Provoked Legitimacy: An Inquiry Into Consulting-In-Action

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“There are, you see, two ways of reading a book; you either see it as a box with something inside and start looking for what it signifies, and then if you’re even more perverse or depraved you set off after signifiers. And you treat the next book like a box contained in the first or containing it. And you annotate and interpret and question, and write a book about the book, and so on and on. Or there’s the other way: you see the book as a little non-signifying machine, and the only question is ‘Does it work, and how does it work?’ How does it work for you? If it doesn't work, if nothing comes through, you try another book

(Deleuze, 1995: 7-8).
Acknowledgments
The process on writing this PhD has been a long journey; at times, it has been challenging and hard but mostly it has felt like an invigorating process and a privilege. In writing this dissertation, I have been given invaluable feedback, comments and encouragements from various colleagues, fellow researcher, friends and family. Despite the fact that the responsibility for the written product is completely mine, I indeed consider the dissertation as a composite product of engaging with literature, consultants and managers, and countless conversations with very helpful people without this dissertation would not have been. I would like to begin with a special thanks to all the research participants as well consultants and managers who allowed me to follow their development process, and further to interview them along the way. Since you all appear anonymous, in the dissertation, I will not mention any names, however, I truly appreciate the consultants who took their time to talk with me along the way, and I am grateful for your openness concerning your practice. Further, I would like to thank the client organizations, who allowed me to do some of my fieldwork in their organizations, and to follow the development processes, which this dissertation revolves.

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**Status of papers**

The dissertation includes four papers. This is the status of the four papers:

Chapter 3: ‘When the client strikes back: Legitimacy inversion in the consulting process’. The paper was presented at EGOS, 2014 at the track ‘The Power of Management Experts in Organizations and Society’. The paper has been rewritten, and is accepted for Academy of Management Annual Meeting 2016, Management Consulting track.

Chapter 4: ‘Seductive atmospheres: Exploring tools at work in consultant-client relations’. This paper is co-authored with Associate Professor Mona Toft Madsen and Lecturer Rune Thorbjørn Clausen, and is currently in a *revise and re-submit* in ‘Journal of Management Education’

Chapter 5: ‘Conceptual tensions and performativity: Is the core task a concept for developing organization?’ Was presented at Nordic Academy of Management Conference 2015 at CBS

Chapter 6: ‘Making consulting valuable: A matter of assessment?’ This is a modified version of a paper co-authored with Associate Professor Claus Elmholdt, Professor Lene Tanggaard and Lead Consultant Lars Mersh entitled ‘Learning good leadership: A matter of assessment?’, which is currently in third round *revise and re-submit* with minor changes in International Journal of Human Resource Development
Executive Summary
How does process consulting become legitimate? And what are the concrete practical maneuvers, concepts and tools that allow process consulting to become legitimate as development practice? Despite the fact that a solid body of literature has interrogated consultancy work from various positions, aspects of consultancy practice, such as process consulting, have largely been neglected. This dissertation aims to contribute to the consulting literature in two ways: firstly by a study of process consulting practice, and secondly by deploying a practice-based and performative approach to the study of consultancy work. Research on consultancy work has mainly addressed issues of legitimacy and authority either from institutionalist and critical perspectives or more functionalistic and psychology-based positions. By taking a practice-based orientation, this dissertation seeks to overcome the issue of either making legitimacy a matter of institutional structure or a matter of the psychodynamics of the relationship. The message in this dissertation is that legitimacy is a practical and ongoing accomplishment, which is made again and again through various concepts, tools and enrollment of allies. The dissertation consists of four papers; three of them are situated in the nexus between a group of organizational consultants at a hospital and their work with healthcare professionals in managerial roles, and the fourth paper is empirically situated in an international engineering corporation and an external consultancy; the paper provides a perspective on attempts to evaluate consultancy work. The papers contribute as follows.

The first paper is an empirical study of the many practical maneuvers and devices which are involved in making consultancy work legitimate. It presents the consultant as positioned in a tension between being animated by certain managerial demands and practical concerns. The paper provides a legitimacy inversion that positions the dissertation in a practice-based and performative conceptualization of legitimacy. Furthermore the paper illustrates how legitimacy becomes an important part of consultancy work, which is essential to the performative effects created in the client organization. The second paper illustrates how tools are deployed by the process consultant. During my observations a range of tools were deployed. The simulation tool in focus here illustrates a contemporary ‘human technology’, which was widely deployed by the consultants. The paper illustrates how a tool and the physical configuration of the room are significant in framing the situation and the consultant as a legitimate authority. The paper develops the concept of seductive atmospheres and argues that the process consultant partially is creating atmospheres for a certain version of development making the organization amenable for intervention and change. The third
paper relates to the research question by illustrating how theories and concepts are important vehicles in mobilizing and legitimating the work of the consultant. Through the example of the concept of ‘the core task’, the paper illustrates how a concept worked as a legitimating vehicle in the consulting process. In the paper I argue that the core task concept could be considered as both an affectual and a perceptual device provoking tension between actual and ideal organization. The fourth paper aims to discuss how consultancy work is accounted for. This paper differs from the rest of the chapters since it is situated in a private organization. Attempts to evaluate consulting were also evident in the hospital study; however, the private corporation provided a particularly apt case for illustrating this aspect of consulting. By turning impact into numbers evaluating consultancy work can be read as both an attempt to test consultancy services and turning intangible services into valuable tangibles.

The theoretical contributions that emanate from this study are twofold. Firstly, the study provides an in-depth example of how legitimacy is achieved in process consulting practice. Secondly it discusses the politics of researching and consulting processes.
**Dansk resumé**


De teoretiske bidrag, som kan udledes af denne undersøgelse er tosidet. For det første tilbyder afhandlingen en grundig undersøgelse af, hvordan legitimitet opnås i proceskonsultation i praksis. For det andet bidrager afhandlingen til diskussioner af læring og politik i konsulentarbejdet.
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INTRODUCTION

‘The organizational consultants contribute with provocative questions; what they do is to provoke’

(Interview, Hospital, Ward manager, spring 2014)

Indeed consulting is a contested field. The media, researchers and people in general all seem to question the legitimacy and value of consulting, not least with regard to public sector organizations. While I was writing this dissertation, several controversies over consultants acting in the public sector unfolded often with reference to well-known consultancies such as McKinsey & Co or the Boston Consultancy Group. Not only have these consultancies provided services to the Danish government but also they have recruited the former Danish Minister of Finance and a former Danish Prime Minister, respectively, as advisors. While those controversies indeed actualize the academic stream of critical consulting studies and explicate the interesting impact of consultancies, this dissertation will also demonstrate the broad span of consultancy. While we are often presented with these conventional views on consultants, we hear less about consultants doing organization development, process consulting, and business coaching, although it takes up a significant role in the consulting market. Through the case of process consulting, this dissertation is an inquiry into consulting in those latter traditions.

My inquiry takes a practice-oriented position and is primarily takes place at a hospital where I followed a group of internal organizational consultants. However, prior to initiating this dissertation, I was involved in a large international consultancy over a period of two years, first one year as an intern and then in various projects for another year. My “fieldwork” there partially formed my master thesis and indeed animated the puzzle, which spurred this dissertation. The situation that puzzled me was how consultancy work becomes legitimate? And how consultancy work comes to matter? My concern was with a particular kind of consultancy service. While the large consultancy I was part of, offered many kinds of advice giving, my unit primarily worked with organization development, leadership development and business coaching. It promoted much theory from the social sciences

1 There are no exact estimates of process consulting, business coaching or organization development, although attempts have been made (Joo, 2005) also in related areas such as leadership development (Grint, 2007), training and development (Paradise and Patel, 2007). The general management consulting and advice giving industry has been argued to be a market of more than US$300 billion (Kennedy Consulting Research & Advisory, 2009; Clark and Fincham, 2001). And also in Denmark it is estimated as a billion dollar market, which has been expanding during the last years (Management Rådgiverne, 2015). In those numbers internal consultancy units are usually not taken into account, which also has become an influential occupation (Armbrüster, 2006; O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2015).
(e.g. social constructionism, systems theory and social capital) and therapeutic knowledge into the managerial realm. While consulting in general is considered as a rather intangible service, this mode of process consulting might underscore the intangible dimension even more. The practices would emphasize participation and dialogue as vehicles in documenting and producing organizational and managerial knowledge. Hence, other modes of activities were deployed, which are rather different compared to conventional interpretations of management consulting (e.g. McKenna, 2006). However, questions of legitimacy were still of concern and consultants still voiced doubt and a practical interest with regard to the value or effect of their services.

**Exploring consultancy practice**

Is it possible to be a constructionist consultant? This question was raised by Czarniawska (2001; 2012), after she had trouble with regards to using her constructionist ideas with a “client” in a public administration. What Czarniawska argues is that she had to subscribe to a certain ‘logic of representation’ in order to act legitimately in accordance with the ‘logic of practice’. Czarniawska suggests positioning legitimacy as an essential vehicle in the consulting process, and she questions how the legitimating process should be handled in order for a consultant to carry through her work.

Although Czarniawska’s story is only one inspiration for this dissertation, it nevertheless provides an important connection since it illustrates how legitimacy becomes a matter of practice. The inquiry, which I set out to do, is inspired by the recent interest or ‘turn’ to practice (Gad and Jensen, 2014; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and Savigny, 2001) and re-descriptions of a pragmatist stance in organization and ‘social studies’ (Muniesa, 2014; Rumens and Kelemen, 2013).

Research on consulting has generally ignored practice-based studies (Mueller and Whittle, 2011), and, as I will illustrate, mostly been inspired by psychological or institutionalist perspectives. Czarniawska (2012) calls for studies that explore consultancy work, particularly consultancy with social constructionist approaches, in order to uncover what this means for legitimacy. I believe that is likely that a practice-based approach will be able to answer to Czarniawska’s call. To paraphrase Nicolini (2013: 2), a practice-based approach affords an orientation towards how practitioners accomplish their work through ‘tools, discourse’ and ‘bodies’; thus, he argues ‘what is legitimate’ and ‘what can be done’ are constantly being tested in practice (Garfinkel, 1967: 9; Nicolini, 2013, 228). I believe this provides an interesting avenue for researching the consultant-client relationship. In this dissertation, I set out to explore what a practice-based approach means to the study of
legitimacy when diverse practices are entwined in consultant-client relations. The chapter proceeds as follows: After having done this brief overall introduction, I move on to describe how a process-consulting figure can be identified in sociological analyses. Subsequently I will present consulting and discuss what it means; this will lead to the research problem.

Consulting in sociological analyses

For critical management scholars as well as many sociological analyses the management consulting figure has been a favorite object of criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Illouz, 2007; Latour, 2013; Sennett, 2006; Thrift, 2005). In this section, I will briefly discuss three contributions, which I believe are particularly relevant for the interest of this dissertation. Firstly, I will briefly describe Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s (2005) analysis as their analysis of management texts indeed relates to consultancy in many ways. Secondly, I will mention the writings of Nigel Thrift, and finally relate to the critical theorist Eva Illouz, who has provided an interesting description of what she terms ‘emotional capitalism’.

Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) have consultants as an important part of their sociological analysis of the networked firm. Through their study of mainly French management texts from 1960 to 1990, many authored by consultants, Boltanski and Chiapello conclude that many of these texts are highly moral and mainly prescriptive (Ibid: 58). The texts are not about technical analyses but rather suggestive prescriptions. While their analysis illustrates aspects of what counts as legitimate knowledge in contemporary work life, I will limit myself to two aspects of this sociological analysis, which I find of particular importance to the dissertation. Boltanski and Chiapello describe a ‘connexionist world’ where the ‘project organization’ offers a new legitimate organizational form. Projects which are elusive and temporary connect well with what consultants do, and Boltanski and Chiapello’s analyses, are indeed relevant and interesting for studies of consulting. Boltanski and Chiapello further describe how legitimacy and jurisdictional claims become elusive in this world – legitimacy and value have to be asserted again and again. This requires a man of ideas, they argue, who is flexible and has the capacity to connect to people. I believe their description captures many professionals working with the improvement of management in consultancy functions, and also how their jurisdictional claims are an ongoing activity. This includes mainstream consultants who act as strategic advisors to top management, but also consultants deploying the means of facilitation, coaching and participation.
Like Boltanski and Chiapello Thrift (2005) places consultants as an essential part of his description of the ‘cultural circuit of capitalism’ where he depicts consultants as ‘capitalisms commissars’. He also mentions consultants as a significant actor when he describes how academia and business have become more alike in their thinking and their use of vocabulary (Thrift, 2005: 21). Thrift (2005) makes a rather general critique and argues that new modes of government have contributed to the production of ‘fast subject’ positions. Here ‘bodies are trained to act their way out of new management dilemmas through new techniques of the self, based especially in the lore of the humanities’ (Thrift, 2005: 147). This latter description is indeed, what can be encountered when consultants are folding the psy-disciplines into the managerial realm (Miller and Rose, 2013) – particularly in consulting activities such as business coaching and process consultation. This aspect has given way to what Thrift calls ‘soft knowledgeable capitalism’. A kindred spirit to Thrift’s analysis can be found in Eva Illouz’ critical social theory (2007). Illouz argues that we live in times of an ‘emotional capitalism’, which is characterized by objectifying emotions; she argues:

[The] cultural persuasion of therapy, economic productivity, and feminism intertwined and enmeshed with one another and provided the rationale, the methods, and the moral impetus to extract emotions from the realm of inner life and put them at the center of selfhood and sociability in the form of a cultural model that has become widely pervasive, namely the model of communication (Illouz, 2007: 36).

Illouz mainly addresses the emergence of self-help and psychotherapy but relates her argument to the development of the ‘counselling interview’ by Elton Mayo during the Hawthorne experiment. This kind of interview is, as Illouz illustrates, an important aspect of the governance of human relations and making them amenable for intervention. What has happened, she argues, is that communication has become instrumentalized and the primary medium of intervention. Her observation can be related to business coaching and process consultation, which usually intervene through communication and by engineering communication (e.g. Schein, 1988). What characterizes the development of this therapeutic or soft mode of consulting is indeed communication and the incorporation of human technologies from the psy-disciplines (Rose and Miller, 2013). The emergence of this kind of consulting figure, which often is left without interrogation, is exactly what is of interest to this dissertation. Hence, the kind of consultancy work in focus could be argued to be symptomatic for a kind of emotional and soft knowledgeable capitalism, which will be investigated further.
Defining consulting

The man of knowledge has not become a philosopher king; but he has often become a consultant, and moreover a consultant to a man who is neither king-like nor philosophical (Wright Mills, 1956: 353).

And never to be outdone, management consultancy has adopted ‘soft methods’ for intervening in organisations by turning to dramatisations, enactments and performances (Law, 2004: 3).

Consultancy work has gained increasing interest in management and organization studies. It has been argued that we live in times of ‘consultocracy’ where not only unknown problems require consultation but many have also become consultants (Saint-Martin, 1998). Consulting and management are folding into each other in contemporary organizations and they even sometimes shift roles (Sturdy et al., 2015). In his description of the history of management consulting, McKenna (2006) illustrates how consultancy work emerged as an occupation in late capitalism and as constitutive for management and organization as scientific disciplines. McKenna (2006) illustrates the development from early industrial and management engineering towards early famous consultants such as Arthur Anderson (Anderson Consulting) and James McKinsey (McKinsey & Co) and their mutual involvement in cost accounting. Although Frederick W. Taylor (1914) was predated as a management consultant, he is nonetheless often the one who is ascribed the status as the first ‘management consultant’ in the world (McKenna, 2006: 35). This early kind of consulting is largely illustrative for the introductory quote of C. Wright Mills, who placed consultants as a central part of the governmental and political elite in 20th century administration. This kind of consultancy paved the way for much consultancy work in the tradition of operations management, performance management, and financial advice giving. The field of consulting to management and organization, however, later diffused, as illustrated in the other introductory quote by John Law. In other words, the consultant figure is in a state of flux and has many names. Hence, the literature dealing with consultancy work is very broad. Consultants are visible in re-engineering (Benders and Van Veen, 2001), strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Spee, and Smets, 2013), change agency (Caldwell, 2003; Wylie, Sturdy, and Wright, 2014), business coaching (Nikolova, Clegg, Fox, Bjørkeng, and Pitsis, 2013), organizational development, therapy and process consultation (Schein, 2008), and facilitation or leadership development (Smolovic Jones, Grint, and Cammock, 2015). The history of consultancy work can, however, be divided into two overall streams. The one that leans on Taylorism I call mainstream consulting, and the other that shares a socio-psychological interest, I call process...
consulting, as this is how it is often depicted among practitioners. The distinction between mainstream consulting and process consulting is indeed a heuristic divide, which also rather recently has been questioned (Sturdy, 2012). One might argue that most consulting activities relate to process consulting in some way; however, I believe that process consulting is a helpful term for several reasons. Another dimension of this study is that most of the empirical material is from public sector organizations – specifically hospitals – and involve internal consultants. These are both aspects that will have separate chapters in handbooks (cf. Sadler, 2001). Although recognizing these contextual aspects, my focus will be on the consulting process in action.

**Internal and external**

The internal consulting position is nonetheless a controversial position. It shares many issues with its external counterpart as they usually both tend to struggle with ‘otherness’ (Wright, 2009) to the internal/external client they consult (Brown, Pryzwansky, and Schulte, 2001). Hence they tend not to be considered as that diverse (Wylie, et al., 2014). Nevertheless a difference between internal/external consultants is rather institutionalized (Lacey, 1995; Sturdy, 2011; Wright, 2009), but has also become fuzzier. It is a matter of common knowledge that internal consulting units in large organizations increasingly employ former ‘external’ consultants in ‘internal’ consultant positions and also engage in external consulting activities (Armbrüster, 2006; O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2015). The business models of internal and external consultancies differ. Internal consultancy salaries are typically lower but they are also less reversible and hence many different accounting forms exist (Armbrüster, 2006). But internal or external consultancies alike are expected to provide added value (Armbrüster, 2006; Wylie et al. 2014). In the literature one of the main capabilities of internal consulting is the consultants’ ability to ‘know’ the organization and suggest interventions that fit the ‘concrete reality’ of the client firm (Armbrüster, 2006: 101). Hence, internal consulting is often described as the ability to overcome the ‘burden of otherness’, which sometimes jeopardizes consultants’ ideas making them too abstract or flawed (Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath, 2003; Argyris, 2000; Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002). However, this internal ability is modelled on the perceived external ability to challenge as an independent outsider (Smith, 2009), which is further described as a perceived ‘better access to new knowledge and greater symbolic capital of externals (Sturdy and Wright, 2011: 490). Nevertheless, the internal consultant is, like the external consultant, urged to ‘challenge as an outsider’ while ‘knowing as an insider’ (Skovgaard Smith, 2009). With a reference to Merton (1972), Sturdy and Wright (2008) depict internal consultants as hybrids, both insiders and outsiders at the same time. Set
against external consultants it has been argued that internal consultants work more through facilitation and advice giving than formal authority (Lacey, 1995; Wright, 2009). Internal consultants are often labelled as ‘change agents’ who need to know about organization politics and who work across boundaries (Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, and Willmott, 2005; Wright, 2009; Wylie, et al., 2014). While the internal/external divide is indeed a topic of research, consultants also seem to share many similarities; often they are considered at a risk of becoming managerial puppets either in the form of internal agents of management (Wright, 2009) or as ‘externalized management’ (Ruef, 2003). What is at stake in this divide might be more a matter of the nature of the client-consultant relation (Schein, 1997). Werr and Styhre (2002: 50) argue:

Thus, the client-consultant relationship emerges out of an interplay between the characteristics of a specific situation and the actors present. An institutionally embedded perspective of client-consultant interaction therefore “deessentializes” the relationship. In brief, there are no pre-defined or “natural” roles between the client and consultant.

Hence, although internal consultancy is different due to insider knowledge, which can be both a strength and a weakness, I consider this difference to be an empirical question more than a pre-given difference. Consultants contribute at the margin whether they be internal or external (March, 1991). Hence, it is not the main interest of this dissertation since the ambition is not comparative but rather an exploration of the nexus between consulting and client practice.

**Coming to a definition of consulting: A question of legitimacy and politics**

Many attempts have been made to define consultancy work, some of the most cited ones are probably those mentioned below:

Management consulting is an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes (Kubr, 2002: 10).

[A] feature of the process through which management knowledge is constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and substituted is a dialectic between consultants and clients mediated through particular managerial labour processes and the individual preoccupation with existential and material security (Sturdy, 1997: 532).
‘the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client’s internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client (Schein, 2008: 20; Schein, 1988: 11).

Consulting, as I use the term, includes any activity that has as its main apparent justification the giving of advice to organizational participants on how to improve the effectiveness of organizations or specific individuals in them. Within such a definition, I include not only individuals or groups who offer advice on a fee-for-service basis, but also, and perhaps preeminently, people who write books and people who teach (March, 1991: 22).

Those definitions are rather broad, whereas the definition of Kubr (2002) can be considered as the most mainstream. Sturdy and Schein both outline a description that captures a rather broad range of activities. March even includes book writing and teaching in his definition. To March, consulting can be considered as a very broad term characterized by making a contribution at the margin. March argues that good consulting provides interesting ideas and tells stories about success and failure of organization and hence spreads experience. However, the contribution can be too general and hence not worth the effort, he argues. By constantly juxtaposing it to research, March argues that consulting is essentially about providing ‘interpretations for experience’; this need not be a report of empirical results, but a major contribution consists in providing ideas for interpreting experience. Thus there is an aesthetic dimension to consulting which is a matter of interestingness (March, 1991). He concludes that an appropriate evaluation of consulting hence ‘is often more similar to the evaluation of theory (or art) than it is to the evaluation of empirical research’ (Ibid: 30):

Thus, good consulting, like good theory and good art, emphasizes aspects of events and interpretative schema that may be, by themselves, quite misleading or overstated, but that lead in combination with what is accessible to ordinary knowledge to improvements in understanding. From this perspective, the extent to which a speculation is non-redundant in an interesting way is likely to be as important as whether it is precisely true. Making an interpretation both non-redundant and interesting involves an awareness of what is known and of the possible ways in which good approximations to historical understandings may be inadequate. Thus, it calls for an appreciation of the role of surprise, evocativeness, and beauty in interpretation (Ibid: 30).
This is a more ideal definition, which March argues disqualifies much consulting since the ideas promoted by consultants are often ‘part of general knowledge or wrong in uninteresting ways’ (Ibid).

