interview, and demonstrate how symmetry and asymmetry become constructed when participants negotiate the term that would be suitable for calling R&D employees. Immediately before, the consultant has been interviewing one employee (E11), who had expressed criticism on the ongoing change, pointing out in particular how the R&D workers, of whom she is one, are in a minor position with regard to the rest of the organization. Meanwhile, the two directors present (D1 and D2) have expressed their contrasting opinions to some of her opinions. D1 is the director in charge, who gave the welcoming address presented in Extract 1. The quotation starts with the consultant's turn aiming to close the interview with E11 (in Extract 4).

With her first turns (lines 3–9), the employee, E11, starts to build a picture of an asymmetric relationship between the R&D workers and the rest of the organization. By juxtaposing the term of the earlier speaker, *"messenger"*, with the word *"resource"* (line 4), which has been used to refer to R&D employees, she opens up a discussion that invites others to respond. The group around her responds to her statement "*I don't think it's any prettier"* (line 6) with slight laughter (line 7) and makes E 11 to clarify her message: the word resource is a negative term to use about the employees (line 9). This statement positions the others as some who have to change their way of talking.

Extract 1 The director's address: *"with your kind help… we'll be able to move ahead"*

1	D:	well hopefully with((the consultant's name)) and with your (.) your kind help -
2		we'll get like (.) get off to like a good start in this discussion
3		and let's say that possible we'll be able to clear the air
4		and well we'll like (.) if we take a positive attitude we'll be able to move ahead
5		planning how in the future (.) in the future we'll deal with issues and (.)
6		with ((manager's name)) and with ((consultant's name)) there has been some talk about
7		well (1) that if especially if this event works out if this is works
8		in the way ((manager's name)) and I wished for it to work
9		well it might as well to be possible to consider some continuation to this

The director D1 interrupts E11's talk by offering the term *"strength"* to substitute for *"resource"* (line 10). From his institutional role perspective this is what needs to be done here—to bring about more symmetric language for talking about the employees. This aim to build symmetry becomes more clearly articulated by D2 (colleague of D1) who makes a suggestion that a new term could be created together (13–14). This is followed by D1 in turn who makes a connection with his earlier comment regarding organizational language (lines 16–22) and directs his point to the consultant (line 17), who thereby becomes positioned in a way that invites him to support D1's point (see the minimal respond on line 18). In other words, both directors are doing constructive work for more symmetry. It seems, however, that this far E11 has not quite bought the directors' agenda.

The consultant becomes involved, too. By offering space for E11 to define the new term by herself the consultant uses a different strategy for building symmetry (line 24–25). In fact this was his strategy in the beginning of the extract, too: he was just about to close the discussion but asked E11 if she had something to add before the next participant would get the turn (lines 1–2). The consultant's agenda seems to build a discussion where E11 would become positioned as a valued participant. This can be seen both from his minimal responses to E11 (line 12, 31) and his supportive comments to E11 (lines 31–32, 34, 36), who seems to accept the consultant's turns without resistance. Thus, the consultant pursues symmetric communication with E11.

In relation to D1 the consultant positions himself differently. Namely, he does not continue to develop D1's idea about the importance of organizational language but, rather, orientates himself to E11 (line 23). Neither does he respond to D1's later address where D1 corrects his earlier turn about the origins of the term "strength" (lines 27–28). In this sense, the consultant's communication is somewhat asymmetrical. The sensitivity of the situation (see the overlapping speech on lines 26–31) offers one explanation to why this happens. The consultant seems to be very careful with his words and orientate to the situation in a way that guarantees a symmetric position to E11 during the conversation.

Even the consultant orientates himself to being helpful (see the wording "*would help you"* on line 36) by opening up the meaning of the word resource (line 31–32). It seems, however, that he is a bit stuck with the situation. Then, E13, a colleague of E11 and the same employee to whom the consultant referred to in his welcoming address (see Extract 2), interrupts and offers a wider perspective to the difficulty. It is not only the use of the term resource that is problematic but the whole daily experience: there is no effort to *"do things as a team"* (line 38) and this creates dissatisfaction. Judged from the later interview with E13, he refers to the relationship between the management and the R&D employees in particular. He points out that this has led to a "*something like a resource mentality*" (line 40). This perspective puts the directors' suggestions in a new light: the problem of the asymmetry cannot be remedied just by changing a word, it calls for practices that show better co-operation between the management and the R&D employees.

After E13's turn, the consultant makes an agenda clarification for E13: he can talk about this point in his turn after the next interviewee (E12). In other words, the consultant does not allow him to speak more about that relationship at this point. Rather, the consultant makes a suggestion that makes it possible for him to avoid dealing with the asymmetries of the relationships in more depth at this point. E13 accept this and the consultant—by making an asymmetric move—closes the discussion and invites a new employee to become involved in the interview.

The consultant's action during the episode can be seen as balancing. On the one hand, he offers space for E11 to clarify her concern and to make suggestions for the kind of language that would indicate a more symmetric relationship between the R&D employees

Extract 2 The consultant's address: *"I don't really have an aim"*

1	C:	yes surely it's good for us to a start to talk about indeed about just that
2		um what this event's somehow is about that how this um
3		how best you could benefit from this ((event))
4		(.) um you asked me over there at the lunch table and um I felt it was a good question
5		um you said that that what's
6		(.) you could have asked somehow what my aim is
7		(1) and I answered in the beginning something like that um well
8		(1) that I don't really have an aim
9		(2) and then I specified it more closely when you asked futher um well
10		(.) um what makes me satisfied I said that I'm satisfied
11		when I see a constructive kind of a dialogue is going on
12		(1) that that somehow I work according to that principle that
13		I don't have any aims from the content's perspective
14		you have you've got your own leaders who have aims about
15		um what kind of work you are doing and you have aims

Extract 3 The employee's address: *"for unexpected reasons I'd be really looking for some extra resources"*