From a rather different sociological position, Luhmann (2005) through his systems theoretical approach argues that consulting becomes perturbation. Accordingly, consultants are only able to cause perturbation since they act as an ‘autopoetic’ system, which can only connect to the client system through structural coupling, meaning adjusted behavior that ‘allows mutual perturbations’ between the client and the consultant (Mohe and Seidl, 2009: 12). As a result, knowledge does not transfer from the consultant to the client; rather there is always a modification which potentially can lead to ‘productive misunderstandings’ (Ibid). In a related conceptual endeavor, Clegg et al. (2004) describe consulting as a matter of translation that creates parasites and makes ‘noise’. The notion of the parasite is not negative but inspired by Michel Serres (1980/2007), who argues that the prefix \textit{para} in the word \textit{parasite} means that ‘it is on the side […] not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. It is always mediate and never immediate’ (Serres, 2007: 38). A parasite is one ‘who takes without giving’ (Brown and Stenner, 2010: 48), but with regard to consulting it is not a position the consultant can take purposely. A consulting intervention always emerges as a parasite in the relation, for instance, organizational changes or excluded participants might end up as parasitic noise to the consultant-client relation. However, what is noise or interruption to one relation easily becomes circumvented and a previous relation becomes noise to a new one. Serres (2007: 66) provides the following illustration.

\begin{quote}
At the feast everyone is talking. At the door of the room there is a ringing noise, the telephone. Communication cuts conversation, the noise interrupting the messages. As soon as I start to talk with this new interlocutor, the sounds of the banquet become noise for the new ‘us’. The system has shifted. If I approach the table, the noise slowly becomes conversation. In the system, noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor, but they are transformed into one another as well as a function of time and of the system. They make order or disorder […] The noise is a joker. It has at least two values […] a value of destruction and a value of construction. It must be included and excluded.
\end{quote}

‘Noise’ is what enables order and disorder and hence it is not negative but productive (Brown and Stenner, 2010); this resonates with Gregory Bateson’s notion of noise as the ‘source of new patterns’ (Bateson, 1974: 416). The parasite logic is applicable to various social functions as it lives by the ignorance of others ‘intelligently disguised as white expertise’ (Serres, 2007: 123). Brown and
Stenner (2010: 59) argue that we ‘must not be deceived, then, by those who claim to convert real noise into a harmony that is merely theatrical’. They exemplify the parasitic logic by arguing that ‘medicine lives parasitically off the noise of disease. Law off conflict, science off ignorance’ (Ibid). Likewise, consultants parasitically live off the noise of leadership, organizational change or management, a noise they have contributed to making up themselves and now claim jurisdiction over (e.g. Wylie et. al. 2014). However, what is seen as parasitic noise always emerges in the interstitial space between or in the relation. Clegg et al. (2004: 37) write:

Consulting may be conceived as a process of tension, oscillating between order and disorder and de- and reconstruction. It can deconstruct organizational routines and taken-for-granted convictions in order to open up a spa– producing dissensus, searching for instabilities, gaps and divisions, building creative dissonance into practice, even if it challenges the core values of the organization. Thus consulting challenges the knowledge an organization possesses (through learning) and the identity by which an organization is possessed (through becoming): it questions the established ways of world-making (Goodman, 1978) in order to open up as yet unknown perspectives and possibilities.

However, providing this kind of description spurs a back-and-forth exchange between more critical management theorists, who consider this to be too much in favor of the consultant role. In a reply to Clegg et al. (2004), Sturdy et al. (2004) argue, that although consulting can be seen as an activity where theory serves “as a means by which practice can be interrupted and transformed” […] [T]he history of management consulting in recent times has been one, not of noise and plurivocality, but of silencing certain groups (e.g. employees, consumers and citizens), sometimes systematically’ (Ibid: 338). Sturdy et al. (2004) argue that consulting should be seen ‘as a means of “interrupting” and “transforming” power relations rather than tinkering with managerial practice’ (Sturdy et al. 2004: 339). Accordingly, aspects of power and politics are at risk of being omitted. Sturdy et al. (2004: 339) relate this to discussions of the field of organizational learning where ‘the hegemonic nature of legitimacy in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work is written out of subsequent translations and consultant interventions’ (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Sturdy, 2009). By making this argument, the idea of consultants as having a privileged outsider or stranger’s ability (Skovgaard Smith, 2009) to cause perturbations is juxtaposed with the idea of consulting as liminal space where changes can happen (Clark and Mangham, 2004; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, and Bourque, 2010). However, in their comment to this, Clegg et al. (2004: 342) argued that they ‘did not
intend to “celebrate” consulting as a “privileged arena”. Rather their parasitic notion was intended to emphasize their status as ‘ambiguous contemporaries’. They conclude that the potential impact of any form of consulting intervention is limited; however, consulting can still be tasked ‘to disrupt business as usual and make fissures in hierarchies of power (at least temporarily)’ (Ibid: 342). While Sturdy et al. (2004) encourage future research to critically explore how certain participants are silenced through consulting and reveal the construction of a managerial discourse, Clegg et al. (2004) on the contrary suggest that often clients are in a position to impose critique by themselves, and critique is in other words not ‘the unique privilege of the intellectual’ (Ibid: 343).

At least two important aspects of consultancy practice can be drawn from the dispute, namely the role of legitimacy and politics in consultancy work. While Sturdy et al. (2004) argue that consulting essentially is managerialist and a matter of power relations, Clegg et al. (2004) argue that consulting potentially can challenge established power relations. However, settling on this question in advance might be to put the cart before the horse. In line with the writings of Latour (2005), whether consulting is affording order or disorder, is managerialist or non-managerialist, evokes innovation or silence all become empirical questions.

Towards a research problem

Although my first ambition with this dissertation was to investigate how consultancy work became legitimate, the concept of legitimacy and what it means have developed remarkably. What puzzled me during my two years in a large international consultancy, first as an intern and later working on various assignments, was how consultancy actually became legitimate and how it came to matter? Those questions were based on an inductive reasoning – they emerged as I, as a newcomer, was struggling with how consultants became legitimate and provided value. As I started to review the literature, legitimacy and the value of consultants’ work proved to be key concerns in the literature (Czarniawska, 2001; Fincham, 1999; Wiley et al., 2014). Here, however, it was often related to institutionalist explanations and certain kinds of consultancy work that seemed slightly different compared to my situation and practical puzzle.

Although my interest has changed and the problem indeed transformed – particularly mediated by my new empirical engagement during the time of this dissertation, the puzzle remains. The consultants that I followed in my empirical work would speak to the client of influence and asserting appropriate ‘difference’ or ‘disturbance’, and several times they voiced a concern that their work ‘had
to create value’. Although expressed rather differently, my initial puzzle, along with the literature, was also reflected in the consultants’ work. By following the consultants it became visible that legitimacy, as a normative fit between diverse practices (Czarniawska, 2001), was important in order to enable the consultants accomplish their work, hence also assert their value.

**Questioning the legitimacy of consulting**

Research has often studied consultancy work either from a psychology-based position or from positions mostly inspired by institutionalist theory and to some extent post-structural writings. The psychology-based positions have considered consulting as a sort of organizational therapy (Miller, 1976; Schein, 2006a) or as a ‘broker of meaning’ (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002), and often used the term process consulting (PC) to demarcate a particular focus on individual or group relations from a non-expert consulting stance (I will elaborate on this position in chapter 2 and focus on Schein in this section). From a proclaimed socio-psychological position, Schein argues that consulting is a matter of ‘help’ rather than ‘advice’ (Schein, 1988; 2002). The legitimacy of consulting is hence not a central topic to Schein. He speaks of ‘social influence’ (Schein, 2006) and argues that ‘power and authority’ (or legitimacy) is granted to the consultant due to a ‘psychological contract’ (Schein, 2008: 30-32). Schein states that ‘For a person to seek help and make herself temporarily dependent on another person is a de facto confession of weakness’ (Ibid: 31). What Schein argues is that this ‘call for help’ makes the status of the consultant ‘one-up’ at the outset, since the client is dependent on the consultant. Schein (2008: 36) thus says that the relationship between consultant and client at the outset contains a ‘subtle but powerful force’ [...] based on cultural norms and personal agendas’. The client is generally shown as having a psychodynamic interior, which makes the client act with, for instance, dependency or subordination, transference or defensiveness in relation to the consultant. Schein argues that these reactions are mediated by cultural norms, which also influence what is judged as legitimate (Ibid. 37). He illustrates this by arguing that ‘cultural norms’ make a consulting assignment in Switzerland different to one in the US or some other country (Schein, 2006b). What Schein does is to foreground the ‘psychodynamics’ of the consultant-client relationship, which is treated as most important for the relationship. Again, legitimacy is not a key concept in the psychology-based literature – here represented by Schein. Rather this relation is argued to rely on ‘the psychodynamics of the helping relationship’, which implicitly makes legitimacy interior to the consultant-client relation. Not that Schein does not acknowledge communication and the use of pen and paper, he just does not seem to grant them any importance in “strictly human” helping relationship. However, in all
fairness we may say that this position indicates legitimacy as a practical accomplishment but without ascribing much importance to institutions or the concrete apparatus of the work. Instead, terms like ‘trust’, ‘defensiveness’, ‘safe environment’ etc. are emphasized. The reason why legitimacy is not that noticeable in the psychology-based literature, particularly with Schein, might reflect that the PC is described as an aspired equal and collaborative relation between consultant and client.

Set against this position, the institutionalist and critical perspectives take a more non-humanist or at least non-subjectivist attitude. This literature emphasizes the intangible dimension of consultants’ work, and questions of legitimacy and value are a major concern (Clark, 1995; Fincham, 1999). Since consulting to some extent is devoid of institutional back-up with regard to common education (Clark, 1995), legitimacy is usually considered as derived from institutionalized rational myths, which consultants may draw from (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For instance, existing literature has argued that the ability to signal ‘expertise’, ‘relationships’, ‘added value’ and ‘professionalism’ is important to gain legitimacy as a consultant (Fincham, 1999; Wylie et al. 2014). ‘Expertise’ might be claimed in relation to, for instance, change management, ‘relationships’ indicated to top management or former clients and the ability to claim ‘added value’ is an important aspect of this (Wylie et al., 2014). However, the institutional and critical perspective tends to explain legitimacy as only based on actors exogenous to practice. In other words, the very concrete practices and tactics through which consultants accomplish legitimacy tend to be neglected in this literature.

This split between the psychology-based position and the critical institutionalist position, which I briefly introduce here, is of functional value. It illustrates some of the issues with regard to legitimacy in studies of consultancy work. Although the psychology-based literature acknowledges the performativity of all kinds of intervention, particularly PC, it seems to suspend its own normativity. In other words PC mostly omits questions of legitimacy, since it is by definition an exponent of a normatively good consultant-client relation – a ‘helping relationship’. Conversely to this psychology-based view, the critical and institutionalist position seems to suggest that consultants are mostly working to legitimate something exogenous to their practice. Hence, it does not really say anything about how consulting is accomplished in practice. I suggest that this difference can be transgressed if we ‘turn to practice’, since this will enable another version of how legitimacy is derived, which is neither merely interior nor exterior to the consultant but require a study of consulting practice.
Legitimacy as a practical concern – an example from practice

Several times during my study, I observed concerns with legitimacy. For instance, the consultants would discuss how to account for the value added of their consultancy services, which they regarded as largely intangible. Legitimacy particularly became an issue when the consultants prepared for the intervention; here they would discuss how to use certain concepts to approach the client in order to relate to the client practice. When the consultants spoke of issues regarding legitimacy, they often related to creating trust or credibility in their services. In other words, it was considered as an inevitable part of accomplishing their work and without legitimacy and credibility, it would be impossible to work. One of the consultants that I was following was working on an organizational development program at a hospital research department, where much of my empirical work was conducted. During my observations with her, I observed different maneuvers with regard to how she organized the meeting room and prepared for meeting the client. I thus asked her to explain some of her considerations with regard to doing such a program. I suggested using Nicolini’s (2009) interview technique called the double. This interview technique basically consists in having another person explain how you should act if you were to take over her job tomorrow. The consultant accepted this format and hence we met at her office, me with a tape recorder, she ready to “teach” me some ‘tricks of the trade’. After a short introduction, we decided to focus on an assignment she had conducted the day before and which I had not participated in. This incident was fresh in her memory and here is a slightly shortened version of what she told me.

[…] Consider the following: I am on my way to a conference facility. Here I meet up with the other consultant who is also on the assignment. We meet an hour before the meeting with the managers starts. We have to be ready when the managers arrive, which means that we have to make sure the slideshow is functioning, the program is ready, and the tables are set up correctly […] Imagine a room with tables, chairs, flip-overs, and a PowerPoint projector; these are some of the tools we have at our disposal […] The physical layout of the room means a lot to what can be done. For instance, placing the tables in a horse shoe tends to destroy the dynamics in the room so we have to get the tables set up right – herringbone style is ok because then I can stand in front of the managers and they can see each other. These things must be ready when the managers arrive […] ‘One can feel a stranger in the room’ so it is important just to be there before the managers arrive, to be able to look them in the eye and make an individual and personal connection […] The first thing I do is to introduce myself in plenum so they know what kind of merits I have. I typically tell them that I graduated with a master’s degree from
the university. It is important to state an academic background, particularly among people with a medical degree; it provides legitimacy to my position. I also state my professional background: I have been involved with the hospital system since 2007 and am now employed as a consultant in the HR consultancy unit […] I aim to use a lot of humor and self-irony and allow them to say something, I try to smile and act interested. We have to communicate that we have been looking forward to this […] after the introduction I will do an ‘anticipation vote’. I do this at a flip chart where I write down the expectations for the meeting. This creates accountability and something you can return to later. When I write on a flip chart, I try to mirror textually what is said by the client, so it’s theirs. This enables me to return to those aims during the meeting […] I typically also provide the managers with paper to make sure that they have something to take notes on. So much knowledge does not stick if we do not get it written down – reflections should be laid down on paper […] In this program I am very inspired by the theory of Jody Gittell and Otto Scharmer, so I introduce these theories as I introduce what we will be working on […] I also use references and experience from other assignments at various departments, and it is essential to find examples that they can identify with […] (Interview, consultant).

Although I will present different examples during the dissertation, which is more grounded in my own observations from the field, this small auto-ethnographic ‘tricks of the trade’ account provided by the consultant is illustrative of a practical concern with legitimacy. Although the consultant only mentions legitimacy explicitly once, she nonetheless illustrates the ability to engage with the client in a convincing and credible way. It means that not anything goes; the physical configuration of the room, the theories deployed and some kind of emotional labor or body work also helps ascribe legitimacy to the practice. The ‘anticipation vote’ at the flip chart also works as a way to indicate progress and assist her in controlling the process. Obviously several other actors are of importance to the consultant’s legitimacy: she must be attached to some kind of principal who has given her the task and is paying for her service etc. However, becoming legitimate is a very practical concern embedded in very practical maneuvers conducted by the consultant.

**A practice-based view on legitimacy**

Within the social sciences legitimate speech or action is usually considered as a prerequisite for recognized action. For instance, Bourdieu argues the following with regard to legitimate speech:
Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. What is rare, then, is not the capacity to speak, which, being part of our biological heritage is universal and therefore essentially non-distinctive, but rather the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language (Bourdieu, 1991; 55).

This way of reasoning is also identifiable in organization studies, where legitimacy is often considered as derived from ideal type institutional actors or logics, which exist exogenous to practice (Suchman, 1995; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012; Weber, 1958). (I will elaborate on these positions in chapter 3). While Bourdieu is interested in the institutional background structure which ‘underlines’ a speech act to create performative efficacy, I am more concerned with how this is accomplished from a practice-oriented stance. In his book on practice theories and practice-based approaches, Nicolini (2013: 227-228) positions legitimacy as essential to practice orientation writing:

[…] practices are perpetuated and made durable by people who come to share similar skills, practical concerns, and ways of making themselves accountable […] What is more important, however, is that the nature of the practical concerns and the boundary of the legitimate practices are continuously tested and contested within the social circle created by the joint endeavor. Questions of what is appropriate, what is legitimate, and what can be done are continuously tested in action so that practice is necessarily provisional and tied to specific historical and material conditions.

Accordingly, what is considered as appropriate reflects what is legitimate ‘in practice’. In order for an activity, a thing or a speech act to become recognized, it has to be considered as legitimate. With inspiration from ethnomethodology this can be described as a situated ‘ongoing accomplishment’ (Linstead, 2006; Nicolini, 2013). In other words legitimacy is considered as a performative effect (Law, 2003). By this I mean that legitimacy is an effect of a performance situated in practice. I believe this to be an important aspect of consultancy work, since it is a practice which is constantly met with trials of relevance in need for signaling knowledge, overview, and value. To paraphrase

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2 Nicolini (2013) presents a ‘tool-kit’ for practice-based studies where he presents praxeology, communities of practice theory, ethnomethodology, activity theory, the practice theory of Theodore Schatzki and discursive approaches.

3 This statement is slightly different to the interest of Bourdieu who argues that ‘The magical efficacy of these acts of institution is inseparable from the existence of an institution defining the conditions (regarding the agent, the time or place, etc.) which have to be fulfilled for the magic of words to operate (Bourdieu, 1991: 73). The performative power of speech acts is conditioned on being acts of institutions’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 73), which further depends on the symbolic efficacy assigned to these institutions. The practice-based stance, I am advocating for, however, focuses more on the situated accomplishment and less on institutional structures.
Garfinkel (1967: 9), consultants are often in a precarious situation during their interventions, where they have to make their position count ‘for another first time’. To some extent it is possible to exemplify legitimacy from a performative approach if one replaces power with legitimacy in the following sentence: ‘when you simply have power – in potential – nothing happens and you are powerless, when you exert power – in actu – others are performing the action and not you’ (Latour, 1985: 265). The point is that legitimacy is an effect of action which becomes visible by the actions of others as an effect of the legitimate performance. This statement also illustrates the point made by Cooren and Sandler (2014: 236), namely that positions always have to be shared with others in order to become legitimate. In other words, and like also argued within actor-network-theory (e.g. Latour, 2005: 211), action is distributed, and a legitimate action is shared with actors recognized as relevant. A range of actors must be assembled in order to achieve legitimate performance as will be shown in chapter 3.

This short presentation of a practice-based view on legitimacy (will be elaborated in chapter 3) may give rise to a few questions. Many related terms might have been chosen, such as justification, authority or maybe even power and expertise, since I consider those terms entwined. For instance, Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) question how positions are ‘justified’ by people and infer six categories (policies), which all count as ‘legitimate orders’. The same can be said for authority which in Weber’s (1958) writings is considered as a legitimate form of power, which is able to impose some kind of order. With regard to power it again can be argued to be entwined, as I have already indicated through the previous quote from Latour. Power is, however, a contested term and to make a long story short, I will refer to Follett’s (1942) classical distinction between power over and power with. Power over is usually considered as a matter of position, for instance, with reference to hierarchy or gender. In contrast power with, is a conception of power more in line with the Foucauldian concept of power, which is shaped by discursive practices and is not repressive but produces effects (Foucault, 1978). This conception of power is closely related with legitimacy as a performative effect and as presented here, and the difference might rather be empirical questions. However, I consider the concept of legitimacy to provide sensitivity towards norms and values which are of importance to the precarious situation of a consultant.

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4 Latour (2013) nonetheless criticizes the concept of legitimacy for referring to some kind of subtle power underneath. This critique is what I try to overcome by making legitimacy a performative effect enacted in practice.
**Coming up with a research question**

Recognizing that legitimacy is a contested and complex term, I explore the term a bit closer prior to setting up my research question. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) legitimacy means a matter of ‘being legitimate’ and different definitions are provided in relation to this.

1. To render lawful or legal, to give a lawful or legal character to; to authorize by legal enactment. In early use, to give (a person) a legal claim to (something) (OED)
2. For which there is a fair and acceptable reason (Oxford Learner’s dictionaries)
3. Conformable to law or rule; sanctioned or authorized by law or right; lawful; proper (OED).
4. To affirm or show to be legitimate; to authorize or justify by word or example; to serve as justification (OED)

Etymologically speaking ‘legitimate’ is derived from *lex* (meaning law) and has to do with making or declaring to be lawful. This might seem like splitting hairs over how legitimacy matters in consultancy work; however, I think it says something about what ‘to become legitimate’ could mean. Words like proper, authorize or justify, fair and acceptable reason are used, and in general it tells something about legitimacy as an aspect of the normativity or values constituting a practice. In other words, legitimacy also has to do with becoming credible. This is obviously not to be confused with being legal; as Suchman (2008) argues, one can be a legitimate participant in an illegal gang. Hence, what counts as legitimate in a practice can thus be inferred through the attachments to principals, concepts, contracts or a range of other actors. What is at stake in a consulting practice is how this relates to the client practice? Although my empirical research takes place mostly in a healthcare context, among internal consultants doing process consulting, I raise a rather generic research question. Those contextual dimensions indeed pose limitations to my study and it might seem at odds with my philosophical position to choose such a generic research question. I will elaborate on my choice and its limitations in the methodology section. As my inquiry centers on how legitimacy matters in consultancy work subscribing to the idea of process consulting, I raise the following research questions:

- How does process consulting become legitimate in practice?
- What is the role of tools and concepts in accomplishing this kind of work and connecting to the client practice?
A range of words are used in the research question, and I will briefly elaborate on my choice of terms (marked with *italic*). The term *process consulting* will be elaborated on in **chapter 1**, however, as already mentioned, the concept is chosen as a heuristic concept based on the consultants’ own descriptions of their work. I have chosen to use the notion of *concept* and *tool* as well even though these are highly entwined. Although ideas and theories can be regarded as *tools* in a pragmatist sense, I use *concept* in relation to ideas, theories and labels deployed by the consultants. The notion of *tool* is used to emphasize the use of things or technologies to achieve something, for instance, a group technology could be a tool. In order to address these rather broad questions, each paper in the dissertation has a research question which will be used. How do soft management consultancy practices provoke their object of concern and make them amenable for intervention? What are their performative effects and how do such practices gain legitimacy and credibility? And what will an ethnographic exploration teach us about the modes of knowledge they value? Those questions also have theoretical relevance to what legitimacy and performativity actually mean from a practice-oriented perspective and in relation to intervention practices (knowledge) in general.

*Dissertation structure*

In this section, I will outline the dissertation structure. This is partially done through table 1 below, which provides an overview, followed by short description of how the empirical papers (chapter 3-6) interrelate.

**Table 1: Dissertation overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Research question, content and contribution</th>
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| **Chapter 1** | Content: The chapter provides a review of two bodies of literature, critical consulting studies and psychology-based consulting studies. I identify how the research problem is positioned in the literature and provide a historical overview of the psychology-based approach that has animated process consulting.  
Contribution: To discuss the research problem in relation to current studies of consulting and position process consulting as part of a long stream of psychology-based consulting studies. |
| **Positioning the dissertation in the literature** | |
| **Chapter 2** | Content: The chapter outlines the methodological considerations of the dissertation. Subsequently I will outline how I conducted my fieldwork, analysis and writing and introduce the main methods used; observations, interviews and document studies. |
| **Methodology** | |

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3 My distinction is a condensation of the difference I infer from the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary
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<tr>
<th>Chapter 3</th>
<th>Research question:</th>
<th>Content: The paper suggests doing a ‘legitimacy inversion’ with regard to the role of legitimacy in consultancy work. This means that legitimacy is seen as neither belonging to the consultant or to the client, but is an ongoing and fragile performance situated in practice. The paper is based on an in-depth empirical case of a consultant-led leadership development program among a group of leaders at a medical department. The case illustrates how legitimacy was important for the consultant-led program to become pragmatically effective, and how this resulted in only partially anticipated outcomes.</th>
<th>Contribution: By deploying a practice-oriented stance to legitimacy the contributions of the paper is threefold. Firstly it contributes to discussions of legitimacy in consultancy work, secondly it contributes to recent discussions of a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on legitimacy, and thirdly to the relation between different ‘professional practices’.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Research question: How do tools shape the consultant-client relation and what do they enable?</td>
<td>Content: The paper focuses on the role of tools in consultancy work. It explores how a simulation tool was deployed in a consultant-led development process in order to make the participants reflect on their everyday practice. By using Lewin’s concept of atmospheres in combination with Gibson’s theory of affordances, we suggest that tools can provoke a seductive atmosphere. This tool mediates the relation and engages the participants. Also it allows the consultant to control the process and to provoke an organization amenable for intervention.</td>
<td>Contribution: The paper contributes to discussions of the role of tools in consultancy work by illustrating how tangible dimensions matter to the consultant. Furthermore it contributes to recent discussions of the politics of consultancy work. The paper illustrates how politics can be understood as atmospheric affordances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Research question: How does the core task concept translate in developing organization? And how does it relate to practical organization?</td>
<td>Content: Consulting is known as an activity which is often enabled by concepts, theories and models. This paper provides an example of how a concept is used in consultancy practice to evoke a legitimate attempt of developing organization. This paper focuses on how the concept of ‘the core task’ was deployed in a consultant-led development process at a hospital. The article</td>
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shows how the concept produced conceptual tension between the ‘ideal
organization’ and an ‘actual organization’.

**Contribution:** The paper contributes to discussions of the performative effects
of concepts in the practice of consulting in a public sector organization.
Furthermore it contributes to discussions of the legitimating role of concepts in
consultancy work and questions what kind of organization concepts
constitutively shapes.

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<th>Chapter 6</th>
<th>Research question:</th>
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<td>Making consulting valuable: A matter of assessment?</td>
<td>What are the performative effects of assessment tools in measuring learning from consultant-led development work?</td>
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**Content:** This paper discusses the many attempts to evaluate consultancy work
and planned change processes. Empirically the paper builds on a case study of
a leadership development effort in a global organization, which was assessed by
an internal consultancy unit in collaboration with an external management consultancy. The assessment was part of trying to document improvements of consultancy. The paper investigates how the change intervention was made valuable.

**Contribution:** This paper contributes to discussions of the impact of consultant-led leadership development. By investigating the apparatus used for making development valuable, the paper contributes to the discussion of the use of social science methods in organizations.

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<th>Chapter 7</th>
<th>Content:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>In the concluding chapter I discuss the overall contribution in relation to the research questions. This will include implications for theory and practice as well as general limitations of my study.</td>
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Although the papers were not designed to have a pre-defined order, they do together address the research questions and are related as follows: Through the first paper (chapter 3), I aim to situate a practice-based and performative conceptualization of legitimacy. This paper provides an understanding of legitimacy as an important part of consultancy work, which is essential to the performative effects created in the client organization. Here legitimacy cannot be grasped as something given; rather by enrolling allies and activating connections, it is an ongoing performance that emerges through translations and transformations. The legitimacy of the consultant-led program is created by being able to activate certain actors who are considered as relevant to the client.

The second paper (chapter 4) aims to illustrate how tools are deployed by the process consultant. A range of tools were deployed during my observations. The simulation tool, which is in focus,
illustrates a contemporary ‘human technology’ (I will elaborate on this term in chapter 1), which was widely deployed by the consultants. The paper illustrates how a tool and the physical configuration of the room enabled the consultant to control the process as a legitimate authority. Also the paper suggests that the legitimate authority of the process consultant partially can be understood as a result of the creation of a certain atmosphere for development.

The third paper (chapter 5) relates to the research question by illustrating how theories and concepts are important vehicles in mobilizing and legitimating the work of the consultant. Consultants’ role in translating theories and concepts in organizations is well known, and the consultants I followed also deployed various concepts and theories. The paper provides an empirical example of how a concept works as a vehicle in the consulting process and works as ordering devise, which affords a legitimate attempt to develop organization. The fourth paper (chapter 6) aims to discuss how consultancy work is accounted for. This paper differs from the rest of the chapters as it is situated in a private organization. Attempts to evaluate consulting were also evident at the hospital; however, the private company provided a particularly apt case for how this aspect of consulting is conducted. Evaluating consultancy work, by turning impact into numbers, can be read as both an attempt to test consultancy services and turning intangible services into value-able. This aspect of consultancy work, which many are calling for, provides a case of how consultancy services communicate legitimately through tangible numeric values.

By addressing the overall research question through the just outlined chapters, my theoretical ambition is twofold. Firstly, by conducting a practice-oriented study of consultancy work, I aim to contribute to the scarcity of studies interrogating consulting in practice (Sturdy, Handley, Clark, and Fincham, 2009). Although the kind of consultancy work in focus implicitly is discussed within other areas, such as leadership development, the amount of studies also here remains limited (Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015). As Sturdy (2002: 134) notes with regard to consulting, ‘very little research explores knowledge diffusion in action, through observation’. To cite Whittle and Mueller (2011: 189), this creates a ‘significant omission’ in the literature. Often studies are conducted primarily through document studies and interviews, which means that some practical controversies that potentially provide valuable insight, are at risk of being omitted. Therefore I argue that my practice-oriented stance contributes to expanding studies interrogating consulting in action. As Nicolini (2013: 2) argues, practice-based approaches potentially seem to ‘offer a new vista on all things organizational
(and social)’. In other words, discussing the very concrete details of consulting allows me to address the just described problem in the literature.

Secondly, by interrogating how legitimacy matters to process consulting, my ambition is to overcome the scarcity of critical studies on process consulting (e.g. Fincham, 2003; Sturdy: 2011: 527). Most academic studies of process consulting still seem to be oriented towards how process consulting can be used for enhancing organizational learning or human relations improvement (Lambrechts, Grieten, Bouwen, and Corthouts, 2009). Although process consulting has been related to political agendas (Cooke, 1997; Engwall and Kipping, 2004: 247; Murrell, 1994), and although calls have been made for ‘new political research agendas’ with regard to consulting within this tradition (Sturdy, 2009: 461)⁶, the politics of researching and consulting in this tradition are largely neglected⁷. Process consulting often promotes an ambition of enhancing organizational practice through learning (see chapter 1); this ambition is hard disapprove of and it seems reasonable to question what the politics of researching and doing process consulting are? (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Jones et al. 2015; Sturdy, 2009). I believe focusing on how legitimacy matters to process consulting provides an apt approach for discussing how politics might be conceptualized differently in consulting studies.

In sum, the study seeks to provide a practice-oriented stance to the study of legitimacy in process consulting practice. This focus will allow me to discuss how consulting might be understood as largely deploying or imitating many recent developments in late capitalism. By relating to the historical review in chapter 1, my aim is to illustrate how consultancy work attempts to provide legitimacy and how this relates to client practices. This not only matters to process consulting, it also allows me to discuss, more generally, how consultants assert value and produce effects in the client organization. The dissertation will end with a discussion of the managerial implications.

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⁶ Sturdy (2009) encourages new research agendas on the politics of management learning and (process) consulting
⁷ In their interrogation of the history of industrial psychology, Rose and Miller (2013) however provide perspectives on the politics of therapeutic work in organizations.


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CHAPTER 1
POSITIONING THE STUDY IN THE LITERATURE

A literature review on consultancy work in management and organization studies reveals that the ‘the consultant’ figure has been portrayed in many different ways and has been investigated from a number of perspectives. Consultancy work appears under various names such as management consulting, change agency, facilitator and adviser, and many attempts have been made to group consulting into categories (Czander and Eisold, 2003: 489n) or different perspectives (Buono and Poulfelt, 2009). For instance, Buono and Poulfelt (2009) define four perspectives: firstly a functionalist perspective assuming that consultants can provide value and hence aim to provide models and principles for consultancy work (e.g. Block, 2011, Gallesich, 1982) or suggest certain aspects like trust as a basic vehicle (Maister, Green, and Galford, 2000). Secondly, an experience-based perspective, which is based on consultants’ own experience with the aim of substantiating their experience (Schaffer, 2002). Thirdly, a behavioural perspective, which is rooted in psychological, humanistic thinking and therapeutic approaches, promotes, for instance, process consulting and facilitation (e.g. Schein, 2008). Finally a fourth critical perspective depicts consultants as mostly theatrical performers or witchdoctors promoting fads and fashions (Alvesson, 1993). Resembling the two latter perspectives, I would argue that in academic literature two bodies of literature have been dominating; these can be categorized as critical and psychology-based studies of consulting; the latter has also been presented through the term organization development (OD).

Critical consulting studies


8 The review was made in Business Source Complete with a search string reflecting management consult*, consult*, process consult*, legitimacy*, change agency* in different combinations. The same search was made in psychINFO with only limited additional results.
9 They group consulting into twelve categories: (1) management consulting, (2) mental health consulting, (3) organizational development, (4) executive coaching, (5) technical consulting, (6) consulcube, (7) process consultation, (8) organizing consulting, (9) transformation consulting, (10) feedback/survey consulting, (11) team building, (12) re-engineering (Czander and Eisold, 489n).
10 Although Buono and Poulfelt (2009) describe a rather similar behavioral perspective, I will argue that the category psychological-based one is more appropriate since it has a broader span.
1992, Grint and Case, 1998, Salaman, 2001). According to Fincham and Clark (2002: 9), consulting literature was dominated by organization development (OD) approaches from the ‘late 1950s until the mid-1980s’. This approach was functionalistic and prescriptive in nature and largely examined ‘those factors that were perceived as maximizing its [OD consulting] effectiveness to organizational interventions’ (Ibid). Accordingly this literature ‘suggests images of the consultant as a skilled practitioner’ or as possessing ‘professional expertise’. In other words, it is a normatively positive image of the consultant role primarily directed towards practitioners, which describe the consultant through the metaphor of a ‘professional helper’ (Ibid). According to critical consulting studies, this means that the OD approach has overlooked aspects of legitimacy, power and the politics of consulting. In contrast, a critical perspective emerged (e.g. Alvesson, 1993, Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994, Jackson, 1996, 1999, Huczynski, 1993), which was mostly concerned with consulting imitating what Schön (1983) describes as ‘technical rationality’. To paraphrase Fincham (1999: 349), critical management scholars saw ‘in the rationalist aura of consultancy a system of strategies designed to build images of its own expertise in order to legitimize this to clients’. Accordingly, it is argued that there is no such codified knowledge in consulting (e.g. Alvesson, 1993, Fincham, 1999). It is a profession that lacks institutional support, for instance, in the form of an established education (McKenna, 2006, Glückler and Armbuster, 2003, Greiner and Ennsfellner, 2009). Likewise Clark (1995) argued that since consultant services are largely ‘intangible’, they gain legitimacy and assert their value by constructing realities which convince clients that they are offering ‘a high quality service’. Those arguments directed the attention towards consultants’ claims of rationality and expertise. This research agenda was primarily driven by critical management theorists describing consultants by means of a range of critical terms. For instance, ‘merchants of meaning’ (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990), ‘gurus’, ‘witchdoctors’, ‘wizards’ (Canato and Giangreco, 2011, Clark and Salaman, 1996), ‘traders of empty rhetoric’ (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994) or ‘corporate puppets’ (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark, 2009). This shift towards ‘critical consulting studies’ (Clark and Fincham, 2001) aimed at critical distance to the object of concern. According to the critical perspective, one of the problems with the former studies of consulting was that they were embedded in the activity of consulting. Hence, OD studies were not able to appreciate the ‘real problem’, which, in the critical literature, was considered a matter of convincing clients about ‘the value of their knowledge’ and legitimating certain activities (Fincham, 1999: 336, Handley et al., 2007). Referring to Guest (1990: 378), Salaman (2001) argues that in general the critical literature has discussed ‘how to explain the popularity and its [consultancy knowledge] apparent success in capturing the
imagination of academics and industrialists alike?’ Or in other words, if consultancy techniques and practices in general are flawed and invalid, how come they are so successful and how do they gain legitimacy? Although related, four main perspectives can be inferred from the literature in relation to these questions: (1) acts of persuasion, (2) uncertainty, (3) management fashions and (4) professionalism.

Firstly, Alvesson (1993: 1007) depicted knowledge intensive firms (KIF) as mainly rhetoric and positioned consultants as ‘in the business of rhetoric’. Along with many other practitioners of KIF, consultants would act more as professional persuaders or rhetoricians (Alvesson, 1993). Alvesson (1993) argued that in general consultants were characterized by ‘impression management’ and ‘ambiguity’; thus he suggested a sceptical attitude towards conceptualizations of knowledge in consultancy work (see also Alvesson, 2002), and he suggested speaking instead of ‘claims of knowledge’ or ‘skills’ (Alvesson, 1993: 1012). Increasingly the legitimacy of consultants was seen as a matter of ‘persuasive strategies’ or professional rhetoric, impression management and storytelling (Clark, 1995, Fincham, 1999: 336). Legge (2002), for instance, describes how consultants develop a ‘strong rhetoric or self-legitimation by enrolling participants into the machinery of total quality management’. This involves ‘linking claims to statements the client already believes in’ and of creating a ‘good story’ appealing to many (Ibid: 77). The good story means several stories or at least one good story with, what Giroux (2006) calls, a pragmatic ambiguity that enables various managerial ‘agendas’ to be addressed (Ibid: 86). Likewise, in analyses of management gurus, as another aspect of consultancy, it was argued that legitimacy is enabled by deploying storytelling as a technique that constructs attractive and appealing realities and identities (Clark and Salaman, 1996, 1998, Greatbach and Clark, 2005). With inspiration from the dramaturgical metaphor of Goffman (1959) and Mangham (1990), it is argued that the consultant, or the guru speech, is considered as a performance, which influences by being persuasive through, for instance, humour, gestures and stories (Ibid: Mangham, 1990).

Already in the idea of consultants as persuaders or rhetoric professionals, the nature of consultancy knowledge was extensively discussed. This gives way to another perspective on consultants’ legitimacy which basically subscribes to the idea of consultancy knowledge as ambiguous. It introduces ‘uncertainty’ as a driver of consultants’ ability to become legitimate. Fincham (1999: 339) writes ‘Consultants make their managerial clients receptive by unsettling them and playing on uncertainties, they offer attractive alternative scripts, and reinforce the message with follow-up
techniques’. Since management knowledge, by definition\(^\text{11}\), is uncertainty, it has been argued that uncertainty is the feed-stock of consulting. In other words, it is a matter of managers’ uncertainty with regard to their practice that enables consulting as a legitimate position (see Czarniawska, 2013, Fincham et al., 2013). Recalling the ‘persuasive’ argument, one could say that in this view a legitimate position is the result of consultants’ proclaimed expertise in matters of management, human relations or leadership, etc. Seeing consultancy as basically driven by uncertainty is also evident in the rise of the many management fads and fashions, which became popular due to uncertain clients seeking ways to create order.

The third perspective is inspired by sociological neo-institutionalism and it also relates consultancy work to management fashions or fads (Abrahamson, 1996, Benders and Van Veen, 2001, Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996, Ernst and Kieser, 2003). The main focus of some of this literature is on the ‘adoption side’ studying how come organizations involve consultants. An organization might decide to adopt a certain concept or practice. For instance, business process re-engineering, lean, public sector reforms, job evaluation packages, dialogic development, management development or coaching as a response to some institutionalized rational myths regarding performance (Engwall, 2003, Røvik, 2003). With the gradual institutionalizing of those concepts or practices, consultancies can be said to become legitimated due to institutional pressure leading organizations to adopt those concepts and practices and hence involve consultancies (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Kipping and Clark, 2012). From this perspective consultancies are mainly seen as legitimizing already existing knowledge or managerial agendas in the form of certain activities or decisions to be made (Alvesson, 1993, Faust, 2012, Handley et al., 2009).

Related to the perspectives described above, a fourth perspective can be inferred. I have chosen to call this professionalism since often it is related to the sociology of professions (Abbott, 2014, Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger, 2007, Fincham, Clark, Handley, and Sturdy, 2008, McKenna, 2006). However, it tends to emerge in the discussion on elite or expert status and the nature of management knowledge (Alvesson, 1993). Alvesson and Johansson (2002), for instance, suggest treating professionalism as a resource that consultants can deploy to enable ‘authority, status and credibility’ (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002: 228). In other words,

\(^{11}\) When I say ‘by definition’ I think of Simon (1959) who speaks of management as an artificial science, and Mintzberg (2010) who speaks of management as in-between art, science and craft. However, uncertainty can be argued to be more than a matter of management knowledge. Science and technology studies have vividly described how the production of scientific knowledge is a controversial process charged with ambiguity. This is also visible in the literature on risk where uncertainty is a key element (Arnoldi, 2009).
professionalism is an element of consultants’ discursive repertoire providing legitimacy to the consultancy position. Fincham et al. (2008: 1147) discuss this position arguing that consultants are indeed challenged in producing legitimacy and a solid knowledge base in a world that is ‘continually reconfigured’; however their outsider status or ‘otherness’ can afford a certain expert status. Fincham et al. (2008) illustrate this by ‘sector knowledge’. A consultancy might be a sector expert positioned at the ‘boundary’ between sector knowledge and firm knowledge helping to negotiate this boundary (Kitay and Wright, 2004, 2007, Sturdy, Handley, Clark, and Fincham, 2009). Exemplified through sector knowledge, Fincham et al. (2008) illustrate how certain categories of ‘outsider’ expert knowledge legitimate the consultant arguing that professionalism and expert status have a particular status in consultancy work. Likewise Wylie et al. (2014) discuss jurisdictional claims of change agency among internal HR and OD consultants also in relation to professionalism. From an interview study they infer three main sources of legitimacy and credibility. Firstly, they argue that ability to claim ‘expertise’ in change processes is an essential part of becoming a legitimate change agent. Secondly, they discuss ‘relationships’ as an important source, for instance, to a diverse client base or senior management (see also Wright, 2009). Thirdly, they found that ability to demonstrate ‘added value’ was essential to gaining legitimacy and credibility among the interviewed consultants. Through their study they suggest relating legitimacy to credibility, writing: ‘As Sobel (1985: 557) argues, “someone becomes credible by consistently providing accurate and valuable information or by performing useful services” [...] credibility in any meaningful sense cannot exist without legitimacy, meaning, it is unlikely trust will be placed in those who have no legitimate claim to insight in a specific domain’ (Wylie et al. 2014: 99). This idea of credibility relates to the conception of legitimacy, which will be outlined in the research question section. While these discussions of professionalism and legitimacy provide insights into legitimacy, they also are contested in critical consulting studies. For instance, it has been argued that treating consulting as a profession is problematic due to the lack of institutional back-up as regards education (Armbrüster, 2006, McKenna, 2006). Likewise Alvesson and Johansson (2002) argued that studies treating consultants as professionals seem to be slightly more functionalistic or pro-consulting compared to most critical consulting studies. Nonetheless, studies such as Fincham et al. (2008) and Wylie et al. (2014) indicate

12 Boundaries have been argued to be an important aspect of consultancy work, where consultants are working at the boundary and their ‘difference’ is what provides legitimacy to their work. What is essential in this literature is how consultants constantly negotiate boundaries to balance between insider and outsider status (Smith 2009).
that consulting might provide other forms of professional legitimacy that are relatively different from classical professional jurisdiction but nonetheless equally real.