1	E4:	um well (.) somewhat similar thoughts as my colleague ((E 3)) over there
2		um viewing the bigger picture of course is the paramount question
3		and then I've got two two words in my mind that are connected to-to each other
4		this focusing and allocating resources (1) um well (1)
5		after working like this for a little over half a year
6		I still see that no-one dares to (.) focus on things
7		but instead there's excitement everywhere like there's some kind of hastle
8		(2) one should always remember and well be bold
9		um to put things aside coolly and to concentrate on what's relevant
10		(3) um my old manager's (.) principle about the incoming mail
11		that he always puts the incoming mail in the outgoing mail
12		if it's important enough ( ) it will come back
13		((general laughter))
14		it's the same bold spirit we ought to show in our work
15		if we prioritize well yes the signs will gradually appear
16		(2)
17	C:	and when you say that (.) focusing in this way would be important so tell us a little bit
18		about it from your work perspective why would it be important (1) do this (1)
19	E4:	yes I of course (.) for unexpected reasons I'd be really looking for some extra resources
20		because there is you know quite a lot of friction on the client interface
21		((general laughter))

and the rest of the organization. In his pursuit for making this happen, the consultant overlooks the turns of both directors and thus uses his positional power in the situation. On the other hand, the consultant moves indicate asymmetry towards the employees: at the end, he does not allow E11 to develop her idea any more and he restricts E13's attempts to talk more about the asymmetry within the organization.

Extract 4 A multi-party situation: *"but strength, is that any better?"*

1	C	is there anything (1) Oula that you'd like to say
2		can we move on (1)
3	E11	well no- (.) well if he was a messenger then we have
4		again used this word resource (.)
5	C	ahah (.)
6	E11	yea (.) I don't think it's any prettier
7		than messenger
8		((group chuckle))
9		resource is also-o (.) a bit negative=
10	D1	=but strength is that any better (.)
11	E11	well perhaps even that's better (1)
12	C	yea (2)
13	D2	we're developing a nice wor- (.) nice like=
14	E11	=word(.)
15	D2	yea=
16	D1	= they say organisation language I remember
17		you've done research on that haven't you [and um (.)]
18	C	[(yes I have)]
19	D1	and (.) and (.) that is (.) a very important thing (.) thing um (.) to think about that
20		um how we address each other
21		because (1) they may may mean the same thing
22		but they can have quite a [different nuance]
23	C	[mm (.) mm]
24		(1) well do you (.) Oula ((E11's name)) have a suggestion
25		for a replacement for the word resource (.)
26	E11	well I'm sure that the term of strength might [be]
27	D1	[some] some (.)
28		somebody was tossing the term strength around back then [(1) () (.)yea]
29	E11	[it sounded more positive]
30		when [sounds like (.)]
31	C	[mm (.) mm (.) mm] (.)
31		resource brings to mind a rather passive image that (.)
32		they are just like property of others' (.)
33	E11	they just do as they're told (.)
34	C	so that's why it it's important to think what (.)
35	D1	yes (.)
36	C	what gives to you like sort of (.) would help you (.)=
37	E13	=yea one one problem has been just that we really haven't (.)
38		been trying to do things as a team in the first place (.) but but
39		in fact we've now ended up with a kind of
40		something like a resource (.) mentality (.)
41		together we haven't (.) even tried to deal with things (.)
42	C	ahem (.) okay (.) you'll get a chance to talk about that in a minute but first let's move on to=
43	E13	=yeah=
44	C	=your partner sitting next to you so your [name is]

Discussion

In this article, we have explored the variation of asymmetric and symmetric relationship constructions within a multi-party consulting situation. The analysis of the three single addressees showed that each described the asymmetry and symmetry of the mutual relationships differently. In our case, the director was concerned about the mutual *"help"* of all participants and pursued symmetric relationships—while re-producing the basic asymmetry of the organization, whereas the consultant was balancing between the symmetric and asymmetric needs of the situation. The employee, then, called for more asymmetry to the relationship between the employees and the management in terms of power use. He used somewhat asymmetrical rhetoric for this purpose. Our analysis of a multi-party interaction episode showed how the asymmetry and symmetry of relationships were negotiated. This conversation, where various participants wanted to contribute, became a delicate situation where the consultant had a specific role of a regulator of the asymmetry-symmetry balance. Thus, we argue that the asymmetry-symmetry dimension is present for consulting parties and that the parties mutually produce and reproduce the asymmetry-symmetry balance of their relationships. We want to highlight that in this respect the relationships within a consulting system change from one moment to another. This opens for the consultant the opportunity to become actively involved in the relationship construction between the participants.

The present study shows how within a consulting conversation, when issues on the formal agenda are being talked about, organizational members discreetly orientate to the organizational relationships and make the current asymmetries and symmetries visible from their perspective. This makes it possible for them to re-construct organizational relationships. For all of them, there is a good reason to find a suitable balance between the polarities since too much asymmetry leads to lack of collaboration and feeling of mutuality, whereas too much symmetry (e.g. unclear demarcation of roles and tasks) leads to difficulties in e.g. coordinating the organizational learning outcomes effectively (see, Argyris 1997).

However, making organizational asymmetries and symmetries visible enough and subject to re-construction does not happen easily. Rather, as this study shows, organizational relationships are a delicate issue to talk about. Moreover, making them transparent and re-defining them might change the power structures of the organization at the same time. This makes the presence of a consultant significant. The consultant's status offers a privileged position from which to offer temporary amendments regarding the balance between asymmetric and symmetric relatiohshipshe polarities, sometimes by supporting the current order and sometimes by disrupting it (see, Clegg et al. 2004). We suggest that the consultant's role is important in facilitating flexible shifts between symmetric and asymmetric relationships within an organization.

A consulting collaboration can be viewed as a parallel system for the organization itself. This means that the changes taking place in the consulting setting may have transformative impact on the organization's daily practice. Therefore, the process through which organizational relationships become re-constructed in the consultation conversations becomes very important. In fact, the consulting conversation is the only arena for a consultant to contribute to the organization. In our data, the consultant contributed to the organization by building more symmetry within the system. However, by carefully positioning himself, as well as the other participants, through specific language use, the consultant was balancing, rather than threatening the basic asymmetry of the organization. Interestingly enough, when balancing between the polarities, even an asymmetric interactional move by the consultant can be used for symmetry-creating purposes. A similar sort of a paradoxical position is acknowledged among some action researchers (Ospina et al. 2004; Whittle 2006).

Enough symmetry is thus needed between all consultation parties. However, the parties might not be willing to relinquish their asymmetric power position. Symmetry advocating language could therefore be used as a rhetorical device to construct an impression of equality. Yeung (1998) found out that in an internal consultation context managers perform delicate balancing acts of opening themselves up to subordinates' influence on the one hand and keeping the decision-making process under their control on the other hand. With regard to our findings, this means that either symmetric or asymmetric rhetoric might be functional for each party of the consulting project.

Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to examine the nature of asymmetry and symmetry in consultancy relationships and to show how each become constructed through details of language use within a consulting system. We adopted a discourse analytic approach to analyse single-case material drawn from the main author's consulting practice. For the purposes of our analysis we utilized the concepts of asymmetry and symmetry in the sense of referring to 'any kind of inequality/equality' arising from either the form of the relationship constructions (i.e. what content each description represented) or the process of communication (i.e. how each interactional move handled the other two parties of the relationship). To illustrate our findings in this paper we chose material from the early stage of the consulting process, in which the need for establishing the relationships between consulting parties is obvious. In this paper we have attempted to conceptualize the consulting relationship in a new way and to create insights that would be of use for both academics interested in consultancy processes and for practitioners interested in reflecting upon their own professional practice.

For academic researchers the present study opens up a perspective for looking at consulting as an institutional practice. The research on institutional discourse has shown that asymmetry is a typical pattern in professional interaction (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992; Maynard 1991) while there are also institutional practices where symmetric interaction is preferred (O'Halloran 2005). This study draws a picture of a consultant's institutional task from both sides: a consultant does have a special position in allowing one to act asymmetrically while the aim for a process consultant might be to weaken the asymmetry that stems from the authority relationships, sociopolitical structures and communication structures (Maynard 1991) of the organization. However, the institutional task for a consultant can be a context dependent issue—some organizations may 'invite' the consultant to take a much more asymmetric stand than some others. Therefore, further research is needed to specify what has only been suggested in broad terms here, namely the character of institutional interaction in consulting. As a single case study, this study can only raise the question of the institutional side in consulting work in terms of symmetry and asymmetry.

This paper contributes to developing the relatively young consulting profession by linking theoretical concepts and practice to one another. Additional research would also be needed to find out whether the symmetry-asymmetry perspective is a useful way of conceptualization for understanding consulting practices that are based on an expert role rather than a process facilitator role of the consultant. In that particular context, it would be interesting to establish whether 'good interaction' which is often acknowledged as a success factor in consulting (e.g. Fullerton and West 1996; Gummesson 1991; McGivern 1983; McKinney Kellogg 1984), shows itself in terms of the symmetry-asymmetry—dimension.

As a study of a living practice, the present study represents ideas pertaining to the action research tradition. It is concerned on practical issues, it is curious about knowledge in action, it is conducted in participation with research subjects (the first author) and it aims at flourishing the practice at least by offering ideas for developing well-informed action (see, Reason and Bradbury 2001). One of our learning points from this process was that taking a researcher's perspective to one's own practice is a fruitful way of learning the practice itself. In our case, it increased the first author's awareness of the function of the fine details in relationship building in consulting.

For a practising consultant this study offers conceptual tools for reflecting their own practice. Our work suggests that awareness of the symmetry-asymmetry perspective in consulting is useful. One can, for example, reflect on an ongoing client relationship by asking questions like 'what sort of a relationship am I building by my words here' or 'what opportunities or constrains does my own communication bring about for others in this consulting relationship'. Being curious about one's own contribution to relationship constructions within the consulting system is one part of the professional reflexivity that every process consultant should engage in.

Appendix 1

Transcript Notation

The audio-recorded materials analysed in this article are transcribed according to a modified version of Jefferson practises (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984). The following notations were used in this article:

Symbol	Represents
yes (1) me too	Figures in rounded brackets represent inter- and mid-turn silences, hand-timed in seconds
yes (.) me too	Period in rounded brackets are 'micro-pauses' of less than 0.2 s
( )	Unrecoverable speech
yes ((clap)) me too	Double rounded brackets contain relevant contextual information, added by the transcriber
[and well on the whole	Overlapping utterances are marked by single square brackets. The left-hand bracket shows where the
	overlap began, the right-hand bracket shows where the overlapped speech is terminated
I think- I think so	A single dash following a word or letter(s) indicates an abrupt cut-off in the flow of speech (stammering)
<u>absolutely</u>	Underlining signals emphasis
=	Equal signs indicate no gap between utterances

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III

THE PROCESS AND CONTENT OF ADVICE GIVING IN SUPPORT OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

by

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The process and content of advice giving in support of reflective practice in management consulting

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Abstract

Although consulting has been defined as an 'advice-giving activity' there has not been much research on advice practices in management consulting. In particular, we lack evidence on how advice might assist in supporting another central issue in management work, namely reflective practice. This article approaches consulting from a discursive perspective and views reflective practice at the level of language use. We use data on naturally occurring talk during a single OD consulting process, and discursive methodology, to examine these conversations and offer empirical evidence on how advising can support reflective managerial practice. Examples of conversational practices that provided reflections on the managerial position, day-to-day responses and actions are given. They illustrate varieties of both the content and the process of advice, which were utilized when building the reflective stance. We discuss the tension between advising and promoting reflective practice in OD consulting settings.

Key Words: *reflective practice, advice-giving, management consulting, OD consulting, discourse analysis*

Introduction

An ideal consulting relationship brings about not only answers to the practical questions of managers but also enhances reflective practice; adopting new ways of thinking and acting, which help managers to anticipate and solve similar problems in the future. This ideal raises a crucial question for management consulting: how do advising practices actually tackle this challenge? Despite the recent academic interest in ‘management advice-industry’ and consulting work as ‘advice-giving activity’ (Fincham & Clark, 2002), surprisingly little attention has been paid to actual advice giving in consulting and its role in supporting reflective managerial practice.