The critical perspectives on consulting have illustrated new aspects of legitimacy and politics with regard to consulting and management knowledge compared to previous OD studies. The CMS aim of ‘anti-performativity13 and non-prescriptive research (Founier and Grey, 2000: 172) has indeed been advanced from this position. Salaman (2001), however, emphasizes some of the issues that have been neglected on the critical agenda. He suggests studying what kind of knowledge consultants actually provide. What Salaman (2001) indicates is that a particular idea of knowledge, which belongs to a scientific mode of existence, with certain felicity conditions (see also Latour, 2013) has dominated the critique of consulting knowledge. Accordingly, what is needed is an investigation of what knowledge is and does in consultancy work not treating consultancy ideas (including fashionable theories) or practices as inferior to a particular scientific mode of knowledge. What Salaman (2001) and Fincham (2008) indicate is that consulting requires another mode of knowledge with other felicity conditions. Salaman (2001: 253) suggests that ‘consultancy projects contribute to the governmentality of organizations […] by supplying theories and proposals for the constituents of governmentality’. Further, citing Miller and Rose (1993: 75), Salaman (2001) argues that consulting projects and intervention make organizations and individuals ‘thinkable and calculable and amenable to deliberate and planful initiatives […] They re-imagine or re-invent the organization, the employee and the manager […] they claim authority to define the organization’ (Ibid). This neglect that Salaman illustrates relates to the scarcity of studies interrogating consulting in action, a gap which also has been noted by Sturdy (2002) and Mueller and Whittle (2011). But, what might a practice-based view afford? How can we grasp legitimacy, politics and the effects of consulting as enacted in practice?14

In other words, critical consulting studies illustrate very well how certain categories can be identified to describe how consultants become legitimate through acts of ‘persuasion’, managerial ‘uncertainty’, ‘management fashions’ or concepts and claims of ‘professionalism’. Also critical consulting studies have illustrated how legitimacy can be understood in relation to exogenous actors or institutionalized rational myths (Berglund and Werr, 2000). But the practical engagement with a client15 (Fincham,

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13 This use of performativity seems more similar to Lyotard’s use of the term but is not related to how I use it.
14 There are few examples, for instance, Handley et al. (2006, 2007) who deploy a communities of practice and situated learning perspective on consulting.
15 Although there was a special Scandinavian Journal of Management issue (see Alvesson et al. 2009), the argument is still valid. Werr (2002) discusses client learning but emphasizes the scarcity of studies; the same is repeated by Sturdy, Werr and Buono (2009) who question how clients assess and evaluate outcomes. Sturdy et al. (2009), for instance, argue: […] there is a need to follow the trail of consultancy interventions further to those diverse groups who
2012, Schwartz, 2009, Werr and Styhre, 2002) and particularly consultants working with OD or psychology-based consultancy have been largely omitted in critical consulting studies (Sturdy, 2011). For instance, Sturdy (2012: 479) questions the difference between management consulting, organization development and other kinds of consulting such as process consulting, facilitation and business coaching (Nikolova, Clegg, Fox, Bjørkeng, and Pitsis, 2013, Segers, Vloeborghs, Henderickx, and Inceoglu, 2011). Still aspects of legitimacy, politics and power within OD or ‘organizational therapeutics’ (Schein, 2006a) seem to remain but are not interrogated (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, Cooke and Burnes, 2012, Nikolova and Devinney, 2012). Also new psychological perspectives keep being brought into the managerial realm; this includes re-interpretations of process consulting (e.g. Bushe and Marshak, 2012, Lambrechts et al., 2009, Rose and Miller, 2013), ‘systemic consulting’, which has been popular in German-speaking areas (Mohe and Seidl, 2009: 2011) but also in Denmark16, positive psychology (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros, 2003) and narrative therapy (Barry, 1997, Kure, 2008). Salaman suggests (2001) that the task is to investigate the apparatus17 that authorizes consultants’ work projects, ideas and theories. This includes how work and any kind of managerial knowledge claim must be taken seriously. However, knowledge comes in different modes and is not something consultants possess. To paraphrase Gergen (1991, 270), knowledge is rather ‘something that people [and things] do together’.

In sum, critical consulting studies thus seem to provide an outset for discussing legitimacy, politics and effects of OD and psychology-based perspectives. In the following section, I will trace what has been referred to and “packed” into the term ‘process consulting’ or ‘organizational therapeutics’ as Schein (2006) calls it. Drawing on Callon (1986) this story can be seen as a partial mobilization of applied behavioural or social sciences and psy-disciplines in the managerial realm and partially a story of how political, economic, expert and technological agents became interested and enrolled in a cross-Atlantic network to mobilize an organizational psychology and Schein’s process consulting.

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16 In Denmark consultancies such as Ramboll Management Attractor, MacMann Berg, Dispuk and several small agencies promote a systemic approach, which is inspired by systemic family therapy. This is no new approach, since Schein claims inspiration from those perspectives.

17 Salaman (2001) draws the term apparatus from Foucault (1991: 81), which emphasizes all the equipment that makes up practice.
The therapeutic habit of organizational consulting:
From industrial engineering to social engineering

As already mentioned, my focus will be on what Schein describes as process consultation, which I understand as a heuristic concept part of the larger psychological machinery of organizational consulting. What I discuss is indeed related to what has been described by Rose and Miller as the incorporation of psycho-disciplines in the managerial realm. The development of this kind of work can be seen as part of what Costea, Crump and Amiridis (2008) describe as ‘the ideological and technical apparatus of HRM [that] performs nowadays the function of legitimating the utilization of subjectivity as the key resource for productivity and competitiveness’ (Costea et al. 2008: 671). I will argue that it is possible to understand this stream of psychology-based consultancy work and research as constitutive for a particular ‘habit’:

[...] habits are arts. They involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials. They assimilate objective energies and eventuate in command of environment. They require order, discipline, and manifest technique. They have a beginning, middle and end. Each stage marks progress in dealing with materials and tools, advance in converting material to active use (Dewey, 1922: 15-16).

Following Dewey, ‘habits means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli’ (Ibid: 33), habits ‘furnish us with our working capacities’ (Ibid, 22) but also evolve by use and practice. Burkitt (2002: 229) argue that habits are ‘not bound to eternal repetition, for complex human activity must be flexible and adaptable to various situations. Technique also is the tool, the instrument through which we achieve our ends, so it does not in every instance determine the outcome of the end product of the action’. Habit hence becomes an appropriate term to describe how different ‘human technologies’ (Rose and Miller, 1992) over the years have been constitutive of a ‘therapeutic habit of organizational consulting’18. Human technologies are drawn from Rose (1998: 121) who defines these as technologies that aim at ‘calculated transformation of human conduct’, which ‘comprise a range of related methods for linking together, shaping, channeling and utilizing the forces of individuals and groups in pursuit of certain objectives’. It is this ‘therapeutic habit of organizational consulting’

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18 In their article Costea et al. (2008) speak of the therapeutic habitus, with a reference to Thomas Aquinas, and argue that habitus is to be understood metaphorically as a matter of a ‘self-perfection invoked by managerialism (p. 676). They relate their critique to an aspect of ‘soft capitalism’, hence it is a more general critique, which is why I believe the term habit in the Deweyan sense is more appropriate, because it is exactly a technique of the body.
which I will argue has gradually institutionalized to partially enable ‘process consulting’ as a legitimate technique and term for consulting in contemporary organizations.

**A process of translation**

I will situate my historical outline of process consulting in the emergence of human relations and organization development in industrial organizations. This kind of consulting and research aimed to enhance managerial practice not by conventional industrial engineering but by beginning to focus on matters of leadership, human relations, collaboration, communication etc., viz. all matters of concern that aimed at engineering humans or in the words of Kurt Lewin (1946) ‘social engineering’. This kind of consulting tends to be found in HR departments but also in large consultancies often under the name of organization and leadership development and often occupied by practitioners with a background in the psy-disciplines (Alvesson and Johanson, 2002, Rose, 1998).

The history of human relations consulting is also a history of the rise of an idea of ‘applied behavioral science’ in the US and ‘human relations’ in the UK. This includes bringing ideas from mainly the psy-disciplines but also sociology into the practical managerial and organizational realm. Integrating inspiration from the psy-disciplines into the managerial realm is not a new thing and has already been illustrated to a wide extent (Rose, 1998, Rose and Miller, 2013); in fact almost from the dawn of seeing management as a science, psy-disciplines and management have been entwined and continued to evolve. Also consulting interests in human relations became particularly explicaded with the rise of psychological perspectives on management and what came to be known as applied behavioral science. Figures like Hugo Münsterberg (1913) – the often ascribed founder of industrial psychology (Bruce and Nyland, 2011) and Lillian Gilbreth (1914) were much inspired by Taylor’s scientific management movement and argued that knowledge about the psychology of the manager and the managed was essential to developing and learning management. Gilbreth (1914: 3), who was one of the first consulting industrial psychologists, argued that scientific management (SC) had demonstrated that ‘successful management lies on the man, not on the work […] It [SC] has further recognized that the man’s mind is a controlling factor in his efficiency, and has, by teaching, enabled the man to make the most of his powers’. Hence, Gilbreth emphasized that in order to understand this teaching element, a ‘psychology of management’, obviously related to the principles of scientific management, was imperative. A related contemporary, Mary Parker Follett (1926), who consulted

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19 While Taylor (1916) was concerned with the manager-employee relation, he was not interested in the worker as a human being per se.
various organizations, also noted that the psychological foundations of management were still underdeveloped (Follett, Metcalf, and Urwick, 1942). She argued that leadership and management in business organizations provided some of the most promising human group activities to societal change and also a promising terrain with regard to the study of ‘human relationships’ (Ibid: 249). Through her interventions among executives and managers, Follett outlined a psychology of business administration which was inspired by American pragmatism and made issues of power, authority, control, leadership, co-ordination and human relations central to the discipline of management (Follett et al., 1942). Many of Follett’s ideas are often argued to predate the results of Elton Mayo’s (1933) study at the ‘Hawthorne Works’ (McKenna, 2006, Stewart, 2009) and were indeed important to the practice of consulting, particularly the ‘feminine in consulting’ (Marsh, 2008).

After this brief introduction to some of the early contributions to human relations consulting and attempts to use ideas of psychology in management, I will now focus on five bodies of work that I argue to be constitutively significant to most human relations consulting in contemporary organizations. Those are the human relations programs of Elton Mayo, Kurt Lewin’s gestalt-inspired social psychology, the humanistic tradition of organization development that followed, the work at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, and finally contemporary incorporations of social constructionism and systemic therapy to developing organization. Although distinct, the five bodies of literature are indeed interrelated.

**Mobilizing the human: The human relations program in the US**

The Harvard professor and psychologist Elton Mayo’s (1924) human relations and industrial psychology program is seminal in positioning ‘human relations’ at the core of developing management (Trahair, 2006) and human relations consulting (O’Connor, 1999, Trahair and Bruce, 2012, Woodworth, Meyer, and Smallwood, 1982). Although Mayo did not aspire to management consulting at the outset and even ‘abhorred’ engaging with “unsophisticated” business men at the beginning of his career, he nonetheless came to act in a consulting role through different corporations (Trahair and Bruce, 2012: 57). In a description of the human relations ‘roots’ of consulting, Trahair and Bruce (2012) discuss how Mayo acted as a consultant or therapist at the Hawthorne experiments and moreover consulted groups of industrialists about what psychology could offer the industry (Trahair, 1984). Mayo’s contribution to consulting was, in other words, not like a typical management consultant, but more in the role of trying to push psychological ideas into the managerial realm. The results from the Hawthorne Works were interesting to the industry which saw the results as a
technology for overcoming industrial issues and ‘individual maladjustments’ in corporations (Gillespie, 1993: 113). The critical point became a legitimation of management authority that would now be able to solve those ‘maladjustments’ and overcome industrial conflicts (Nyland and Bruce, 2012, Trahair and Bruce, 2012). Trahair and Bruce (2012) present Mayo’s consulting engagement with industry as important to the mobilization of ideas on human relations. According to Bruce and Nyland (2011) the Hawthorne study was less well designed than its diffusion bears witness to; however it impressed business leaders since the study was ‘cloaked in facts and figures and emphasized that changes in supervision solved worker maladjustment and improved productivity’ (Bruce and Nyland, 2011: 398-399). This was enough to enroll businesses to his ideas and hence helped the ideas to translate further and enable a new demand for management education at Harvard (Ibid). Through his work Mayo supported the development of management and training of administrators in human relations, listening skills and counseling (Gillespie, 1993, Mayo, 1949, 1933: 183, O’Conner, 1999). An important tool for achieving this was the ‘counselling interview’, which was invented in the Hawthorne experiments. According to Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939: 288) – Mayo’s collaborators – the aim of the ‘counselling interview’ was that the ‘interviewer should do everything to help the worker to feel at ease’. Therefore the interview should include five rules; ‘(1)The interviewer should listen to the speaker in a patient and friendly, but intelligently critical, manner; (2) The interviewer should not display any kind of authority; (3) The interviewer should not give advice or moral admonition; (4) The interviewer should not argue with the speaker; (5) The interviewer should talk or ask questions only under certain conditions’ (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939: 287 in O’Conner, 1999). The ‘counselling interview’ has been argued to be a seminal tool in HR consultancy since it emphasized the improvement of attitudes (O’Connor, 1999). O’Conner (1999: 236) finds that Mayo incorporated this interview technique from psychotherapy into a managerial realm by suggesting training managers in this technique. Accordingly, this would help the manager ‘improve attitudes’ of employees and hence make them happier so they did ‘not join unions’ (Ibid). Although this technique sounds advanced, it resembles interview techniques one could find in modern business coaching; the ‘counselling interview’ also anticipates some of the ambitions of creating a safe climate where concerns can be shared in process consulting (e.g. Argyris, 2000, Schein, 2008). Mayo was interested in the interior and subjective states of the human in enterprise – attitudes more than physical work conditions (O’Conner, 1999), and Mayo’s program of applying ideas of psychology to management was extended by Douglas McGregor (O’Conner, 1999), who also was an important figure in organization development and consulting (Schein, 2011). Hence, even
though Mayo might not consider himself as a consultant *per se*, his work was nonetheless important to human relations consulting as it instrumental in institutionalizing a new mode of management development (Trahair and Bruce, 2012, Woodworth et al., 1982). It is worth mentioning that Mayo was reluctant towards the use of democracy as ideal (e.g. Mayo, 1949), and O’Conner (1999) places the thoughts of Mayo in a philosophical tradition prolonging Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli. Although this comparison might be appropriate in relation to consulting (e.g. Marsh, 2008), in comparison the later work of Kurt Lewin and in OD was oriented towards democracy.

*Mobilizing the consultant as action research: Kurt Lewin, social engineering and the idea of applied behavioral science*

Schein (1988, p. 239) positions Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) as an intellectual father to the idea of applied behavioral sciences, change programs, and organization development (OD) (see also Burnes, 2004, Burnes and Cooke, 2013a), and hence, as I will argue, Lewin is part of the institutional legacy of human relations consultancy work. Lewin was professor at MIT and did, with his many collaborators, contribute to consultancy work particularly by making the group a target for consulting and through the ‘action research’ technique. Like Mayo, but through different techniques, Lewin and his associates helped institutionalize training and development as a solution to ‘poor leadership’ (Bavelas and Lewin, 1942: 115), and argued that ‘[g]ood leadership is recognized as one of the outstanding conditions in any field of group life or cooperative endeavor’. In their work Lewin and his associates were inspired by Lewin’s social psychological field theory and borrowed from psychotherapeutic techniques and role play, for instance by incorporating inspiration from Jacob L. Moreno’s psychodrama (French Jr, 1945, Lippitt, 1943). In relation to OD Lewin’s work became particularly well known after his death in 1947. Burnes (2007) argues that Lewin’s rather unknown studies and extensive intervention program with several of his colleagues at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation was particularly important to the promotion of Lewin’s ideas in an organizational setting (see also Marrow, 1969). According to Burnes (2007: 220), ‘Lewin shared Chester Barnard’s view that organizations were cooperative systems; if workers did not give their cooperation willingly, the enterprise could not prosper’, thus many of Lewin’s ideas were put to the test at Harwood particularly and his action research approach became advanced. However, as Burnes also notes, it is through his ‘change steps’, the ‘Iowa experiments with styles of leadership’, ‘resistance to change’, ‘action research’ and through the National Training Laboratories (NTL) at the Gold Academy in Bethel, Maine, that Lewin’s work became particularly renowned (Bradford, 1967, Burnes and Cooke, 2012).
Lewin provided several key constructs to consultancy work, and besides the ones already mentioned, he provided a social psychology consisting of conceptions such as ‘social atmospheres’, ‘field’, ‘life-space’ and ‘boundary zone’ (Burnes and Cooke, 2013a, Lewin, 1947, 1939). These concepts of Lewin were central to his consulting work and therefore also to the aftermath of Lewin, which I will elaborate on below.

Lewin considered the consultant as a change agent (Madsen, 2001) who was leading a planned change processes. His consultant figure was depicted as working through an action research approach, which would enable Lewin’s rather hopeful ideas about how social science research could improve intergroup relations (Lewin, 1939: 82). Lewin was Jewish and had witnessed WWII and thus his concerns for intergroup relations were, at the outset, probably slightly different compared to Mayo’s concern about union-employee-manager relations. Lewin argued that action research could be the solution, which he considered to be research that ‘will help the practitioner’ (Lewin, 1946: 34). Lewin wrote ‘The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering’ (1946: 35). He promoted an action research approach, which was driven by scientific rigor and he used the term ‘diagnosis’ derived from the work of a surgeon or engineer to illustrate how the social management problem should be inferred from careful diagnosis involving ‘comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change’ (Ibid: 37). He continued arguing that ‘we should consider action, research and training as a triangle that should be kept together for the sake of any of its corners [...] the close integration of action, training and research holds tremendous possibilities’ (Ibid: 42-43). Lewin considered intervention and research to go hand in hand and provided great endorsement to aspiring management consultants in this “new” field since he argued there to be a ‘lack of competent training personnel’ that hindered ‘progress in setting up more experimentation’, in his view this was a ‘prerequisite for the progress in social science’ and ‘social management’ (Ibid: 42). His enthusiasm for this new approach to social science research is vividly enacted throughout the text as he concludes ‘It seems to be crucial for the progress of social science that the practitioner will understand that through social science and only through them he can hope to gain power necessary to do a good job’ (Ibid: 44). Lewin exemplified this action research approach through his work with changing food habits (Lewin, 1947) and several cases of organizational change (Burnes, 2007, Lewin, 1946). Lewin promoted theory as a tool; indeed it was Lewin’s contention that an increased theoretical vocabulary could enable human development proclaiming ‘Enthusiasm for theory? Yes! Psychology can use much of it’ (Lewin, 1951: 1). He was intrigued by the great rigor and formalism of a reasoning inspired by mathematical topological logic.
and he built this rigor into his theories of planned change. Lewin outlined a field theory which he used to understand how social groupings were ‘formed, motivated and maintained’ (Burnes and Cooke, 2013: 409). The field is what the action researcher or change agent has to deal with and is also part of the ‘life space’ of the individual or the group (Cartwright, Lewin, and Dynamics, 1951). ‘Life space’ is a mental space, which according to Lewin includes ‘the individual and his psychological environment’ (Lewin, 1951: 240). He argued life space to be linked to behavior through the following equation ‘behavior (B) is a function (F) of the person (P) and of his environment (E), B=F (P,E)’, and hence he concluded that ‘psychology has to view the life space, including the person and his environment, as one field’ (Ibid: 1951). Life space can in general be considered a psychological or mental space, which describes how the individual and its environment exist to the individual, whereas the field can be considered ‘the ecology’ of the life space meaning the ‘individual placed in social and physical surroundings’ (Nickelsen, 2013: 4). As a result, the life space or field analysis is not limited to the individual. The field analysis could be extrapolated to a group or institutions, which also would exist in a life space, which then ‘consists of the group and its environment as it exists for the group’ (Cartwright, 1951: xi). According to Lewin (1951: 191) the group would have different properties compared to the subgroups or individual members who constitute the group – a certain social atmospheres would emerge. Atmosphere was another of Lewin’s key terms, which he used to describe how different group dynamics were created. Lewin argued that ‘there exists a general cultural atmosphere which is the “background” for all special situations’ (Lewin, 1936: 4). In the famous Iowa experiment on various modes of leadership (autocratic, democratic and laissez faire), Lippitt along with Lewin argued that ‘[…] the social atmosphere is one of the outstanding characteristics of the total psychological field of the individual’ (Lippitt, 1939: 26). What Lewin called atmospheres or social climate elsewhere (Lewin, 1939) were used as a way to redirect attention from the individual to the group. However, compared to consulting addressing the physical configuration of the work, Lewin was interested, like Mayo, in the human or ‘the social’. Through the constructs of atmospheres and life space, Lewin seems to divide reality into a subjective and an objective reality or rather a physical and social or psychological reality. Lewin argued:

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20 As Burnes and Cooke (2012) note Lewin referred to life space through a number of terms; they mention ‘psychological environment, perceptual environment, psychological field, social field and force field’ (Ibid, 409).

21 Czarniawska (2014: 17) and DiMaggio (1979) relate Lewin’s field theory to Bourdieu’s notion of field and further to neo-institutional theory. Recognizing this inference I, however, have not found references to Lewin in Bourdieu, but Bourdieu like Lewin was inspired by the philosopher Ernest Cassirer, which might explain some of it.
I am persuaded that there exists a social space, which has all the essential properties of a real empirical space and deserves as much attention by students of geometry and mathematics as the physical space, although it is not a physical one (Lewin, 1939: 71).