This article focuses on reflective practices in advice-giving situations in consulting settings and approaches reflective practice from the discursive perspective. The study is part of a larger research project on discursive practices in Organization Development (OD) consulting previously reported in international journals (e.g. Kykyri, Puutio & Wahlström, 2007; Puutio, Kykyri & Wahlström, 2008). We approach consulting as ‘first and foremost a linguistic activity – a discursive practice through which realities are enacted’ (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2004, pp. 36). We pay attention to language use during advising conversations; how advice is formulated (the content perspective) and how the advisor and the recipient interact (the process perspective) (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler & Budarz, 2004). Our data’s stemming from authentic consulting conversations enables us to look at these interactions in detail and demonstrate how advising conversations in their fine details can support managerial reflection, thus responding to recent calls for more research on actual interactions in consulting (Berglund & Werr, 2000; Edvardsson, 1990; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Engwall & Kipping, 2002; Fincham, 1999; Fincham & Clark, 2002; Sturdy, 1997; Werr & Styhre, 2003).

Reflective practice and consulting conversation

The term reflective practice, originally introduced by Schön (1983), refers to learning from experience when observing one’s own action, thoughts or feelings; and utilizing these observations in building new understandings. Reflective practice contains reflection, defined by Raelin (2001, 11) as “practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one’s immediate environment about what has recently transpired”. Reflection may occur before, during or after the experience, and it can be individual as well as collective, structured in various ways, and varied in depth (Amulya). Reflection may serve purposes of understanding theoretical ideas and research findings in practice, building practical knowledge, ‘rules of thumb’, and seeking dialogical knowledge aiming at transforming one’s practice (Raelin, 2001). The core element of reflection is re-thinking and recognizing something that was earlier unrecognizable: “it privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice” (Raelin 2001, 11). Reflection can focus on the past or the future, and on failures or successes (Ghaye, 2005). In this article, we use the term reflective practice to refer to re-thinking of the managerial position, and to the use of this new awareness in guiding actions in regard to employees. Our analysis will deal with how consultant’s conversational moves promote a shift in perspective, a new understanding or, in Schön’s terms, a new theory, on what managerial position means and what new actions are attainable from that position.

OD consulting work is described as practice that helps managers to step 'outside their usual, taken-for-granted routines and adopt a strategic perspective on the interaction …where they are able, relatively dispassionately, to observe and reflect upon their everyday actions and the consequences of such action for each other' (Mangham, 1978: 103, cited in Fincham & Clark, 2002). Reflection is thus central to the OD consulting activity. Ideally, reflective practice in consulting conversation helps the client to become aware of the wider logic of the problem at hand and thereby leads to increasing reflexivity, i.e. managers' increased ability to question their ways of making sense of the world and relate this to their organization (Cunliffe, 2002).

For a consultant, the only arena for making this happen is the consulting conversation. However, the situation may be complicated by the client's urgent need to obtain advice. This may complicate the endeavor to invite and support reflection. From the reflective practice standpoint giving and receiving advice in OD consulting becomes something of a dilemma.

The dilemmatic nature of advising

In their classic text 'Dilemmas of advice' Heritage and Sefi (1992), point out that advising easily positions the parties asymmetrically. Request for advice "may imply or display that its producer lacks knowledge or competence concerning the issue at hand or is unable to cope with a problem without external assistance. By the same token, it constitutes the recipient of the request as the knowledgeable, competent, and authoritative party in the exchange" (Heritage & Sefi 1992, p. 367-368). This can lead to a situation where advising itself conflicts with its aim to be helpful. Advice giving as interaction may turn out to be unhelpful, as pointed out by advice researchers (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Goldsmith, 1999; MacGeorge et al., 2004).

Research on advice-giving institutions other than management consulting gives us insight into how this dilemma emerges and can be tackled by the advice-giving process (Heritage & Sefi, 1992; Kinnell & Maynard, 1996; Silverman, 1997; Vehviläinen, 2003). As an example of such a process strategy, Peräkylä and Silverman (1991) introduce an 'interview format of advising'. Advice can be received more easily when presented by means of a question and when the response to the question is utilized in formulating the advice. The recipient of advice becomes thereby an active participant in the advice-giving interaction.

Not only the advising process but also the content of an advice can help to manage the dilemma. Goldsmith (1999) points out that in order to be appropriate from the recipient's point of view, the advice content needs to be in his/her interest. It has to appreciate the recipient's freedom to reject the advice, to consider him/her as capable of choosing a beneficial course of action, and to give the recipient a choice regarding possible solutions. Appropriate content, then, considers the recipient's own agency. To be most appropriate, an advice should be solicited by the recipient and meet his or her needs. The advisor needs to be sensitive to what sort of advice best suits his/her concerns (MacGeorge et al., 2004).

Clinically based consulting approaches (e.g. Argyris, 1970; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2005), and particularly the so-called process consulting approach (Schein, 1987, 2002), have acknowledged that giving expert advice to a manager jeopardizes the chance for reflection and learning. Process consulting authors see expert advisors' and process consultants' roles as representing opposite ends of the task-process dimension (e.g. Lippit & Lippit, 1986). The suggested way of managing the tension between advising and reflection is to play each of these roles separately, and at the appropriate time (Schein, 2002). Schein's (1987) general position is that a consultant should avoid giving advice but should instead build a practice that helps the clients to help and advise themselves.

Drawing from our own consulting experience, we maintain that advising and reflective practice need not be separated. We believe that a request for advice can initiate a conversation where reflection can be practiced. Our own experience also supports the notion that there are varieties of advice, which can contribute to constituting reflective rather than problem solving conversations. Our data taken from one OD-consulting case will demonstrate how a reflective practice, a perspective shift in re-thinking managerial position and action, can be supported by the content (i.e. what) and process (i.e. how) of advice in a consulting conversation.

The case

The case material for this study comes from an OD consulting process, carried out in a private sector manufacturing company in Finland. As researchers, we were enabled access to such actual consulting conversations because the first author had already established a working relationship as a management consultant with the company in question, and had obtained permission to gather data throughout the process. The consulting process aimed at facilitating change from a functional toward a customer orientation in the organization. Technically, the change had already been made and employees had already been informed about their new roles within the organization. The need for consultation emerged as a result of difficulties experienced by management in establishing the 'new organization' in the day-to-day operations with the previously separate research and development (R&D) and customer service departments. In the new organizational structure, the R&D staff felt that they were put in a subordinate position to the customer services, which led to problems in cooperation, and pressure on the management to do something about the situation. The consulting process handled the relationships and practices between the R&D and customer service employees. Moreover, the role of the management required in the new organization was explored throughout the process.

The entire consultation process (altogether nine months) consisted of three consulting meetings with the two managers in charge and two two-day OD events for the organization, including the managers. All consulting sessions were both audio and video recorded. The meetings with the management constitute the material for the present research. These conversations became an arena for tackling this particular change process from management's perspective. From the consultant's perspective, the managers were inclined to overlook the impact of their own involvement with the employees. As we will see, the consultant worked hard to advise the managers to look at their own position and actions in regard to employees.

Methodology

Our methodological repertoire draws on the organizational discourse approach (Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004); a recent tradition, that brings together research from different disciplines utilizing various theoretical approaches to bear on issues concerning the use of language and discourse in organizations. In the present study, three methodological approaches have been used.

When looking at how the reflective practice was aimed at, we first utilized ideas from positioning theory (Langenhove & Harré 1999). Beginning with the idea that all conversations involve some sort of positioning, the theory proposes that positioning is a discursive practice whereby "within a conversation each of the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself" (Langenhove & Harré 1999, 22). We became interested in how the idea of reflection was promoted during advice-giving conversations by the ways in which the consultant positioned himself and the two managers in conversation.

The second methodology used in the study was Discourse Analysis (DA) (Potter, 2003, 2004). Centering on the analysis of 'naturally occurring talk' (Potter, 2004), DA focuses on the fine details of interaction and sees discourses as action-oriented, situated, constructed and constructive (Potter 2003). Whatever is constructed in interaction is done through talk; things become real through being performed through talk. In our study, we looked at how the idea of reflection was embedded in the rhetorical or argumentative organization of talk and how various discursive strategies were used to construct and justify reflective practice as relevant for managers.

Thirdly, we utilized methodological ideas from Conversation Analysis (CA) (Goffman, 1979; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), which analyses means of interaction and the process of language use in the context of turn taking and the sequential order of conversations. We utilized ideas from CA by looking at how utterances constituted responses to earlier turns and how some turns constructed certain preferences during a sequence. We explored how earlier turns as well as details of interaction were constructed to form a reflective point of view. When looking at the reception of advice we used CA-tools such as 'marked' and 'unmarked acknowledgement of advice' (Heritage & Sefi, 1992).

Analysis

In order to answer the question raised in this study, i.e. how reflective practice can be supported by the content and the process of advice giving, all three consulting sessions with the management were analyzed. In each session both the director responsible for the 'customer process' and the manager responsible for R&D activities talked about the current process of change with a consultant. The recorded data (approximately 5 hours in total) were transcribed using a modified version of the Jefferson system (see, Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). (Transcription symbols are given in Appendix 1). The primary analysis was done using the Finnish language transcripts, which may create difficulties for the reader. We have however stood by this decision as it best reflects the conversation as it happened.

For our analysis, we defined advice as a type of persuasive address that focuses on proposals for action (MacGeorge et al., 2004). However, consistent with earlier observations (cf. Heritage & Sefi, 1992;), we too found that advice is often discreet in nature and displayed in cautious and indirect rather than straightforward ways. Depending on the conversational context, advice could be embedded, for example, in questions. We detected dozens of episodes in which advice-giving was present. Most of the advice given was advisor-initiated (Heritage & Sefi, 1992) and consisted either of suggestions for specific action or of the adoption of a more general mindset for future action. After identifying and reading the advice-giving episodes of the data corpus, we chose to focus on the second meeting. This two hour meeting contained the highest number of advising episodes (altogether 24) and appeared to represent well the richness and variety of advising in the whole data.

Our interest in discourse that invites reflective practice guided the subsequent detailed analysis. We looked at the contents of advice as well the discursive strategies (i.e. processes of advising) that were employed by the consultant in both client-initiated and consultant-initiated advice-giving episodes. We use three extracts from the transcription of a single session between the consultant and the two managers (the second meeting) and demonstrate in detail how the consultant's agenda for building a reflective practice becomes visible in these chronologically presented advice-giving episodes.

Supporting reflective practice by a variety of content and strategies of advising

In the following, we display how the consultant works for a perspective shift from immediate managerial matters or general explanations to reflection upon managerial position, responses and actions. From the consultant's perspective, the managers were inclined to overlook the impact of their own involvement with the employees. Therefore, the advice throughout the examples encourages the managers to re-think their own contribution to organizational practices.

Utilizing the client's initiative to offer reflection on the managerial position

The first extract is taken from the early stage of the consulting session (35 minutes into the session). The director (D) makes an initiative for gaining confirmation of his idea. Prior to this, the consultant (C), manager (M) and director have been discussing a current problem where some members of the R&D organization have reported – because of the new customer-oriented organizational structure - that their colleagues "take them for granted" and "no longer respect them". The phrases "ordering around" and naming people "resources" are given as examples. The director wishes to talk about possible ways of remedying the problem and asks for advice by testing his own idea.

Extract 1. *"You are in a special position"*

D (.) listen (.) a thought just came into my mind (.) about this ordering around
and resources and other stuff so (.) should we sit down (.)
with these people who have been
doing this launching job at the Factory ((mentions the name of the factory))
M mm (.)
D to discuss this issue whether they have experienced this (.) ordering around
((a little laughter))
and other stuff (.) that how have they experienced like their role
(6 lines removed, D is talking about the staff and their formal roles)
D yeah have they felt that they have been ordered around and

have the others felt that they have been ordering them around (.)
it would be a really really interesting thing to discuss (.)
C yeah (.) well (.)
D = if you think about it you know (.) if you think about it (.) a get-together for example
[so] we could have (.) have (1) this like this (.) let's say
C [mm]
D (1) with a theme (.) two hours of business six hours of fun
M mm↑
C =yeah (.) well (.) somehow the same thought popped into my mind too
so that in a way that (1) a bit like a kind of a question
that (.)↑what have you succeeded somehow (.) in doing as managers (.)
D mm (.)
C that has (.) sort of (.) helped this co-operation between people
what have you done like this
because [you are there (.)] in the system sort of in a special position
D [mm mm]
C you have [like] (.) according to my understanding the widest view of it and [you have]
D [mm] [mm mm]
C you have also been building it by yourself this whole thinking and
and you have internalised it much earlier than (.) than of course the others (.)
D yeah (.)
C you have a kind of a vantage point (.)