Lewin argues that it is a set of forces within a field which guides the behavior of individuals and groups, and the life space, as a mental space, is largely constituted by culture that determines the ‘space of free movement’ of the one who acts (Lewin, 1939: 82). This insistence on psychological forces and a social space, which is not physical, might be the reason why Dewey and Bentley (1960: 141) criticizes the idea of life space as ‘mentalistically fashioned’. And also what led James Gibson (1986) to argue that a dualism was created between a phenomenal and a physical part of the object. This critique seems to be reasonable from a non-dualistic position. However, Lewin did not consider psychology or change and development as unrelated to physical facts or configurations, quite to the contrary (see Lewin, 1936: 20). With regard to organization development, Lewin provided rigorous nuances to development efforts as his work often would require rather significant changes. He encouraged one to consider ‘what conditions have to be changed to bring about a given result and how can one change these conditions with the means at hand’ (Lewin, 1943: 172). For instance, with regard to changes of food habits, this would require awareness towards the access to good products, earnings, group memberships etc. (Ibid: 173). Hence, Lewin argued that analyzing a life space would involve physical and social facts (Lewin, 1951: 196) stressing the importance of knowing ‘the physical and social conditions because they limit the variety of possible life spaces […] as boundary conditions of the psychological field’ (Lewin, 1951: 240). Moreover changes would mean that the consultant needs to consider the total social field, which also contains groups and subgroups, their value systems, relations (Ibid: 225) and forces of a vectorial character (Lewin, 1940: 27). In other words, Lewin, as a systems thinker, considered development to be grounded in the group and not in the individual:

It is usually easier to change individuals formed into a group than to change any one of them separately. As long as group values are unchanged the individual will resist changes more strongly the further he is depart from group standards. If the group standards itself is changed, the resistance, which is due to the relation between individual and group standard, is eliminated (Lewin, 1947: 228).

To Lewin the group provided a set of norms, which is an observable field of enabling and constraining social forces that affords what Lewin described as a ‘quasi-stationary equilibrium’ where certain
changes are desired and others resisted (Lewin, 1947: 199-200). Resistance is here described more as a kind of inertia in the group or system than a psychological thing to overcome; resistance to change is also what enables a group to keep up production even when members of the group become sick or other changes happen. Hence, Lewin concluded that change cannot be reduced to singular elements, such as motivation, but has to be understood within the field of social forces (Ibid: Nickelsen, 2013). According to Lewin, the difficulty would consist in changing the group standard since resistance then will be eliminated; in other words changing group standards would usually also change the individual (Lewin, 1947: 230). Changing group norms, Lewin argued, can be divided into three steps: unfreezing-moving-freezing and would involve a sort of “catharsis” (Lewin, 1947: 229) to change social habits. This was a difficult endeavor and hence Lewin supported workshops and isolated laboratories to help facilitate change, even though change often remained short-lived:

A change towards a higher level of group performance is frequently short lived; after a ‘shot in the arm,” group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency of the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective (Ibid: 228).

Accordingly, Lewin argued, the success of a change effort through a workshop would depend on the ability to create “cultural islands” where change in group standards could occur (Ibid, 232). This idea of a ‘cultural island’ in a way related to ideas of liminality in development efforts, which is a popular analogy in research on development efforts in contemporary organizations (Hirsch, 1987, Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, and Bourque, 2010).

In sum, although Lewin was not the one to invent the idea of leadership and organization development through workshops or T-groups (training groups), he nonetheless contributed through his writings and the later development of his ideas to translate and legitimate such work. Recalling the argument of Schein in the beginning of this section, the work of Lewin has indeed come to be vital for much consultancy work on change and development of organization. Lewin’s action research idea has had a strong influence on organizational learning and development consulting (Argyris, 1983, 1997, Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987, Schein, 1969: 2008) and also his change theory within change management consulting (Kotter, 1995, Weick and Quinn, 1999). Indeed Lewin’s work, in my opinion, has had a significant and influential role in institutionalizing OD consulting as a practice for developing organization. Lewin’s enthusiasm for the opportunities to solve organizational problems
by means of social science theory and social engineering supported the OD consultant as a change figure. Lewin’s consultant figure is indeed different from contemporary management consulting; however as already mentioned, management consulting is a diverse field, and Lewin probably did not anticipate how this could be translated further. The work of Lewin was developed further in an American tradition of National Training Laboratories and also inspired the London-based Tavistock Institute.

**The consultant as applied behavioral scientist: NTL and the Organization Development (OD) movement**

Lewin’s work was taken further through the National Training Laboratories (NTL) Institute, which was founded in 1946 (Hirsch, 1987) and was seminal in institutionalizing human and group relations training in organizational settings (Rose and Miller, 2013). Over the years, social scientists such as Ronald Lippitt, Chris Argyris, Warren Bennis and Edgar Schein were enrolled in the NTL Institute, but also various practicing and aspiring management consultants were interested and enrolled at the institute (Hirsch, 1987). The NTL Institute promoted development of ‘human relations consultants and a developing science of human relations’ (Benne et al., 1953: 27 cited in Hirsch, 1987). By incorporating insights from Lewin’s work and Moreno’s psychodrama new approaches to group relation development emerged (Bradford, 1967: 134). Miller and Rose (2013: 158) mention how Lewin’s assignment with the ‘Connecticut State Interracial Commission, to use his skills to train leaders in combating racial and religious prejudice’, was seminal in the invention of the T-group, which became a central technology at NTL. Through the T-groups the idea was to sensitize the ‘participants to their own behavior’ and what happens in groups (Burnes and Cooke, 2012: 5), thus the term ‘sensitivity training’ was introduced (Bradford, 1974). Like Mayo’s ‘counselling interview’, the T-group offered a ‘human technology’ (Rose, 1998, Rose and Miller, 2013), which was, according to Ronald Lippitt one of the founders of NTL, an operationalization of Lewin’s action research:

A group of people undertakes to make their own developing experiences in and as a group a major focus for inquiry and learning. They share openly their observations and interpretations of behavioral events in which they engage themselves both as participants and as observers. The development of the group is guided by continuing inquiry into the transactions between members and between members and trainers. Component of action, training and research are integrated in a powerful process of re-education (Lippitt, 1949 cited in Hirsch, 1987: 19).
The technology would be a laboratory for participants to learn about their self and group relations. According to Hirsch (1987: 20-21) the idea of the T-group and the further work in OD rested on an idea of reality as socially constructed and embodied a ‘female’ alternative to a ‘male’ interpretation of organizational reality. The consultants, who were leading a T-group, would ask questions, present interpretations and encourage interaction to make the participants discuss problems from their home organizations. Participants should be free to raise issues that might ‘anger or threaten other group members’ and in general the idea of the T-group would be to experiment with group behavior and to enable new understandings of how goals, strategies and organization can work (Hirsch, 1987: 29). Ultimately the T-group technology would enable changes ‘within an individual’, who would undergo a liminal process at an isolated ‘cultural island’ away from everyday practices (Hirsch, 1987: 32, Turner, 1987). The NTL movement invoked humanistic and democratic ideals to organization development (OD) and was a vehicle for the ‘human potential’ and ‘humanistic psychology’ movement that followed (Hirsch, 1987: 4). It was in other words influential regarding the potential of learning through self-reflection and improvement of relationships by reaching consensus about diverse reality interpretations.

Enabled by research grants, the NTL institute was at the outset driven by social scientific interests and the T-group became a key device in promoting humanistic and democratic values through action research (Hirsch, 1987: 46). This ability to interest and enroll universities, research foundations and social scientist in the NTL “program” was an important part of mobilizing and institutionalizing not only the T-group but also the very idea of applied social or behavioral science and hence OD as a professional project (Bradford, 1967). During the 1950s the group dynamics training at NTL started to interest industrial corporations and the NTL began to enroll aspiring management consultants who wanted to set up businesses on group dynamics based on the programs, and NTL also started to do external consultancy (Burnes and Cooke, 2012, Hirsch, 1987: 46-47). At that point the T-groups were not only a matter of addressing problems of individuals; as Rose and Miller (2013: 159) argue, it was also a matter of productivity; ‘hope was again to be invested in the economic potential of psychologically informed management of the enterprise’. This new and more commercially driven enterprise of human engineering was criticized internally at NTL (Benne, 1949 cited in Hirsch, 1987), and the effectiveness of the method was also questioned. Nevertheless the NTL Institute started to engage with organization development and, through a large assignment at Esso-Standard Oil in 1957-1958 and a following endorsement from the Foundation for Research on Human Behavior, the organization development (OD) approach expanded and became a way of life for many management
and organizational consultants (McGill, 1974: 104). This led to new fractions of the NTL Institute. It was argued that humanistic values made way for more bureaucratic interests, and at the same time a West Coast perspective interpretation emerged at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). At UCLA they had a stronger focus on personal growth and human potential (Hirsch, 1987, Porras, 2005). This combination led to much development without taking much notice of the organizational setting; as Jerry Porras, one of the key figures at UCLA, argues ‘The theory, very simply, was let’s transform the ways managers think about themselves and the ways they relate to people and solve problems and once we’ve done that, we can send them back home to transform their own organizations’ (Porras, 2005: 393). This idea resembled what Miller and Rose (2013:146) argue to be at the core of the Tavistock Institute, namely ‘how the few could change the many’. Again, I argue that this idea can also be seen in much business coaching where the idea is to change the individual or the small group in order to change the organization. Those developments were particularly important to the consultant figure and consultancy work in the American OD tradition. Along this work of mobilizing the program of applied behavioral science, which NTL had become spokesperson for, the research-based journal – The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science – was launched. This furthered the institutionalization of Lewin’s scientific ambition, namely OD or action research as an applied behavioral science. This work was also reached Denmark where the laboratory technology from the NTL Institute was translated by the social psychologists at Aarhus University (Madsen, 2001). Beside the mobilization of Lewin’s ideas through the group development work at NTL, academics related to NTL also started to take the work of Lewin further in relation to consulting; of particular significance was the work of Schein, Argyris and Schön, the latter two often in collaboration. Before I elaborate on the work of those three, I will make a short detour to the UK and the Tavistock Institute. Here Lewin’s ideas were also translated and ideas sharing resemblance with Lewin’s grew simultaneously with the later development in the US (see Burnes and Cooke, 2013b).

**Mobilizing consulting as group relations improvement: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations**

Parallel to the development in the States, a British tradition of OD emerged through what came to be known as the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) (Burnes and Cooke, 2013). During his late work Lewin became involved in TIHR and was part of founding the journal *Human Relations* in which two of his articles (Lewin, 1947a, 1947b) were published in the first volume (Neumann, 2005). Elliot Jaques (1948) declared that an important influence on his work was Lewin and his group as
well as the work of Mayo. Also Eric Trist (1976), another significant figure in the Tavistock tradition, declared to be intrigued by Lewin’s work, which indeed came to shape the Tavistock tradition of OD consultancy (Trahair and Bruce, 2012). Although mutually influencing each other (e.g. Miller and Rice, 1967, Schein, 1965, 2008) and although both could relate to Lewin’s work, they also developed independently (Burnes and Cooke, 2012: 2013b). Particularly the work of the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion during WWII (Bion and Rickman, 1943) became a cornerstone at TIHR. Bion (1961) developed a group theory, which illustrated that groups were not only an aggregate of individuals but would function with different group dynamics (Bion, 1961: 141). Hence, Bion distinguished between two different formations in groups, namely the ‘work group’ and the ‘basic assumptions group’. He argued that ‘every group, however casual, meets to ‘do’ something; in this activity […] they cooperate’ (Bion, 1961: 143). This is an activity oriented towards a rational task that belongs to the work group that is cooperating and that is able to define the task that it is performing (Bion, 1961: Rioch, 1975). Set against the work group, the basic assumptions group is another aspect of group activity that consists of fantasies about authority, which can obstruct the work group, he argued (Nickelsen, 2013). Bion also outlined a technology for group relations training, what came to be known as “the experience group” (Vikkelsø, 2012). The experience group can be considered as a counterpart to the T-group at NTL. Bion demonstrated and developed it through training managers and educationalists (Miller and Rose, 2013). It emphasized the opportunity for learning about leadership and authority as the group studied its own behavior. This idea of ‘experience groups’ or learning through experience in groups was indebted to Lewin’s ideas and T-groups, which got translated into a particular technology under the label ‘Leicester Conference’ (Miller, 1990). This technology was advanced at the Tavistock Institute under Ken Rice at the Center for Applied Social Research (again a counterpart to the Applied Behavioral Science at NTL) (Miller and Rose, 2013: 161). Rice describes the technology in the following:

‘In the structured groups of everyday life, the specific roles and role relationships, the procedures, the recognized standards and behavior, provide defenses against the recognition of underlying processes. For conference members in their relationships with each other these defenses has been removed. In short, the basic conference method is to construct situations in

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22 Beside Trist, Jaques and Bion, Ken Rice, Eric Miller, Melanie Klein and Isabel Menzies Lyth become central figures at TIHR.

23 Bion inferred three basic assumptions groups from his experiments: ‘a dependency group’, ‘a pairing group’ and ‘a fight/flight group’.
which the conventional defense against recognizing or acting on interpersonal and intergroup hostilities and rivalries are either removed or at least reduced (Rice, 1977: 73).

As Nickelsen (2014) notes it was this peculiar socio-technical arrangement which enabled a certain intervention to take place. The group of participants would work in groups and a consultant would assist the participants in analyzing their behavior as a group. In their historical review of TIHR, Miller and Rose (2013) argue that this turned into ‘The Tavistock Model’, which was mobilized as various institutions (universities, hospitals, churches) enrolled in the program of group relations training:

The construct of the group brought into existence a new domain of reality, a space for thought and intervention that was no longer confined to the consulting room. A new peripatetic laboratory for the study of human relations was opened up […] It could be re-created anywhere one could find six people, a room and a consultant […] What was offered to those who attended – what enrolled them into the therapeutic network – was a kind of fusion between a ‘self’ project and a ‘professional’ project: one could make oneself a better manager, teacher, prison officer, social worker, clergyman or nurse by making oneself, if not a better person, then, at least, a wiser one (Miller and Rose, 2013: 162-163).

The peripatetic laboratory became a technology for enabling new kinds of intervention, which according to Miller and Rose transformed expert authority into a therapeutic authority. NTL and TIHR were indeed closely related; however Kaplan (1985) argues that one distinction between TIHR and NTL could be that at the TIHR they study ‘people in groups’, while those related to NTL and training groups study ‘people in groups’ (Kaplan, 1985: 463). In other words, focus might be slightly more on the individual in the NTL tradition – particularly in the West Coast interpretation – compared to the TIHR tradition. From the position of TIHR, Miller and Rice (1967: 17) argue that the individual ‘is a creature of the group’ and that it has ‘no meaning except in relation to others with whom he interacts. He uses them, and they him, to express views, take action, and play roles’. Besides the work of Bion (1961), the psychoanalytic inspiration also came from Elliott Jaques (1953) and Isabel Menzies Lyth who worked on defense mechanisms and levels of anxiety, which provided the theoretical underpinnings of the group relations training. Hence, the purpose of group relations training and the ‘sociotherapeutic’ consultant role (Miller, 1976) was to enable an interpretation of group behavior, learn about leadership and assist participants in understanding their own behavior in relation to their everyday practice. This idea of becoming aware of oneself and how one reacts and acts in relation to others was, as Rose and Miller (2013) note, described as a balance between over-
interpretation with the risk of making a patient out of the participant and under-interpretation with the risk of ending up with merely a discussion of topics. The germ of the group relations training was to enable people to experience, on their own bodies, how leadership and authority affect, to gain skills in group behavior – not to get knowledge about group behavior (Rice, 1977: 71). In other words it was an experiential learning, which was promoted in the ‘laboratory’ that enabled particular modes of learning. By gaining this kind of experience, Miller and Rose (2013: 148) argue that people were transformed and that ‘to understand these ways of changing others is to understand something about power’. Drawing on Foucault, Miller and Rose analyzed the program promoted at TIHR not as a matter of ‘bending’ or as a matter of rendering ‘individuals passive and docile’ rather they consider it as a matter of ‘endowing individuals with new competencies, aptitudes and qualities. And these new attributes can in turn be conveyed by others, so that there exists a kind of “multiplier effect”, the generation of a surplus through each empirical injection of ideas and techniques’ (Miller and Rose, 2013: 148). Accordingly this is an engagement with ‘how the few could change the many’ (Ibid.) and a governmental aspect of the group relations training.

The consultant roles enacted through TIHR took form both as a psychoanalyst or ‘sociotherapeutic’ approach in group relations training (Miller, 1976) and as an action researcher with a dual purpose of research and organization development – particularly through the work of Eric Trist (Trihair and Bruce, 2012). Trist (1976) challenged a privileged expert consultancy role on planned change in developing organization and translated the idea of action research from Lewin into a matter of ‘joint consultation’. This consultancy approach was visible in the emerging organization theory at TIHR where organizations were considered as open socio-technical systems (Bamforth and Trist, 1951, Trist, 1981). The open systems approach would mark how ‘any human system depends upon continuous interchange with its environment, whether of materials, people, information, ideas, values or fantasies’ (Miller, 1990: 72). This conceptualization deployed Lewin’s concept of ‘boundary’, not in the sense of a ‘strict line’ but in the sense of a ‘region’ (Miller, 1990: 172), which would mark how human systems were related to their environment. With inspiration from Bion, the concept of the primary task was coined and organization was considered as oriented towards a primary task ‘around which organizational boundaries may be drawn’ (Ibid). The concept of the ‘primary task’ worked as a heuristic concept to the consultant role (Rice and Miller, 1967); it was first defined as ‘the task which it [the organization] is created to perform’ and later, since the former was believed to be unfortunate static (Rice, 1963: 185), ‘the task it [the organization] must perform if it is to survive’ (Dartington, 1987: 1478). The socio-technical dimension of the organization would emphasize how
development of organization should strive for ‘joint optimization’ of the “social” and “technical” system (Bamforth and Trist, 1951). Rice argued that those aspects would require different modes of awareness: the ‘technological demands place limits on the type of work organization possible, but a work organization has social and psychological properties of its own that are independent of technology’ (Rice, 1958: 4). Accordingly the consultant had to be aware of those dimensions in order to infer ‘what the primary task should be’ and to guide the intervention. By focusing on the primary task of the organization, it is rendered amenable for intervention with regard to both social and technical aspects. The consultant was, in other words, considered as the one who led the intervention with an obligation ‘to the organization, not to the individuals’ in the groups consulted (Miller, 1976: 9). Hence, the consultant’s objective would not just be ‘the solution of a problem, whether presenting or underlying, but also an attempt to leave the client equipped with greater problem-solving competence’ (Ibid). Although the consultancy approach, which one can infer from Bion (1961), Rice (1965), Trist (1976) or Jaques (1948) differs, what indeed is important is the emphasis on human processes and group dynamics. The consultant is considered as one who is able to provide ‘outside assistance’ (Jaques, 1948: 533) and who is able to analyze what is happening through a ‘joint consultation’. Porras (2005) argues that the socio-technical dimensions at TIHR never got that far; however, the psychoanalytic theory deployed at the TIHR can indeed be traced many places (Brown, 1967) also in late economic life (Miller and Rose, 2013). Again, like the NTL Institute, TIHR also contributed to mobilizing and institutionalizing an applied social science and OD or sociotherapeutic consulting. Indeed, Miller and Rose (2013: 46) argue that TIHR also took part in the attempt to instrumentalize ‘the relational life for economic ends’. This was accomplished by promoting group relations and leadership and making them amenable for intervention and improvement. Miller and Rose argue:

Leadership could be utilized as a resource for management, not only the leadership capacities of the top employees, but also those of crucial intermediaries such as foremen. The key to this technology was that leadership could be re-conceptualized, not as an individual quality to be obtained by careful selection procedures, but as the effectiveness of an individual in a specific role within a specific group united for a particular purpose. Hence leadership could be produced and promoted by a relational technology of the workplace, a calculated reorganization of the relations of persons and tasks (Miller and Rose, 2013: 46).
In sum, I argue that TIHR provides a relevant and interesting site for the managerial and organizational history that matters to this dissertation. The development at TIHR influenced both NTL and further developments in that tradition – particularly the work of Edgar Schein, but TIHR also contributed to making groups target for intervention and improvement in contemporary organizations along the US tradition.

**Mobilizing consulting as learning and help**

As already mentioned, Tavistock and Lewin’s legacy mutually influenced each other across the Atlantic, which became particularly visible in the OD consulting approach that emerged in the US. Like Lewin and Mayo it placed the human side of work at the center of organizational effectiveness and was advanced by Edgar Schein, Chris Argyris, and Donald Schön, who also incorporated the humanistic psychology and client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers (Schein, 2008, Schön, 1987). The T-group was essential for this further development (Burnes and Cooke: 2012). Amongst those, Argyris (1964) was a proponent of T-groups and aimed at evaluation of the effects of this kind of work (e.g. Mangham and Cooper, 1969). Accordingly managers in large American corporations, who ‘were hindered by pyramidal [bureaucratic] values, could use T-groups’ and it would work as a technology ‘to help them develop leadership values that would promote innovation and employee commitment’ (Burnes and Cooke, 2012: 7). Argyris and Schön redeveloped Lewin’s action research idea and invented new ‘human technologies’, such as the left-column exercise, which I will address below, to address the “interior” of the human worker. Likewise Schein (1969) was interested in group development and promoted what he called process consulting as an essential part of OD.