The director refers to the ongoing discussion in the organization by asking whether they should respond to it by organizing a meeting, where the members of the organization could discuss their roles and the issues of whether they have tried to "order others around" or whether the others have felt undervalued by being ordered around (lines 1-11). By saying, "it would be a really really interesting thing to discuss" (line 12) and by describing how the discussion could be carried out (lines 14-15, 17) the director displays an option for action. This sort of an initiative calls for at least confirmation from the consultant. He responds to the director's turn, but interestingly, does not answer the question ("should we sit down with these people…to discuss this issue", lines 2-3, 6) straight away. Instead, he uses it as a means of changing the focus. His notion "somehow the same thought popped into my mind too" (line 19) is obviously aimed at connecting with the director's turn but the reference point is markedly different. For the consultant, the focus is neither on the actions of the employees nor on the immediate responses of the management but rather on their awareness of managerial position. By stressing the wording "as managers" (line 21) and the word "you" (lines 24 and 25) the consultant makes a claim that the director and manager are in "a special position" (line 25). Switching the focus positions the director and the manager differently in relation to their subordinates and invites them to consider this position.

The consultant's agenda regarding provision of a particular reflective practice for the director and the manager becomes obvious when looking at the process in which the perspective shift is offered. First, he refers to his own understanding (line 27), which, as a tentative point of view, is difficult to dispute. Secondly, he emphasizes the role of the two as the pioneers of the change and therefore offers them a special 'expert' position, that of those who have "the widest view" (line 27) and who have "been building… the whole thinking" (line 29). Finally, by the wording "you have internalized it much earlier" (line 30) the consultant makes the change look as having already happened and positions the director and the manager as those in the front line of this change. By the same token, an idea of a competence for reflective practice becomes embedded in the discourse: since the director and the manager have internalized the change earlier than the others have, they have access to a wider perspective. The phrasing “you have a kind of a vantage point” (line 32) makes the same point by using metaphorical rhetoric. In fact, this argumentation defines the position of the management not only as a special one but as something desirable and valuable, too. The minimal responses of the director (lines 28, 31) indicate “unmarked acknowledgement of advice” (Heritage & Sefi, 1992), leaving it open as to whether the shift towards a new perspective is accepted or rejected.

Overall, in this example the consultant withholds giving advice when faced with a potential request for this. Instead, the consultant works for a shift in perspective and leads the talk towards re-thinking the managerial position. The extract illustrates the importance of the advice-giving process itself, i.e. how the client’s initiative can be used as a resource for a perspective shift towards a more reflective stance. The implicit content of the advice is that the management should look at their expertise position and utilize it in order to help their employees.

Giving advice that offers reflection on positive managerial responses.

In the next episode, half an hour later, the consultant-initiated advice accentuates the need for reflection in day-to-day managerial practices. The advice to adopt a positively responsive stance is taken up favorably by the director and the manager. In between, the director and the manager have talked about the current situation regarding an on-going project. This time, the consultant takes the initiative for an advice-giving episode. He starts by offering the notion that it is important for managers to show interest in their subordinates’ work. Then he begins to clarify his point.

Extract 2. *”They are just small phrases but they can have big effect”*

1 C	actually (.) >if I a bit (.) like tell you how this appears to me<
2	that sort of simply expressing interest
3 D	mm (.)
4 C	in how the project proceeds (.) I would like to hear and (.) and then
5	giving feedback and then when you Aili said that the reports were good=
6 D	=yeah=
7 M	=mm (.)
8 C	well they are (.) they are (.) they are just small phrases=
9 D	=mm=
10 C	=but they can have sort of [bigger] effect [than we]
11 D	[yeah] [yes cer-]
12 C	we come to think about=
13 D	=yes (.) thinking thinking (.) maybe you don’t always even come to think that way (.)
14	think that (.) one should always (.) remind oneself of how one was some (.)
15	fifteen years ago (.)
16 M	yeah sure=
17 D	=that if if I had received some (.) some director
18	or or somebody=
19 C	=yea=
20 D	=somebody well like feedback from work well done
21	I would have (.) have been walking (.) on air for a long time that (.)
22	[real] (.) [( ) proud as peacock yeah]
23 M	[mm]
24 C	[yeah (1) proud as yeah right]

Here, the consultant introduces his argument with the words “actually if I a bit like tell you”, and presents it as his personal understanding, “how this appears to me” (line 1). Editing one’s own talk in this way can be seen as a strategy to demonstrate reflection as personal pondering. It shows that the speaker is aware that his perspective is only one way of looking at the situation. The content of the advice seems to state that by realizing how words create meanings in an organization, the managers can become more aware of the importance of how they phrase their sayings and responses in day-to-day exchanges. Showing interest and giving positive feedback to their own subordinates is offered as a general guideline for managerial actions.

The process of advising illuminates various discursive strategies adopted by the consultant in offering a reflective perspective. First, by using the word “simply” (line 2) he introduces easiness of the issue. He simulates the managerial voice (“I would like to hear”, line 4) and gives an “active voice” (Hepburn, 2003) example of how to show curiosity. By referring to the client’s words “when you Aili said that the reports were good” (line 5) the consultant gives a “vivid description” (Hepburn, 2003) of some positive practice and links his advice to the evidence at hand. This move illustrates that the management has already acted in a way that is in line with the advice. The consultant introduces everyday managerial feedback as something worth thinking about: “they are just small phrases but they can have sort of bigger effect when we come to think about them” (from line 8). Here, the use of the wording “we come to” (line 12) presents the argument as both a general and a shared one: the consultant positions himself among those to whom the advice applies and thus constructs himself as a peer rather than a specialist advisor.

Both the director and the manager respond to the consultant’s address (lines 3-9) and eventually they mark the offered advice as accepted. The director’s turn “yes cer-“(line 11) overlaps and the word “certainly” is left incomplete. This “marked acknowledgement” (Heritage & Sefi, 1992) validates the content of the advice. His wording “maybe you don’t always even come to think that way” (line 13) shows that he recognizes the difficulty of being aware of one’s own language use. His wording “one should always remind oneself” (line 14) and his rememebring his early career as a subordinate (from line 14) displays reflection. The metaphors of “walking on air” (line 21) and “proud as a peacock” (22) show personal involvement in re-thinking one’s own experiences.

To conclude, the consultant offers a reflective perspective on managerial responses to employees’ work. By alluding to successful managerial feedback practice, the consultant offers the idea that becoming able to choose one’s own phrases is not so difficult to attain. At the same time the consultant seems to lead the two managers to talk in a way that displays personal involvement, gives positive examples from existing practice and shows observations of how one’s own responses influences others. The director’s last turn indicates personal reflection from a retrospective perspective.

Offering reflection on managerial action by confronting the client’s talk

In the last example the reflective perspective on managerial work is pursued by disagreeing with the director’s description of the situation and by offering a corrective version of it. The extract is taken from the end of the consulting session at the point where the consultant has just wrapped up the discussion. The director’s following turn refers to how he has experienced the session.

Extract 3. *"By all actions that you take"*

1 D you crystallised it well in the sense that (.)
2 that what I meant by referring to the role (.) role (.)
3 it is exactly that things could be seen (.) that things should not be seen as=
4 C =mm
5 D power- (.) [related issues but] but but
6 C [mm (.) mm (.)]
7 M [mm]
8 D co-operation (1) as co-[operational] issues
9 C [yeah]
10 C yeah (.)
11 D that if (.) if this could be unlearnt (.)
12 C yes
13 D =because it is you know a functional organisation's (1)
14 C yes=
15 D =way of doing things and >of course (.) okay it is
16 [certainly so deeply ingrained] issue in people<
17 C [mm (.) mm (.) yeah]
18 D that unlearning it (.) might be (1) <impossible>
19 C =well but (.) yes (.) but then (.) perhaps one could ask (.)
20 whether it might be a useful question that (.) that
21 by all the action that you take in relation to this organi[zation]
22 D [mm]
23 C (1) you either (1) like (.) support either [way of] perceiving things
24 D [mm (.) yeah]
25 C (.) either (.) either taking the co-operative approach or power approach=
26 D [=mm=]
27 M [mm]
28 C =and then I think that (.) that (.) that (.)
29 it might be useful to pay attention to how
30 I (1) [how we and how how you] (1)
31 D [yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah]
32 C as managers (1) sort of intervene or
33 M exactly↑ (.)
34 C because it (.) it (.) probably you are just seen as
35 like [wielders of power in this system that] (.)
36 D [yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah]
37 C so that how your ways of (1) intervening (.) your ways of giving (.) giving out
38 tasks (1) would tell of something
39 D =mm=
40 C =like co-operation=
41 D =mm

The director starts to look back across the consulting session and indicates that the consultant (line 1-2) has heard his point. Then he summarizes his understanding by reformulating two categories for interacting: power-related (line 5) as typical of a hierarchical, function-centered organization and co-operational (line 8) as optimal for them as a customer-oriented organization. By talking about the need to unlearn the first one, he states the problem of unlearning as a general phenomenon. He uses psychological terms to add force to his rhetoric ("unlearning" line 11, "deeply ingrained in people" line 16) in highlighting that a change "might be impossible" (line 18). However, his reflection on the meeting fails to make a connection to his own position perspective, something which has been on the agenda throughout the meeting. The consultant receives this comment as if the director takes an outsider rather than insider perspective on the organization, i.e. as if he did not have any control over the state of affairs and thus no position of agency. In his address the director does not express any request for advice.

The consultant responds by interrupting - stealing the turn from the director (line 19) - and by starting to challenge the director's view. This strong move becomes understandable from the reflective practice point of view – the consultant has to act to ensure that the director includes his own contribution to how the organization will look like. After softening his interruption (lines 19-20) the consultant becomes more explicit by making the claim that all actions of the management contribute to what sort of interaction becomes dominating in an organization. This constitutes his advice. The content of the advice concerns the need for reflection on one's daily practice: since the director and the manager are seen as "wielders of power" (line 35), it would be useful for them to look at their own ways of relating to their employees (lines 36-37). This advice invites them to "pay attention" (line 29), i.e. to re-think the management's own practices on "intervening and giving out tasks" (line 37-38).

The process of giving the advice shows the delicacy that is needed when confronting in a way that invites further reflection. The consultant seems to utilize various strategies for that purpose. First, he seems to respond with the same kind of categorical rhetoric as the director did (line 21), using the either-or pattern (line 25), and using the pronoun "you" (lines 21, 23) to address his point. Afterwards, he softens his style by displaying his advice as a personal opinion: "I think that" (line 28), and as a vague general statement: "it may be useful to pay attention to" (line 29). Both these moves downplay the expert role of the consultant, thereby preparing the ground for giving the advice. When formulating his advice the consultant starts by saying "how I", corrects it after a one second pause to "how we" and finally phrases it into "how you as managers" (line 30). This extension of the formulation works as a strategy for balancing between a peer-type of advising style (by including himself) and a more indicative style (by excluding himself).

Furthermore, the consultant uses a specific language tool, a 'minimizer' (Hepburn 2003), to soften his rhetoric ("sort of", line 32, "probably", line 34). It looks as if he wishes to avoid an argument with the management and rather invite them to think about their own action in relation to the employees. Judging from the minimal responses of the director (lines 24, 31, 36, 39, 41) and the manager (line 33) they both mark the advice as accepted.

In sum, the extract shows that the consultant works hard to 'correct' the summary of the session made by the director where the latter attempted to exclude himself from the problem description of the organization. The consultant's agenda of framing the situation differently becomes visible in the way in which he handles the director's turn as one lacking a reflective practice. The need to do this by giving advice becomes apparent when we consider that the session is ending. The consultant seems to work for an outcome where the director would show more reflection upon his own action. He seems to offer the agency position back to the director by means of both the explicit advice and the richness of process strategy use during this particular exchange.

Summary of findings

The three extracts offered here illustrate our findings on how both the content and process of the advice can be used to offer a reflective perspective on managerial work.

From the content perspective, each extract showed a different kind of advice for reflective practice. In extract 1 the implicit advice offered was to look at how the two managers could recognize their own position to support co-operation within the organization. In extract 2 the advice called for paying attention to positive management's responses to employees. In extract 3 the advice invited reflection on managerial action as a model for organizational interaction. Along these contents the need for a reflective stance was explicated by the consultant as an essential aspect of the managerial position. Generally, the need for taking a reflective perspective on day-to-day managerial work was present in the content of the advice.