Along an academic career at highly estimated universities, Argyris and Schön consulted a range of organizations and worked with executives on different development programs24 (Argyris, 1991, 1997). Through this work, Argyris and Schön advanced Lewin’s action research idea. Argyris (1983: 115) inferred six characteristics from Lewin’s (1946) action research: ‘(1) it was problem driven, (2) it was client-centered, (3) it challenged the status quo and was simultaneously concerned with (4) producing empirically disconfirmable propositions that (5) could be systematically interrelated into a theory designed to be (6) usable in everyday life’. Hence, Lewin’s enthusiasm with group development through action research was translated further by Argyris and Schön as they promoted

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24 Beside his academic appointment, Argyris also acted as director at the Monitor Consulting Company (Parker, 2006). Monitor Consulting was started by, amongst others, Michael Porter who mobilized his five forces model through the Monitor (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Monitor was later taken over by Deloitte.
a certain mode of reflection (particularly in the work of Schön, 1983, 1987). Deploying a cognitive psychological vocabulary, Argyris and Schön (1978) argued that humans were programmed with certain ‘theories of action’ which described how ‘human beings in their interactions with one another design their behavior and hold theories for doing so’ (Schön, 1987: 255). Hence, Argyris and Schön distinguished between two theories of action: theories-in-use, which depict how people act in their everyday activities, and espoused theories, which are the theories people put forward to justify and explain their behavior. Following this distinction another distinction was introduced between model 1 and model 2 behavior. Human beings was considered as defensive reasoning by nature, and Argyris and Schön used the term model 1 behavior to describe a unilateral protection of self and one-sided control of tasks (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Set against the model 1 behavior Argyris and Schön suggested a model 2, which would be less defensive, and protection of self and control of task would be a joint enterprise. Accordingly theories-in-use in model 1 make people inclined to ‘single-loop learning’ – they do not test their theories in public, it was argued. Theories-in-use in model 2 would not be limited to single-loop learning, ‘double-loop learning’ could happen where the values and assumptions that drive behavior would be explicited in public, which would enable learning and suspension of most defensive routines. Inspired by Gregory Bateson’s (1942) concept of deuteron-learning, Argyris and Schön (1978) came up with the distinction between double-loop and single-loop learning. This distinction was important and significant as Argyris (2003: 1179) argues that ‘the knowledge and skills required to produce double-loop learning are significantly greater and more complicated than those required for deutero-learning on single-loop issues’. Through the technique called the ‘left-hand column exercise’, Argyris, (1976) argued that reflection could be provoked and the undiscussable could become discussable. The exercise would then consist in writing down a scenario (in the right-hand column), this scenario would portray what was said in a meeting and in the left-hand-column the thoughts, which were unsaid, would be written down. This technique was used to make practitioners reflect on their assumptions and encourage them to learn how to learn about their tacit values and assumptions. The ‘left-hand column exercise’ worked as a human technology that would make practitioners acquire knowledge in a bound learning environment and move towards model 2 theories-in-use, which then could be used ‘outside the learning environment’ (Argyris, 1976:43-54). It was presented as an advanced accomplishment, and Argyris (1976: 50) described how practitioners might have read their book, spoken to them and were able to espouse and invent model 2 intervention solutions to organizational problems. However often the practitioners still ‘were unaware that they could not produce’ model 2 solutions and hence were not able to act and
intervene beyond model 1 theories-in-use (Ibid). Argyris (1976: 51) argued that ‘in the hands of competent faculty [or consultant], these cumulative, self-sealing, and defensive reactions can provide the bases for a breakthrough to learning to learn Model 2’. This meant that people must learn about model 2 in order to be able to hold this kind of theories-in-use (Ibid: 54). Their mode of intervention enabled a consultant role, although this would not be a typical expert role: it would deploy behavioral sciences and work through dialogue rather than expert advice. The idea of organization development and human engineering through a consultant-led process where implicit knowledge is explicates through communication and other modalities such as writing (left-column exercise) was promoted. Their theory of organizational learning made an external intervention, very likely from a consultant, an important aspect of organizational development (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995: 46). This indeed can be read as an endorsement of management consulting, although Argyris (1997: 2000) argued that consulting needed to define how to be rigorous and its effectiveness should be testable. He concluded that Lewin’s and his own work with Schön was examples of ‘scholarly consulting’, meaning consulting that was ‘genuinely committed to help the clients build a better life’ (Argyris, 1997: 823).

The work of Argyris and Schön became a significant contribution for further legitimization and institutionalization of OD consulting and applied behavioral sciences. The work also influenced Schein (2008) and although he promoted another translation of Lewin’s action research program, he shares the affinity towards promoting organizational effectiveness and learning. Schein’s consulting ‘figure’ – the process consultant (PC), is presented as an eclectic concept deploying ideas from, amongst others, psychodynamics and the Tavistock tradition, Goffman, gestalt psychology, NTL, Carl Roger’s client-centered psychotherapy and systemic therapy (Schein, 2004: 2008). Although Schein came up with the notion of ‘process consulting’, many of his ideas were already described by Ronald Lippitt, who made a series of writings (G. L. Lippitt, 1959, R. Lippitt, 1959) on the consultant using the root metaphor – the consultant as ‘helper’ and with a particular interest in the psychology of consulting. Lippitt, however, did not speak of the process consultant, but used terms like human relations trainer, group therapist, management consultant, applied anthropologist and social psychologist to describe the ‘psychological outsider’ of the consultant (Lippitt, 1959a: 5). Schein (2006) describes it as a sort of ‘organizational therapy’, which aspires to intervene in ‘organizational pathologies’. Schein presents ‘"Process Consultation" and "Clinical Inquiry" to be essentially the same’ (Schein, 1995: 13), thus he deploys another concept from psychotherapy into the managerial realm but notes:
The more I examined process consultation and observed my own behavior as a consultant, the more I realized that what consultants do is very akin to therapy, but this formulation is not acceptable to most managerial clients (Schein, 2006: 297).

Like Lewin, Lippitt, Rogers, Argyris and Schön, Schein (2008) promotes the idea of the consultant as a ‘helper’, which becomes a pervasive metaphor in all Schein’s work (see 2011). Schein (1988: 4) illustrates the basic premise for the idea of the consultant as helper:

‘In reality, however, the manager often does not know what he is looking for and indeed should not really be expected to know. All he knows is that something is not working right and he needs some kind of help […] Managers often sense that all is not well or that things could be better, but they do not have the tools with which to translate their vague feelings into concrete action steps.’

It is a positive and functionalistic picture of the consultant that Schein presents where consulting basically is a mode of influence along teaching and therapy. The consultant can help by means of tools, which consist in working with boundaries, primary tasks and in general awareness towards emotional attitudes and the psycho-dynamics of the client relation (Schein, 2008). He argues that the consultant must work by helping people change by ensuring a strong ‘psychological contract’ where the individual ‘feels psychologically safe’ (Schein, 2006). The references to TIHR and Bion are many (e.g. Schein, 2006: 331); he deploys concepts such as boundary and primary task and the inspiration is also evident in the following passage:

To become motivated to change, we must accept the information and connect it to something we care about. The disconfirmation must arouse what we can call "survival anxiety” […] What typically prevents us from doing so, what causes us to react defensively, is a second kind of anxiety which we can call "learning anxiety," or the feeling that if we allow ourselves to enter a learning or change process, if we admit to ourselves and others that something is wrong or imperfect, we will lose our effectiveness, our self-esteem, and maybe even our identity. (Schein, 1996: 29)

Those are the difficulties the consultant must address. Schein draws from a range of psychological perspectives including the already mentioned psychodynamics but also cognitive approaches and humanistic psychology as he, for instance, argues that ‘the human mind needs cognitive stability; therefore, any challenge or questioning of a basic assumption will release anxiety and defensiveness
Hence he promotes an organizational psychological perspective with an emphasis on intervention in ‘human processes’ (Schein, 1969: 13; Schein, 1988). In Schein’s early work (1969), the distinction between an expert model, a doctor-patient model, and a PC model to consulting was outlined. He juxtaposes the expert and doctor-patient model to much mainstream consulting. The expert could, for instance, be a consultant tasked to solve an assignment with a pre-determined problem, for instance in the form of a requested survey. He illustrates the doctor-patient model by how a consultant can be brought in to an organization to ‘check them over’ as a way to figure out if things are working properly (Schein, 2008: 11). He exemplifies this latter version with how consultants ‘contract with senior executives to do extensive interviews in the client organization to find out what is going on, base their diagnosis on these data, and then recommend remedial projects to the client who initially hired them’ (Ibid: 12). Set against those two models, he presents the PC model as a ‘clinical perspective’ (Schein, 1995).

With this approach Schein (2006: 296) argues that he is indebted to Lewin and the saying ‘you do not really understand an organization (system) until you try to change it’. The clinical perspective is a sort of action research, which Schein argues has become split into two directions, one that favors the researcher’s agenda and another that is client-centered (the clinical perspective): he writes:

When Lewin first formulated action research it was clearly a case of the researchers wanting to figure out how to be more successful in implementing some changes that the researcher desired. He found that by involving the targeted population and getting them involved in the research process, they became more amenable and committed to the desired change. But the initial drive came from the change agent, and it was the change agent's goals that were driving the process. In this model action research involves the client system in the researcher's agenda, even though the client system might ultimately be the beneficiary. But the client did not initiate the process and it was not the client's needs that drove the process. It was the researcher's choice to involve the client (Schein, 1995: 2).

Instead of this approach to action research, Schein argues to side with the client. This does not mean that the consultant is not normative – he is, he argues, but the consultant traces ‘the client’s reality before imposing the consultant’s norms’ (Schein, 2006: 298). Schein regards the PC or clinical perspective as normatively sound. He argues that it will enable the consultant to be in a relationship with the client, which ‘(1) the client will regard as helpful, (2) that will enable the client to focus on the critical process events in his own environment, and (3) will enable the client to diagnose and
intervene in those processes to make his organization more effective’ (1969: 20). This means that the process consultant is an expert at giving help and at establishing a relationship with clients that make it possible to be helpful. He does not need to be an expert in marketing, finance, or strategy’ (Schein, 1988: 10). Therefore it not only becomes another kind of expertise but also another kind of authority, which resembles the therapeutic expertise and authority described by Miller and Rose (2013, Rose, 1998) in their interrogation of TIHR. For instance, Schein describes how a consultant can indicate that ‘she believes that members are working on a legitimate group-building task, not just wasting time’ (Schein, 2008: 180). This kind of influence requires an enrollment of the participants by which legitimacy and authority emerge through the “therapeutic” relation.

Although Schein argues that the change agency does not reside with the consultant, he is indeed translating and mobilizing the consultant position as the consultant now can be purposefully involved in order to accomplish change – the figure is a helper. Also, like Nickelsen (2013: 17) observes, the clinical consultant gets a privileged position. By having a particular ‘bodily responsiveness’ and sensitivity towards emotional responses, the PC figure can ‘provide insight into what is going on’ (Schein, 1987: 29 cited in Nickelsen, 2013) and switch roles ‘as she perceives the dynamics of the situation to be changing’ (Schein, 2008: 22). In other words, the consultant is aware that every action is an intervention in itself (Schein, 1995). Those ideas constitute the clinical perspective, which Schein (1995) prefers to describe through the figure ‘process consultant’ (to overcome corporate discrimination). Schein argues that the process aspect underscores a displacement from an interest in what is going on towards how it is done, the latter, he believes, is of the outmost importance. He exemplifies: ‘If I am talking to another person that is what I am doing, but I may be looking at her, looking at the ground, mumbling or raising my voice, gesturing or standing very still, all of which is how I am doing the talking’ (Schein, 2008: 146). This displacement is meant to provide a particular sensitivity in the consulting activity compared to the ‘expert’ and ‘doctor’ model. He adds that ‘the goal of PC is to increase the client system’s capacity for learning so that in the future it can fix its own problem’ (Schein, 2008: 17). Here he is referring to the work of Argyris, Schön, and Bateson on learning to learn – double-loop or deutero-learning. What Schein does through the PC figure is to do another translation of Lewin’s action research, which enables anyone to become a consultant. The PC position is not limited to a certain kind of consultant but is applicable to all kinds of “clients” in life, which he suggests can be found in obviously conventional consultant-client relationships but also in relationships between management and employee, friends, colleagues etc. (Schein, 2008: 18). Hence, the PC figure is not limited to a person hired as a consultant, Schein argues, and one should ‘avoid
concepts like “the process consultant” and think more in terms of “process consultation” as a dynamic process of helping that all consultants, indeed all humans, find to be appropriate at certain times’ (Schein, 2008: 22). In other words, the ‘expert consultant’ can also choose to incorporate a process consulting ‘mode of operating […] in any given situation’ (Schein, 2008:21).

In sum, Schein endorse a therapeutic habit to the consultant figure, which is closely related to what is known as business coaching (e.g. Clegg et al., 2007, Nikolova et al. 2013). Like business coaching Schein emphasizes dialogue and communication as the primary vehicle or modality for intervention. The consultant must, according to Schein, enable the client to learn to listen to themselves as a sort of introspection, which, however, is different from sensitivity training, he argues. It is more a matter of making ‘a group aware of its norms and shared tacit assumptions’, which is basically a matter of culture, he argues (Schein, 2008: 188) or ‘cultural ‘engineering’ (Kunda, 2009, Peters and Waterman, 1982). What Schein promotes is a particular ethics or moral principle of consulting, although recognizing that consulting firms or units must survive financially: ‘once consulting becomes a business, I believe it ceases to be consulting in the sense I mean it’ (Schein, 2008: 247). Hence, Schein promotes a certain kind of business humanism which imitates, obviously without the same philosophical rigor, ideas of help that can be identified in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Knud Ejler Løgstrup and Christian morality (Thejls Fischer, 2005). Indeed Schein is a significant figure in regard to the promotion and legitimation of a moral consulting figure that works in “the good cause of help”. Indeed this is a picture that is in opposition to Thrift (2005) who presents consultants as ‘capitalism’s commissars’. Nonetheless, the idea of consulting as ‘help’ is difficult, since it would easily turn into a philosophical discussion of whether help is a matter of intention or consequence, and if all kinds of help are equally good (see Thejls Fischer, 2005). The PC approach has, however, gained acceptance among many practicing consultants who describe themselves as doing PC. This kind of ‘organizational therapy’ has also been highly influential in relation to more recent developments in OD, such as more social constructionist approaches like appreciative inquiry, which Schein also endorses.

**Mobilizing process consulting through systemic therapy and social constructionism**

The writings of Schein have been very influential in consulting within late OD, and the early ideas of Lewin and TIHR have become translated and transformed to an extent where they tend not to be mentioned anymore (for a similar argument, see Burnes, 2004). Schein takes a rather eclectic position...
claiming to be inspired by systemic family therapy, humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and social constructionism in the form of appreciative inquiry, and hence he appears in various writings (Schein, 2008). While the OD movement goes in different directions, what becomes particularly prevalent during the mid-1980s and onwards, is an orientation towards systemic therapeutics and social constructionism particularly in Denmark and in German-speaking regions (Campbell, 2000, Campbell et al., 1991, Haslebo and Nielsen, 2000, Seidl and Mohe, 2009). This systemic orientation is also prevalent in several Danish and English handbooks on consulting (Campbell, 2000, Dahl and Juul, 2009).

Compared to the previous writings of NTL, Tavistock and the work of Schein, Argyris, and Schön, this approach deploys a different social psychology. Although sharing an affinity with Lewin and Bion in the sense that it places the client problem in the system or group and not in the individual, this changes the consulting role. The consulting model that emerges can be traced to the work of two groups, namely the Palo Alto Group and the Milan Group (Mohe and Seidl, 2009). In the Palo Alto Group Bateson and colleagues studied schizophrenia and came up with a theory that tuned schizophrenia into a problem of communication. Schizophrenia was to be understood as caused by situations of ‘double bind’ where the individual is trapped in paradoxical messages (Bateson et al., 1956, 1973). Although contested later, this study indeed inspired new therapeutic consulting approaches. Researchers became interested in studying groups as having certain communication patterns and feedback systems that could cause problems. Communication became, so to speak, the primary medium for change (Haley and Erickson, 1973, Keeney, 2002, Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, and Bodin, 1974). A common distinction (see, for instance, Campbell, 2000, Mohe and Seidl, 2009) is to make a division between two phases of development drawn from systems theory and family therapeutics. The first phase presents client problems as a matter of problematic communication patterns in groups; consulting would thus involve families or groups not only one person. However, the therapist (consultant) was treated as an outsider able to regulate the system.

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25 According to Mohe and Seidl (2009: 47), the German market is expanding. Systemic consultancies have moved from 0.6% market share in 1998 to 12.1% 10 years later – measured by the number of polled consultancies that would describe themselves as ‘systemic consultancies’.

26 It is worth mentioning that also Argyris and Schön and NTL writers had deployed ideas from Bateson and the Palo Alto group.

27 There are texts which also point at a relation in therapeutic history between Lewin and the Palo Alto group, which became a major influence in systemic therapy. Those texts include, for instance, Keenoy (1983: 66) but also Bateson (1972) refers to Lewin.

28 Some of the most notable who connected with the group over the years were Gregory Bateson, Jay Haley, John Weakland and Paul Watzlawick.
This kind of thinking was displaced with Bateson-inspired ‘second-order cybernetics’, which, to make it short, meant that the observer had to be included in the problem. The therapist (consultant) was not just observing the client but was a participant in the problem formulation (Boscolo, 1987). The focus turned towards how the consultant was part of the problem through her constructs and ideas about the problem. Inspired by Bateson and the idea of ‘difference as a relationship’\(^{30}\), the consultants now started to emphasize an awareness of ‘circularity’ (Cecchin, 1987). This basically meant that any problem should always be investigated in its relational context, for instance between mother and child. The consultant then had to look for contextual patterns in the group using ‘circular questioning’ or ‘relationship questions’, which investigated problems as relational in a ‘reflexive’ way (Tomm, 1987). While at the beginning the consultant was considered as neutral, he now had to be considered not only as a neutral expert but to treat his own ideas about problems as only ‘hypotheses’ about the client problem (Cecchin, 1992). This approach led to a new kind of ‘human technology’ for treatment, known as the Milan method, which turned into ‘the reflective team’ (Andersen, 1987). Andersen (1987: 415) summarizes the approach:

> In this approach, a team behind a one-way screen watches and listens to an interviewer's conversation with the family members. The interviewer, with the permission of the family, then asks the team members about their perceptions of what went on in the interview. The family and the interviewer watch and listen to the team discussion. The interviewer then asks the family to comment on what they have heard. This may happen once or several times during an interview.

This configuration would enable the consultant to invite people to reflect on what they had heard in the interview with the family and they could voice their hypothesis about what was going on. The concern was not having the reflecting team identify the problem but rather to provide reflections which could provide observations about the relationship issues. It seems fair to say that the reflective team might not be adopted in the exact same way in organizations as in the Milan method (with one-way screen etc.). However, modifications of the reflective team are indeed deployed in organizational consulting contexts (e.g. Madsen, 2010); also the questioning technique has been successful in

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\(^{30}\) Bateson gives the example of a piece of paper which is different from the wood of the table that it is placed on (Bateson, 1972: 458). However, the difference is not the paper or the wood but the space in between – it is the relation. This is the idea they took further.
business coaching (Motlke, 2009) and other versions of the reflective team or group reflection exercises have found their way to consultancy work (e.g. Bjerring and Linden, 2013).

The systemic ideas were important for the further institutionalization and mobilization of process consulting ideas. According to Campbell and Huffington (2008: 205), who cite Bateson, the consultant would pay attention to patterns since ‘A pattern can be changed any time by any person who, through altering their own behavior or asking a question, can introduce difference’. Systemic approaches emphasized how the consultant role was not to be seen as an instructing role but rather as a matter of appropriate ‘perturbing’ or disturbing the system, in other words – asserting a difference (Hoffman, 1985, Nickelsen, 2013). This idea of perturbation was drawn from the work of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela who presented a theory of humans as autopoietic (self-creating/referring) systems – this also inspired the Luhmannian approach to consulting (Mohe and Seidl, 2009, Luhmann, 2005). What started as a family-therapeutic intervention form was then translated into the area of management consulting (Campbell et al. 1991, Haslebo and Nielsen, 2000, Oliver, 2005). Mohe and Seidl (2009) argue that systemic approaches will typically lead to different tools for intervention compared to consulting imitating a technical rationalist ideal. This is illustrated by Checcin and Stratton (1991: 6) arguing that the ‘task with families is to help them to consider alternative possibilities of feelings and relationships. And our common task with management is to help them take a broader view of their business objectives […]’. Or by Campbell (2000: 84) when he argues that process consulting31 ‘is not about solving problems once and for all, but about changing the way employees understand the construction of problems in the first place, and the way problems can be de-constructed and re-constructed through conversation’. Like in the process consulting approach, a systemic consultant will never be ‘more expert than management about how a business operates’, Cecchin and Stratton argued (1991). This ideal consulting position and neglect of normativity (Nickelsen, 2013) resemble the idea of Schein where the consultant is an expert on process and in Schein’s case also the psychodynamics of the helping relationship. The systemic ideas advanced this work by inventing new human technologies. Organizational problems were here to be identified in the inter-personal communication which had to be changed.