From the process perspective, the extracts showed some varieties in the discursive strategies available to the consultant when dealing with managers' initiatives and responses. The consultant withheld advice regarding the client's initiative (extract 1), utilized the reported actions of the managers (extract 2) as material for constructing a reflective point of view, or disagreed with the formulation by the director that 'failed' to display reflection by overlooking the influence of managerial action on the case at hand (extract 3). Although the consultant's discursive strategies varied, they also indicated many similarities. In each case, the preceding talk was utilized to invite reflection. The consultant's particular pondering style of talking in the first person position (e.g. "it occurred to me") gave preference to a non-judgmental, speaker-inclusive way of talking. The use of psychological terms and rhetoric such as 'understanding', 'expressing interest', 'internalize' and 'mind' were used as resources for making reflective practice appear meaningful and relevant. The cautious ways of opening up with questions (e.g. "whether it might be a useful question") and of introducing a new perspective as an optional element (e.g. "if I a bit like tell you how this appears to me") displayed sensitive strategies when offering advice. Generally, downplaying the consultant's expert role as an advisor and positioning the management in ways that invited taking an insider agency perspective to their organization seemed to be an essential strategy for the process of advising.

The given extracts show conversation in which the director and the consultant dominate whilst the manager of R&D displays remarkably minor voice. However, her role in accepting or rejecting the offered perspectives was evident. Later on, during the consulting events with the organization, she became much more involved and her role as manager became an important topic for discussions.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has focused on advice-giving conversations in OD consulting practice. By adopting a discursive perspective, we asked if and how the content and the process of advising could support a reflective managerial practice. On the basis of a detailed analysis of recorded data from several consultation meetings we used examples from one single consulting session and showed how the consultant offered managers advice designed to increase reflections on the managerial position, on positive managerial responses and on the essence of managerial action. We also showed various discursive strategies utilized during the process of advising which promoted the adoption of a reflective stance.

The study gives us one example of some of the complexities in promoting reflective practice in OD-consulting. A reflective stance is not easy to attain, even when managers acknowledge its importance and their own need for gaining new perspectives. The general advice "be reflective with your work" would certainly not be enough. Rather, in order to take place, reflective practice calls for particular 'space' (cf. Miller, 2005). In OD consulting context, supporting reflective practice calls for offering challenging perspectives that suit the managerial concerns, interests and abilities, as well as interaction that delicately considers the management's discourse. Although our analysis did not offer information about whether the two managers of the case actually adopted any new reflective practice, or were able to utilize it outside the consulting conversation, it did demonstrate with detailed examples how reflective practice *can be supported* in advising conversations in a consulting context. Being involved with the actual consulting process, the first author was able to see that shifting the perspective in managerial position and action started to make sense for the two managers of the case.

The present study shows how both parties in the consulting situation mutually constitute the advice. Giving and receiving advice is a collaborative pursuit where the consultant needs the client's initiatives and responses in order to formulate and fine-tune the fit between the advice and the client's discourse. This illuminates how the reciprocal nature of the consultant-client relationship (e.g. Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997) becomes alive in the fine details of interaction within the relationship and questions the distinction between the content and process perspective on advice giving (e.g. Goldsmith, 1999; MacGeorge et al., 2004). In actual consulting conversations, the 'what' and the 'how' of advice are intertwined in discourse in many ways and contributed to by all parties.

One can ask whether reflection practiced in a consulting conversation can lead to increased reflexivity of managers, that is, increase their awareness of how their own in situ participation constructs the social realities of an organization (Barge, 2004; Cunliffe 2002). While this issue is beyond the scope of this study, our case material offers some indications that a reflective practice in a consulting conversation can encourage a manager to re-think his/her position and thereby also build awareness of his/her own authorship of the organizational realities.

As in any single-case research, our findings present case-specific information on advice giving. However, the value of this sort of detailed analysis lies in its exploration of and insights into actual practice. DA methodology, as applied in this study helps to reveal the complexities that can be embedded in what appear to be simple conversations. Moreover, it shows how reflection is a social achievement embedded in discursive strategies used in a given moment. This article contributes to how we can approach consulting as advice-giving. Since advising relates to other areas of practice, this point of departure can have value and be transferable to other instances, too. Utilizing the discursive approach additional research could build a more complete picture of advice giving practices in consulting, for example by examining how advice giving processes are constituted and managed in expert-oriented consulting.

Implementing advising into reflective practice is not an easy task for a consultant. We understand Schein's warning as an expression of an ideal when he states that "…whatever else consultation might be, advice it is not. In fact, giving advice in the arena of human problems is generally one of the quickest paths to failure as a consultant" (2002, 21). However, this ideal of opposing advice-giving and reflective practice can be misleading. Taking a closer look, consulting practice seems to be more complex and embedded within many tensions that ideals easily overlook (e.g. Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Clegg et al, 2004; Ellis, Kiely & Pettigrew, 2001; Pellegrinelli, 2002). In this study, we have shown that the presence of the two different agendas of consulting need not in practice constitute a dilemma that could be resolved only through mutual exclusion. Rather, the two approaches can be woven together by means of appropriate use of language.

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Appendix 1

Transcript notation

The audio-recorded materials analysed in this article are transcribed according to a modified version of the Jefferson system (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984). The following notations were used:

Symbol	**Represents**
yes (1) me too	Figures in round brackets represent inter- and mid-turn silences, hand-timed in seconds
yes (.) me too	Period in round brackets are ‘micro-pauses’ of less than 1second
( )	Empty round brackets enclose unrecoverable speech
yes ((clap)) me too	Double round brackets contain relevant contextual information, added by the transcriber
[and well on the whole [mmm]	Overlapping utterances are marked by single square brackets. The left-hand bracket shows where the overlap began, the right-hand bracket shows where the overlapping speech is terminated
I think- I think so	A single dash following a word or letter(s) indicates an abrupt cut-off in the flow of speech (stammering)
mm ↑	Arrow upward signals rising intonation
absolutely	Underlining signals emphasis
=	Equal signs indicate no gap between utterances
<impossible>	‘more than’ arrows enclose slower-paced talk than the surrounding talk
>yes me too<	‘less than’ arrows enclose faster-paced talk than the surrounding talk

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