In sum, the systemic ideas have indeed influenced consultants (Mohe and Seidl, 2009) but, I would argue, particularly through their engagement with the social constructionist movement in social psychology an emphasis on interpersonal communication or dialogue has been foregrounded as a

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31 Campbell prefers calling it development consulting.
vehicle for change and reflection. Ideas from positive psychology (Cooperrider, et al., 2003, Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett, 2001, Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996)\textsuperscript{32} and narrative therapeutics (Barry, 1997, White and Epston, 1990) have also been enrolled offering a range of techniques for imagining and developing organization. This mode of intervention has indeed become apparent in recent work within OD and organization studies, where perspectives from social constructionism and postmodernism are explicitly incorporated. Marshak and Grant (2008), for instance, argue for a new discursive and dialogic awareness to organizational change (see also Bushe and Marshak, 2012, Marshak and Grant, 2008)\textsuperscript{33} where changing organizations are seen as changing conversations (Shaw, 2002). This social constructionist and dialog-inspired intervention form is often depicted as a ‘relational perspective’. For instance, in an attempt to re-invent Schein’s process consultant figure, Lamrechts et al. (2009: 57) argue that ‘There is, in present-day organizations, a high need for relational work internally with collaborating units and externally with a variety of stakeholders. A relational practice perspective may open new possibilities to connect consulting interventions with a turbulent and complex organizational context’. In other words, this kind of consulting does not provide fixed tools as Mohe and Seidl (2009) observed with regard to systemic perspectives. But it infuses ‘the relational’ (the interpersonal) with a huge potential, which the systemic and social constructionist consultant is able to address. As Nickelsen (2013) concludes, the systemic and social constructionist ideas along Schön and Argyris work; not only do they promote new modes of reflexivity (e.g. Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004), they also provide new modes of legitimacy to the process consulting position. Dialogue becomes the primary medium for ‘engineering the managerial imagination’ (Clegg and Birch, 1999, Thrift, 2005) and change becomes a matter of displacement in the discursive repertoire. Set against Schein’s process consultant figure, which has a particular sensitivity to emotional responsiveness, the systemic and social constructionist consultant can be said to have a bodily sensitivity and attentiveness to communicational patterns and responses.

\textsuperscript{32} Appreciative inquiry represented by David Cooperrider has, with its influence from positive psychology, been a major influence among many consultancies as an intervention technique for imagination and has been criticized for imagining unrealistic futures (Elmholt, 2008; Nickelsen, 2014).

\textsuperscript{33} This linguistic turn in process consulting imagines inter-personal communication as the primary medium for change but may with some fairness be said to create reality struggles. For instance, in a review of OD by Oswick (2013: 371) the following quote is illustrative: ‘In keeping with my constructivist credentials, the propositions and assertions offered here should be viewed as an interpretation of reality rather than a factual account of reality’. This epistemological relativism seems to be what has been criticized elsewhere.
**Process consulting and the therapeutic habit of consulting**

Three things connect the literature I have reviewed. First of all the literature relates to a deployment of certain ‘human technologies’. Second, a therapeutic mode of legitimate authority is discernable. Third, a purification and mobilization of the human which has made individuals and groups amenable for intervention in order to improve themselves. By means of the counselling interview, Mayo represented an attitude towards the ‘maladjusted’ employee, which made it a matter of changing employee attitudes. Problems were, so to speak, interior to the worker, and managers should be trained in listening skills, thus they would handle the maladjusted employee. The counselling interview represents one of the first human technologies in industrial settings for intentionally appropriating the human psyche and attempts a non-guiding attitude, very similar to what we find in process consulting. The case of Mayo is symptomatic for the therapeutic habit of consulting, which was constituted by interventions from the social sciences. While partially it is another mode of ‘knowledge claim’ compared to a technical rationalistic ‘knowledge claim’, it also is an example of how social sciences, psy-disciplines, and consulting entwine into a hybrid knowledge form. This entwinement indeed becomes the raison d’être of action research in Lewin’s descriptions, although over the years it turned more into a consulting method – in the case of Schein (organizational therapy, PC), Argyris (scholarly consulting), and Trist (socio-therapeutics, joint consultation). Lewin’s writings illustrate a belief in the possibility of purposeful or planned intervention and compared to Mayo, he supported the consultant role explicitly. It seems reasonable to argue that Lewin’s early work was seminal to the mobilization of group relations development as a legitimate intervention form. With psychological theories of group dynamics and the invention of various human technologies, a peripatetic laboratory was invented which could be deployed anywhere by consultants. Although these human technologies and the peripatetic laboratory have been translated to an extent where they might be barely recognizable, these technologies have given way to new modes of “laboratories” and group technologies. According to Raffnsøe and Staunæs (2014: 187) what characterizes such ‘learning laboratories’ is that they ‘form a particular enclosure in which it is possible to create a controlled set-up that makes it possible to work (laborare) particularly actively and intensively on experimenting and creating experiences’. Such places, with a particular enclosure resemble many contemporary intervention forms (as also illustrated in this dissertation) and can be

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34 TIHR indeed recognizes the technical influence; however I argue that they still took part in purifying the human (see Nickelsen, 2014b).
considered in continuation of what Lewin described as potential ‘cultural islands’ or more recent ‘liminal spaces’\textsuperscript{35} (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003, Johnson et al., 2010).

This review has aimed to illustrate how a therapeutic habit was constituted through different human technologies, theories, and concepts that have made leadership and relations amenable for intervention and improvement. Not only does this description position the consultants in focus in this dissertation, it also illustrates a certain mode of knowledge and legitimate authority in consulting. Indeed, it is partially the sociotechnical configuration of the room and modalities used which enable the human technologies and the consultants to accomplish their work. However, most of the descriptions downplay the sociotechnical dimension of organization and instead “purify” the human (Latour, 1993). For instance, Schein is focusing mostly on the ‘psychodynamics’ of the relationship and Argyris and Schön on cognitive change. In the social constructionist and systemic perspectives\textsuperscript{36}, the promotion of a ‘relational approach’ is a strictly human relation with a focus on change through reflexivity. Like Clark and Salaman (1998: 143) argue with regard to guru consultants, many of these attempts seem to seek a change in practitioners’ consciousness (interpretation of the situation) or conduct in order to provide further change – so the few humans can change the many. This relates to Nickelsen (2013) who argues that much consulting in organizational psychology (what I call process consulting) now focuses on matters of communication and reflexivity instead of technology, phantasies, and emotion as promoted within TIHR.

In sum, what largely remains to be explored is how process consulting as a constitutive practice for, what I have called, the therapeutic habit of organizational consulting is enacted in practice. Since, those historical technologies have been translated and transformed, how do consultants then assert their legitimacy? It has been shown how business process re-engineering and various theories are deployed by mainstream consultants (Benders and Van Veen 2001, Heusinkveld and Visscher, 2012, Legge, 2002). But what about concepts, human technologies, and legitimacy in process consulting-based work? The historical review illustrates how consulting, which I have argued to be constitutive for a therapeutic habit, has been aware of its own performativity, but what does this social constructionist intervention form then mean (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012, Nikolova, 2012)? What

\textsuperscript{35} This metaphor can be contested with regard to consulting, cf. Sturdy et al. (2004).
\textsuperscript{36} This latter perspective might oppose this definition; however it still seems like physical configurations are mostly downplayed in the descriptions. Agency resides in language in an asymmetrical way.
kind of apparatus (Salaman, 2001) mobilizes process consulting as a legitimate practice in contemporary organizations?

**Summing up and relating to a practice-based approach**

Compared to more recent critical consulting studies, the actors constituting the therapeutic habit of organizational consulting seem to be driven by development “optimism” and a confirming stance. Set against this optimism critical consulting studies emphasize the accomplishment of legitimacy and knowledge claims and voice a slightly more pessimistic attitude. Whereas the critical perspective, particularly in discussions of professionalism, has illustrated how legitimacy could be understood as relying on certain institutional structure, the psychology-based approaches have largely been devoid of considering such aspects. It seems mostly like PC omits discussions of legitimacy and reduces the consultant-client relationship to primarily psychology (see also Nikolova and Devinney, 2012: 398). So what to do in terms of legitimacy based on this review and based on a practice-based orientation. Again, John Dewey (1922: 15) provides a great analogy for what not to do arguing: ‘We should laugh at any one who said that he was master of stone working, but that the art was cooped within himself and in no wise dependent upon support from objects and assistance from tools’.  

Even though process consulting acknowledges other perspectives, it still seems to purify the relationship remarkably. From a practice-based and performative approach, I believe we are up to exploring the social consequences of process consulting and how it is enabled – legitimated in practice – by sharing activities with others.

**References**


37 This argument resembles the recent suggestion of a shift in focus from the sociology of professions towards a sociology of expertise (Eyal, 2013).


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CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science? How might we catch some of the realities we are currently missing? (Law, 1994: 2).

The previous chapter outlined the history of research on consultancy work, and in this chapter, I will put forward my methodological considerations regarding my research work and results. The study is of a qualitative and explorative nature and was inspired by an ‘ethnographic orientation’ (Watson, 2011), which involved observations, informal conversations, interviews and document studies related to the consultants, clients and other participants in the processes. In this endeavor, I was particularly inspired by ethnographic writings resulting from organization studies and their focus on interaction and meaning in close-up studies carried out the practice of concern (e.g. Alvesson, 2003, Bate, 1997, Czarniawska, 2007, Rosen, 1991, Van Maanen, 2006, Watson, 2011). Due to, among other things, the mobile nature of consultancy work, much research on consultancy work has been based on interview studies; thus process-oriented and practice-based studies have been limited (for an exception on mainstream consulting, see e.g. Smith, 2008) and calls for studies of consultancy work in-action have been made (see e.g. Sturdy et al., 2009). Consultancy work usually takes place at diverse sites and so did my study, which I will elaborate on in this chapter. While doing fieldwork I also have become my own instrument through my experience in the field, which as a whole have informed my analysis (Hastrup, 2010, Lave and Kvale, 1995, Tanggaard, 2014, Goffman, 1989). My analysis is contingent on this, but I will also discuss my framing of the study and how my analytical cuts of the empirical material have implications (Vikkelsø, 2007).

Etymologically speaking ethnography is a compound of ethno and graphy meaning that there are at least two parts to making an ethnography. As Watson (2011: 206) argues, one is to ‘understand the human as a ‘cultured being’ (‘ethno’) another is to write about them (‘graphy’). In other words, an ethnography consists both of generating ethnographic material from practice and a written product. The chapter proceeds as follows. Firstly, I will outline the pragmatist stance which has informed the empirical work in the dissertation. Secondly, I will discuss the research process from gaining access
to the field to the production of an ethnographic account. Finally, I will discuss how I wrote up data and how this matters to the relevance of my empirical work.

A pragmatist stance and performative social science research

In my dissertation work I have gained much inspiration from the deep interest in studying practice during recent decades (Schatzki et al., 2001, Gad and Jensen, 2014, Mol, 2002, Pickering, 2001, Latour, 1999) as well as the focus of organization studies on work practices (Barley and Kunda, 2001, Czarniawska, 2007, Nicolini, 2013, Orr, 1996). This ‘practice turn’ is a very inclusive term engaging various research traditions such as post-structuralism (e.g. Schatzki, 2005), science and technology studies (STS) (e.g. Rouse, 2007, Mol, 2002), practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977), communities of practice theory (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). There is, in other words, not one ‘practice perspective’ but many ways to do practice-oriented research. What seems to characterize a practice-oriented approach is performative orientation and an interest in doings and concrete interactions at work (Nicolini, 2013). Instead of having an abstract philosophical conception of practice, my focus on practice has meant a focus on ‘situated accomplishments’ and how practice is distributed and shared by varies entities (Gad and Jensen, 2014).

This interest in practice shares family resemblance with early pragmatist thought (e.g. Elkjaer and Buch, 2015, Dewey, 1917/1985, James, 1907/1970), and the more recent pragmatist re-descriptions from actor-network theory (ANT) proponents (Latour, 2003, Latour, 2005, Muniesa, 2015). A pragmatist stance and the many writings of ANT scholars have been important to my study, and particularly I argue four heuristic ideas that have been an inspiration. Firstly, a sensitivity towards following human as well as non-human entities in the process (Dewey and Bentley, 1960, Latour, 1990); secondly, data as enacted and truth as pragmatic (Law, 2004); thirdly, everything can be considered as data (Brinkmann, 2012, Latour, 2005); fourthly, inquiry inspired by critical proximity instead of critical distance (Latour, 2003, Latour, 2004) where mysteries and breakdowns become drivers (Alvesson, 2011, Latour, 2005). The four ideas will be elaborated on below.

38 As I was very inspired by actor network theory (ANT) as a methodological orientation, it is worth mentioning that I do not consider ANT as a practice theory as such (Nicolini, 2012). ANT writers (e.g. Latour, 2005) do not have a strict definition of practice as many practice theories, but it still has a focus on situating the inquiry within practice and hence is also part of a turn to practice in the sense of concrete practical operations (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979).
Follow the actors – also the non-human

As already indicated in the introduction and the first chapter, most research on process consulting focuses on purifying human interaction in such interventions (see also Nickelsen, 2014) or ascribing much explanatory power to, for instance, something like ‘culture’ (e.g. Schein, 2006b) or narratives (e.g. Lambrechts et al., 2009). While the consultants I followed used vocabularies drawn from the social sciences and management studies, I wanted a methodological approach which could contain these statements in an agnostic form not arguing for right definitions of concepts in use, but exploring empirically how they come to matter. Instead of taking culture, narratives, human intention or emotional states as an a priori explanatory meta-language, I was inspired by ANT and the argument that ‘the analysist should never predetermine the weight of what counts and what does not’ (Latour, 1990: 116). Key to this approach is the principles of generalized symmetry and free association. Callon (1986) describes generalized symmetry as the researcher’s commitment to describe all viewpoints in the research process through the same vocabulary. This symmetry also counts when researching the consultant-client relation where these positions must be explored empirically through the same vocabulary and the researcher has no privileged position – ‘no view from nowhere’ (Flyvbjerg, 2002, Becker, 1967). Free association is described by Callon (1986) as the abandonment of all a priori distinctions between the natural or technical and the social – there are no social structure and human nature a priori. In continuation of this, reasons agency takes the shape of a distributed nature and particularly the distribution of agency to non-human actants has been emphasized in ANT writings (Latour, 1990, Latour, 1992, Latour, 1996). According to Latour (1990: 121-122) actants are defined by their actions. An actant can be anything – a human being, a computer, a standard, an email, a concept, which emerges as an answer to a list of trials and is made ‘the origin of actions’ – an actants is entities ‘that do things’ (Latour, 1992: 163). What ANT emphasizes is that non-human actants also have potential agency and this idea of ‘things’ having agency is often considered as the controversial, but also analytical potential, aspect of ANT. The point is that agency is distributed in a network, people and things are networks, which gain agency by being a composed arrangement of, for instance, clothes, talk, architecture, texts etc. (Law, 1994: 1-35). Latour (1990) argue that it is exactly by introducing non-human entities to the social equation that action is made

39 Latour uses both the notion of actor and actant, which I use interchangeably. A formal distinction is found in Latour (1996: 7): ‘An “actor” in AT is a semiotic definition -an actant-, that is, something that acts or to which activity is granted by others’.
40 Latour (2004) points out that a thing is always a gathering. Although a thing can be an object it can also be a coming together, which we in Denmark know from ‘Folketinget’. 
durable. In a study of social interaction among baboons, Latour (1996) argues that since primates create order by using their own bodies to assert their strength, they constantly must have new battles that settle who is the leader of the community (Latour, 1996, Latour, 1990). Compared to social interaction among primates, human communities are, according to Latour, constituted of a series of non-human actants. Latour moves on to argue that symbolic interactionism might explain social life among baboons as complex social interactions but it would be deficient for describing human social life (Blok and Jensen, 2009, Latour, 1996). Hence, Latour (1996: 230) concludes that while the concept of ‘interaction’ might be helpful to explain social life as it is constructed among monkeys, it only becomes a ‘residual category’ to humans. This is not due to some overarching structures that mediate local interaction, but if an interaction is to take place ‘[…] one must first reduce the relationship so that it does not, step by step, mobilize all social life’ (Ibid). Walls, calendars, words, chairs and doors to be closed are typically important aspects in framing situations, and these actants participate in the interaction (Latour, 1996). This point resonates with early pragmatist thought and writers such as John Dewey, William James and Charles Sanders Pierce. Like Latour Dewey (e.g. Dewey and Bentley, 1949) consistently collapses the ability to separate subject and object or nature and culture as distinct domains of life. Dewey uses the notion of transaction instead of interaction to underscore how person and world are mediated in the meeting and are made up through engagement among and along with other objects (Dewey and Bentley, 1949: 131). For instance, a seller and a buyer only emerge as two positions due to a transaction and due to the fact that they are enmeshed in further transactions (Ibid: 185). Dewey argues:

[…] human life itself, both severally and collectively, consists of transactions in which human beings partake together with non-human things of the milieu along with other human beings, so that without this togetherness of human and non-human partakers we could not even stay alive, to say nothing of accomplishing anything (Ibid: 185).

Through the concept of transaction Dewey accentuates how the world is made up through an entwinement of humans and non-humans (Buch and Elkjær, 2015). Dewey’s pragmatist stance suggests a sort of naïve realism and epistemology (Brinkmann, 2013a), and right in line with Latour’s relativistic and performative ontology (Quine, 1968, Latour, 2005). This kind of thought stimulates

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41 The concept of transaction resembles the notion of intra-action from Barad (2000). Both are inspired by the work of Niels Bohr and his work on complementarity. As Bente Elkjær made me aware, *trans* actually means across, which seems more appropriate than the notion of intra-action, which, however, is much more used at the moment.

42 Dewey’s description could indeed be related to Latour’s (1996) notion of “interobjectivity”.
what Jensen (2006) describes as a non-humanist attitude. The task thus is to explore which kinds of technologies, tools, concepts, words, materials etc. that circulate in order to make up a consultant and a client (Latour, 2005). The consultancy practice I have studied is largely considered as a human matter, and a matter of interaction in the sense described by Latour. As illustrated in chapter 1, the concept of non-human actants has been inspirational in the sense that it stretches my awareness towards consultant-client interactions as transactions. What happens in one place is mediated in the literal framing of the situation and what is made present and absent. This non-human awareness underscores that the consultant is a composite composed actor. Imagining a contemporary consultant without managerial concepts, tools or technologies and graphic illustrations (PowerPoint, Whiteboards etc.) would be difficult; all those entities have legitimating positioning effects (Czarniawska, 2001, Munro, 2009). Awareness of how various elements make up a consultant and consultant positioning were important and kept me, as a researcher, curious and open to what will turn out to matter. Latour’s (2005) methodological advice is the dictum ‘follow the actors’. The kind of science it imposes could be conceptualized as a following science (Jensen, 2012) rather than a ‘discovering science’ (Garfinkel et al., 1981: 133). Although the idea of following science and the ‘follow the actors’ dictum are pieces of open advice, they have constituted a helpful methodological orientation in my inquiry (see also Nicolini, 2013: 180). This line of reasoning has made me understand my study as a following study, which has had different implications. First of all, ‘follow the actors’ has meant following consultants in their work with clients, but also follow the client and consultants on certain occasions related to the process. Since so many things present and non-present seemed to inform the consultancy process, I also found another inspiration in the ‘follow the actor’ dictum, which made me move beyond the immediate consultant-client encounter. As an actant is composed by a network of associations, to follow the actor also meant, for instance, following the concept of ‘the core task’ (chapter 5) to other sites and entities.

**Method assemblages and a pragmatist conception of truth**

A qualitative research process is often described as constituted by certain ‘methods as techniques’ or a particular philosophy of science (Dahler-Larsen, 2008). Qualitative research as constituted by a particular method as technique thus relies on certain ways of “collecting”, ‘treating and applying data’ (Ibid: 24). However, as Dahler-Larsen argues, trying to define qualitative research as a certain method

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3 Latour (2005: 179) provides also more elaborate advice: ‘don’t focus on capitalism, but don’t get stuck on the screen of the trading room either: follow the connections, “follow the actors themselves”’. To me this meant follow traces elsewhere to other actors.
either as philosophy of science or technique seems not to capture what the qualitative research process is. In line with this argument, the research process becomes more a logic of inquiry or as Law (2004: 10) describes it, as a way of being and practicing social science. The research process is not an application of methods on an independent field. While the field is partially being made up of methods in a network of research questions, literature, interviews, observations, documents etc., the field also influences methods. Paraphrasing Law (2004: 45) this means that methods ‘participate in the enactment of those realities’. This is what Law (2004) points at through his notion of ‘method assemblages’ encouraging a focus on how the research object is generated and how the researcher participates in making realities by studying it.

This conception of the role of methods as something that is not applied in the field but something that participates in enacting the field also impacts the conception of truth and validity in social science research. Law (2004) writes on this note:

Concern with the truth will not and should not go away. But the distinction between truths and other goods is at best pragmatic. All sorts of assemblages resonate to produce truths in one way or another. And our methods are implicated in other goods, political, aesthetic, spiritual, inspirational, or personally passionate (the list is not complete) (Law, 2004: 154).

As Law points out, the fact that methods are involved implies a more pragmatic conception of truth. From a pragmatist position, James (James, 1907/1970: 229) argues that ‘True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot’. The point is ‘that the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events’ (Ibid). In other words truth is something which is created in practice and so is validity, which is ‘the process of valid-ation’ (Ibid). In continuation of this line of reasoning, Czarniawska (Czarniawska, 2014: 137) advocates for a performative approach to validity and reliability in social science research – an approach she argues to be pragmatic and aesthetic. ‘Something works because it touches me’, Czarniawska (Ibid) writes. In other words, it is argued that an elegant and credible description defines good research (see also Davis, 1971) in a non-representational sense (Thrift, 2008). What is needed is a convincing description (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This does not mean that qualitative research cannot be poorly conducted. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) argue that an ethnographic description must be able to convince the reader that the researcher
has been in the organization and to delineate relations among participants. While Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) suggest that the quality of an ethnographic description be judged in accordance with three criteria – ‘authenticity, plausibility and criticality’, Czarniawska (2014) argues that setting up such criteria provides the idea that good social science can be predetermined through overarching (ostensive) a priori criteria. It is not my ambition to settle this dispute. What seems to be essential in all these writings is the ability to situate one’s inquiry and the participants in the practice studied and further to be able to specify one’s position as a researcher (Flyvbjerg, 2002, Haraway, 1988, Tanggaard and Brinkmann, 2010).

The pragmatic stance to truth and methods as described above should not be confused with an attempt to abdicate from setting any criteria for the ambition of social science research. I believe that Nicolini (2013: 215-216) has articulated the ambition of good social science research very well. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers, Nicolini argues that ‘scientific is an adjective that defines whether some (provisional) propositions about the world make us more articulate; that is, more capable of appreciating differences that matter’. Following this definition, my ambition is not to confirm the ability to describe consultancy practice from, for instance, a system theoretical perspective (Mohe and Seidl, 2011) but to provide descriptions which could provide another vocabulary that makes us more articulate about process consulting practice.

*Everything is data*

Another idea, which has been an inspiration to my research work, is Latour’s call (2005: 133-135) to consider ‘everything as data’. Following Latour’s writings, this meant that from the first email conversations, telephone calls, and project presentations at the research site to conversations with supervisor and reactions from participants and others to my work, have been considered as data. Brinkmann (2012) takes the idea of everything as data a step further. Brinkmann argues that as a researcher one is surrounded by data from media, everyday conversation etc. This also appears in my work where descriptions of consultants in public media, conference presentations, and conversations gave food for my idea notebook and made me approach my material and field in new ways. One example: while doing my PhD I spoke with consultants and friends who had engaged with consultants; this was not part of my study as such but made me note various ideas and it also spurred new insights in my empirical inquiry. Further, I engaged in a study group, which included consultants doing industrial PhDs, and presentations in such groups provided helpful reactions to my work, which also made me shift my focus. Inspiration also comes from reading a book or from the news.
The idea that everything is data also meant that doing an interview with a participant also provided empirical data which was not necessarily captured on the tape-recorder. After each interview I would jot down notes on what happened; for instance, how I had been received and what went on during or after the interview. This also provided a feeling of the practice at the departments studied and the participants involved in my study. This idea of everything as data obviously creates much empirical material, which also might be the downside, as Brinkmann (2012) argues. Potentially it may be hard to demarcate one’s field and there is the risk of producing too much data. Much of this material remained background experience about practice and was not explicitly included in my empirical writings.

**Inquiry through critical proximity and mysteries**

While my study theoretically relates to critical consulting studies, it becomes important to understand what I mean by critique and what this matters empirically. In the earlier writings of CMS and critical consulting studies, the engagement with practitioners in studies of consulting was considered as problematic since most previous research were consultants’ own functionalist writings (Fincham, 1999, Fournier and Grey, 2000). In continuation of this, critical distance was enabled; however, there was also a risk of giving the researcher a privileged position allowing to explain what was really happening. Latour (2004) has discussed this privileged researcher position in relation to sociology. According to Latour (2004) has critique in a traditional distanced and “uncovering” sense to some extent become problematic. Latour argues that this kind of critique always offer the opportunity for critique either through deconstruction or determinism. What Latour (2004) suggests is to allow criticism to become multiple and to get closer to the actual matters of concern; he uses the phrase ‘critical proximity’ to emphasize that move (2003). As a consequence, Blok (2008) suggests that the social scientist should not just have a critical attitude, ‘rather the social object must be put in a critical condition’ (Blok, 2008: 82, my translation). The question, of course, is how one sets the social object in a critical position? Blok suggests that the researcher should get closer to the research object; for me this has been a matter of observing consulting practice. My experience has resonated with what

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44 Brinkmann (2012) argues that the qualitative researcher might benefit from considering that ‘less is more’ when it comes to empirical material.

45 For instance concerning religion, Latour (2004) argues that the sociologist might show that the subject only projects a god into the world – there is no real god, it is just a fantasy. Or the sociologist might show that the subject is determined and although he might think he believes through his own free will, he actually is determined by interests, culture, genes or structures. In other words criticism is always possible and the sociologist gains a privileged position as the one who knows what “really” happened, this is what Latour try to bypass by suggesting a critical proximity.
Strathern argues when she writes “The more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become” (Strathern, 2005: xiii). Critical proximity introduces light and shade to the concept of ‘critical’ from critical management studies or critical consulting. The research approach is still critical in the sense that I will need a good description relying on closeness rather than distance. Critical proximity hence aims at a good description and feeds from controversies and breakdowns (Latour, 2003).

Breakdowns and controversies can emerge through engaging with the field, which also relates to how the research process is considered. Instead of doing inductive or deductive research, this kind of research resonates with pragmatist abductive reasoning (Brinkmann, 2014). Abductive reasoning is neither solely data-driven (induction) nor solely theory or hypothesis driven (deduction) but driven by astonishment, breakdowns and controversies. According to Brinkmann, this contains a research process which encourages puzzlement – ‘to stumble’ (Brinkmann, 2014: 4). This line of reasoning draws on a pragmatist stance and process of inquiry. Dewey describes inquiry as ‘the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole’ (Dewey, 1938). In other words, inquiry starts with an ‘indeterminate situation’ which you gradually come to terms with by ‘instituting a problem’ and determining a ‘problem solution’ (Ibid). The indeterminate situation resembles what Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, 2011) and Brinkmann (2014) describe as a mystery or a breakdown. A breakdown does not happen in a vacuum, the researcher is always informed by certain ideas and theories – this was also my experience, and the research object must be allowed to push back (Latour, 2000). Alvesson and Kärreman (2007: 1269) argue that the crux here is that the researcher becomes aware of his own ‘paradigmatic, political, theoretical, methodological, and social predispositions’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 1269). Breakdowns are generators of ‘mysteries’, which is a situation of doubt and indeterminacy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Brinkmann, 2014). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) argue that situations of breakdown encourage one to confront the tension between occurrences and own predispositions. What is difficult is to make those situations visible to oneself when studying ‘relatively familiar phenomena like workplaces’ (Ibid: 64). In pragmatist terms the research process becomes an ‘experimental’ and ‘instrumental’ process (Dewey, 1925/1958, Brinkmann, 2013a, Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011). Theories and ideas are tools in this approach, which shape and become shaped in a transactional relationship with the world.
Those four ideas outlined above were constitutive for the pragmatist stance and ANT-inspired orientation, which has guided my inquiry. Below I will elaborate on how I followed the actors, the methods I used and the breakdowns I encountered in resolving indeterminate situations in process consulting.

The research process

When does it all begin? Becoming aware of an indeterminate situation

Although my fieldwork for this PhD did not start before I contracted with the hospital, I already had some experience with consultancy work, which also influenced how I look on this kind of work. My inquiry is basically spurred by the puzzle which emerged while I worked for the international consultancy company mentioned in the introduction. In 2010 I got a consultant internship in a large international consultancy. The unit where I was employed promoted social constructionist ideas into the managerial realm, particularly to public sector organizations and particularly through organization development and process consulting. During this period I experienced how the value of consultants’ work was a major concern to the consultants. I started to wonder how the consultants actually connected with the client organizations, and how the intangible services of the consultants became accepted or were considered as legitimate. My internship lasted one year, and I was loosely connected to the consultancy during the following year. During my time at the consultancy, I started to review literature on the topic of consultancy, but most I found was either practitioners’ handbooks or more conceptual descriptions of mainstream management consultancy (as described in chapter 1). Hence, an indeterminate situation appeared. During my time at the consultancy company, I wrote a logbook which largely informed my application for this PhD and targeted me to pursue this puzzle. My time in the consultancy company and logbook notes became a valuable “actant” during my work on this PhD and spurred the further research process.

Approaching my field study

Pragmatism would require us to replace the question ‘what is ethnography?’ with the question ‘how might we most helpfully use the concept of ethnography to enable us to do more worthwhile research in the organization and management studies field?’ (Watson, 2011: 205).

Although much of my inspiration comes from ethnographic writings and an open and explorative attitude, my study hardly qualifies as an ethnography as known from classical ethnographic
writings. In classical ethnographic writings, the stay is typically for a lengthy period of time often in foreign cultures where the researcher does fieldwork (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). As a consequence, the research process usually takes place in one site. According to Agar (Agar, 1996: 120) ethnography tends to be considered as a matter of ‘going into the groups’ home turf’. My study differs in this sense and is more related to the ambition in Watson’s (2011) quote above, to use inspiration from organizational ethnography as an orientation to do research that is more ‘worthwhile’. My ethnographic approach was ‘on the move’, not limited to a single site (Czarniawska, 2007). I did observations in my participants’ offices but the consultancy interventions, which I observed, usually took place at a conference facility outside the participants’ everyday practice.

Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) argue that to some extent this is symptomatic for consultancy work and describe consulting as a liminal space. They deploy this metaphor from anthropology in the sense of a ‘threshold concept’ to underscore how consulting often requires turning regular organization into something temporarily undefined, which suspend normal order. The fact that many observations were made at a conference facility, where the consultants would engage with the participants, gave the ‘turf’ such liminal characteristics (see also Johnson et al., 2010).

The practice I was interested in was process consultancy work and the practice that unfolded in the consultant-client relation. This meant a focus on how this practice was assembled through social, as well as conceptual and material entities. Consulting is known as a practice which often adopts ideas from social science and management studies into their work. In my study this also meant that the consultants’ vocabulary and even that of the managers would not necessarily differ that much from my own. In one of my early observations at the hospital, a head of department made a presentation of the department and how to manage it. In her presentation, the head of department mentioned the importance of being aware of how we use language referring to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein arguing that an important aspect of management practice is that language creates reality. What this observation made me aware of was how advanced philosophers were folded into management

46 By classical ethnography, I, for instance, mean the study of the community of cattle herders in Evans-Pritchard (1940) in “The Nuer”. Czarniawska (2007: 17) argues that ethnography might even not be the right term; she argues ‘studies of work or professions is not studies of life, but merely of a part of it’. Czarniawska (2007:17) suggests the term ergonography as an alternative to emphasize that they are studies of work (ergon). I agree with Czarniawska, and although I argue that my approach has more an ethnographic ‘style’, I chose to maintain ethnography as a commonly accepted term.

47 Although my research process to some extent also could be related to the multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) in the sense that I have followed ideas and people in different places, I chose not to focus on this approach. However, I consider the dictum ‘follow the actors’ almost by definition to be multi-sited as it encourages one to follow the research object in relevant practices or places elsewhere.
practice. The consultants in my study were also familiar with narrative approaches inspired by Michel Foucault, systemic approaches with reference to Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana and described their practice as broadly drawing on social constructionism. In addition, concepts such as social capital and core task were mentioned during my observations, again concepts and theories from the social and management sciences. While many of the concepts and methods were familiar to me, my role as a researcher was still that of a stranger, who had other knowledge interests than the locals in the field (Hastrup 2010: 69). I hence had to balance their use of theories in describing their own practice and my vocabulary for describing their practice. Again, the ANT-inspired methodology was helpful in this endeavor since it allowed me to treat ideas and concepts as actants and not right or wrong descriptions of practice.

**Fieldwork and generating data**

I think there are different kinds of fieldwork: going on digs, experiments, observational work, interviewing work, and the like, and these all have their own characters (Goffman, 1989: 125).

The research material for this dissertation was generated at three main sites: two of them were in a hospital setting (chapters 3, 4 and 5) and the third was a large private organization (chapter 6). In my study I utilized different methods for the chapters, all with different characteristics – as Goffman (1989) points out, and below I will elaborate on those characteristics. Whereas chapters 3, 4 and 5 largely draw on observations and interviews at a hospital, chapter 6 is situated in a private organization (Fluidtech) and relies less on observations and more on interviews. Below I will introduce the three sites and elaborate on how the process of generating data unfolded.

**A hospital as main setting**

As described by Hartley and Benington (2010), hospitals are usually considered as being very specialized with strong professions. Although my focus was on process consultancy work, the hospital setting also provided a case for being situated in the controversial nexus of managerial and healthcare professionals (Evets, 2011). Leadership development programs have been promoted widely (Curristine et al., 2007, Government, 2009, Government, 2007, Government, 2015, Regions, 2012) and the agenda of leadership as a solution to difficulties in public sector services is also discussed vividly in the literature (Martin and Learmonth, 2012, Noordegraaf and Van der Meulen, 2008).
**First access**

My empirical engagement at the hospital was initiated in January 2013. Since I started my PhD in September 2012, I had been in touch with various consultancies regarding the opportunity to do fieldwork with them. Consultancy work is often presented as a rather difficult practice to get access to (Kipping and Clark, 2012, Sturdy et al., 2009), but in general I experienced much interest and a welcoming attitude when contacting consultancy companies and units. I got the feeling that my personal history with ‘being’ a consultant (in my internship) made the potential sites able to relate to my ‘indeterminate situation’. I started out being in contact with three external management consultancies and one internal consultancy unit – the one at the hospital. In one of the consultancies I even started doing some observations, but as contact with the hospital was established and having discussed it with my supervisors, I decided to go with this. My initial interest was consulting in highly specialized environments. Not only did the hospital provide an interesting setting to this concern, it was also undergoing major changes due to a governmental decision to build new hospitals, which made the site even more interesting. I also regarded the setting as sufficiently different to my own prior experience from the consultancy company which might make it easier to remain curious and puzzled. My fieldwork at the hospital was anchored in the HR department’s development consultancy unit. After a series of meetings about my “project idea”, I gained access and signed a contract with the hospital for doing my fieldwork. At the outset, we discussed what kind of processes might be interesting for me, but it took a few meetings to figure out how many and which development processes it would be particularly interesting to follow. The HR development unit is a staff function offering consultancy services at the hospital particularly within process consulting and leadership and organizational development. The consultants in the unit were in that sense internal organizational consultants at the hospital, but they also collaborated with external counterparts on various assignments. In my study I ended up following three organizational consultants with educational backgrounds in the social sciences and humanities, but all had trained in social constructionist approaches to consultancy work. My collaboration ended up being with three consultants in the unit. In dialogue with the consultants and the unit manager, I decided to focus on two development assignments in particular, one involving two departments and another involving one department. All those development assignments were part of a large leadership development initiative at the hospital, which was initiated already in 2009 (elaborated in chapter 3) and contained relatively intensive investment in mobilizing leadership resources at the hospital. Through advice from a colleague, who

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48 The consultants had received training in approaches inspired by narrative therapeutic work.
had acted as consultant, I decided that focusing on only one assignment would be too fragile; thus I chose to focus primarily on the two just mentioned. The advice from my colleague soon proved relevant and it did not take long before the plans had to be changed. One of the departments, which I was about to follow, had reorganized and decided to skip the development process due to the new organizational set-up. This meant that my studies ended up focusing particularly on two development processes, now taking place at only two departments.

**Advancing in the field: Access as an ongoing accomplishment**

Although access to the hospital was granted through the HR department, access was not just granted once and for all. Although my logbook notes show that at that time I was rather optimistic regarding access, it proved that this was not granted once and for all. It was an ongoing achievement and had to be renegotiated in several ways. As my study took place parallel to the consultants’ work, I obviously had to gain the clients’ acceptance: I introduced my project and was allowed to participate. At department CR (will be introduced below), the clinical director granted access and next I presented my project to the group of clinical research leaders, who all accepted my participation alongside the consultant. At department TH (which also will be introduced below) things were a bit more complicated. Again, my first contact was with the department management, the clinical director and the head nurse respectively. This, however, required a bit more persuasion among the charge nurses and doctors before they would let me participate in the process. This meant that I was invited to a meeting with the charge nurses and the doctors respectively. Here I introduced my project, and if anyone was suspicious of my project, they did not show it. At both meetings, the leaders seemed interested in the fact that I was looking into consultant-led development efforts at a hospital. Now formal access was granted; however, access was to be granted many times more in the process, not only informally but also formally. For instance, part of the development programs I followed involved interviews between the consultants and the leaders, and the consultants considered this setting inappropriate for my participation. I had said from the beginning that I would like to participate through observation as much as possible, but would also accept that there could be moments where observation was inappropriate and the interview was one of these moments. The consultants took notes from each interview, and I had to renegotiate consent from the participants to see the consultants’ notes, which was approved in all the cases where I applied.
Two hospital departments and Fluidtech

Department TH

The first assignment in focus took place at department TH49. Department TH is a medical department with as well bed-bound patients as patients receiving ambulant treatment. As the rest of the hospital department TH is also affected by cost cuts and a merger of two units is pending due to the building of a new hospital. The department has approximately 260 employees containing as well nurses, physicians and secretaries. The department is run by a department management team, which is composed of a clinical director and a head nurse. The clinical director primarily takes care of management in relation to the medical part of the department and the head nurse primarily takes care of management in relation to the charge nurses. The department is divided into eight units: three patient wards and five sections that are more specialized – among them an outpatient clinic, a laboratory and a group of secretaries. Each ward has a management team consisting of a charge nurse and a senior hospital physician. Clinical professionals manage the specialized sections whereas a managing secretary manages the secretariat. My study at Department TH consisted in observations during the engagement between consultants and the department’s clinical leaders in meetings as well as at a conference facility. Also I interviewed and shadowed some of the participants in their everyday work; I will elaborate further on this below. Two consultants from the HR development consultancy unit led the development process at department TH. The program was set up to be three three-day seminars at a conference facility with the clinical leaders participating (this included all managers except the clinical director and the head nurse). The development process, however, unfolded in an unforeseen way and was put on hold, then renegotiated and resumed in a format consisting of a three-day and a two-day seminar with the department management participating. The program, however, was soon overthrown. As the second seminar was about to take place, an urgent case came up. A doctor who was quitting his job at the department had filed a complaint about the management at the department, which the department management and clinical leaders chose to discuss excluding the consultants. An interesting development in the process occurred when in my post-program interviews, several of the clinical leaders evaluated the process as providing something even more useful than the initial consultant-led program had witnessed. Throughout the process, the consultants told me that this case had seen more dramatic resistance than usual. As the process developed in not only unforeseen but also dramatic ways, I believe the case translated into what Flyvbjerg (2001: 78) describes as an ‘extreme case’. Given it was unforeseen, I did not know about this development at

49 The name of the department is anonymized.
the outset, it was not something I could predict but it emerged because of my being there. According to Flyvbjerg, such a case ‘can be well suited for getting a point across in an especially dramatic way’ (Flyvbjerg, 2002: 78). I use material from this case in chapters 3 and 5; in chapter 5 the focus is, however, only on a part of the process.

**Department CR**
The second assignment in focus took place at department CR. Department CR is a clinical research department, which employs approximately 100 people. Most of the employees at department CR have an educational background in medicine, statistics or mathematics. Department CR is managed by a department management team, which consists of a clinical director and a management team that consists of a group of five clinical research leaders. Four of the clinical research leaders also have a position as senior research consultant; all had PhD degrees. The fifth leader has a background in statistics and holds a PhD degree and an MBA. The assignment at this department took place from the fall 2013 until the spring 2014, and my engagement with this department continued until May 2015 where I did my final interviews. A consultant from the HR development consultancy unit led the development process at department CR, but an external management consultant was also involved through the process. The development process was launched with an introductory meeting between the clinical director of the department; next the clinical research leaders were introduced to the program. Following this introduction, interviews were conducted with each participant and a program was outlined. The program took place over eight intervention days – one two-day seminar and two three-day seminars. The seminars were held at the same conference facility as department TH’s. While department TH developed into a critical case, department CR unfolded in a less dramatic way where the original plan was followed. Although it had not been my aim to do a comparative study, the two processes nevertheless produced such differences that they were helpful in my interpretations of field data. Material from this process is mainly used in chapter 4 concerning consultants’ use of tools in the process. Also in chapter 5 the material serves as part of the background material, since the concept of ‘the core task’ was essential in this development process.

**Fluidtech**
During my observations at the hospital, I experienced several concerns of how such development assignments actually matter. For instance, during the assignment at department TH the clinical leaders challenged the consultants’ ability to document the effects of such development assignments. As part of the large leadership development initiative the HR development consultancy unit had attempted to evaluate their assignments by means of a questionnaire inspired by Donald Kirkpatrick’s layered
evaluation model (see chapter 6). The evaluation part of consulting practice was interesting since it illustrated an attempt within consultancy to assess the value of their own practice. I got access to the evaluation schemes from the hospital and started to analyze the evaluation efforts. The efforts were an interesting attempt at setting a value on consultancy practice. The documented material was, however, limited50. In my research process, I heard of other examples of attempts to evaluate consultancy interventions, so I was aware that attempts of evaluating development work were made. An academic colleague from Aalborg University told me about an evaluation effort in a global private organization – Fluidtech51 also involving consultants. Fluidtech is a global organization in the pump industry employing more than 18,000 people many of whom are highly specialized technicians. The evaluation effort in the private company proved to be comprehensive and interesting in relation to my research interest. This made me choose to take on yet another research site, although it meant a shift from the until now rather stable hospital setting. The group of researchers from Aalborg University and I initiated a research project investigating the performativity of assessment tools in consultant-led leadership development. Access to Fluidtech was negotiated through a senior consultant in the internal HR consultancy unit. Like at the hospital Fluidtech made use of an evaluation model developed by Donald Kirkpatrick, through which they tried to provide an account of a development program. The evaluation involved a software-based assessment tool provided by an external consultancy, which proved to be a significant actant in the assessment. We then followed the assessment to the consultancy and interviewed the director and founder of the consultancy which provided the evaluation service for Fluidtech. The Fluidtech case to some extent ‘happened by chance’ (Becker, 1994); however, as our dialogue with Fluidtech started, the case translated in my dissertation into what Flyvbjerg (2011) describes as an ‘information-oriented selection’ (Flyvbjerg, 2011: 307). To me, the study at Fluidtech characterizes a case study involving mostly interviews, document studies and a series of meetings with Fluidtech. I use the empirical material from Fluidtech in chapter 6.

As already indicated in the introduction to department TH, department CR and Fluidtech, the empirical material has been generated through observations, interviews, and document studies – I will elaborate on each of them below.

50 The material spanned various programs and made it difficult to use.
51 The company name is anonymized.
Enacting the field through observations

I generated much of my data at the hospital through observations situated in consulting practice. This meant observing how the consultants approached their client from the first meeting, how they prepared the physical room, how they engaged with the client face-to-face by the use of tools, methods and concepts at meetings and seminars. The aim of my observations thus was to explore ‘how things work’ in action (Watson, 2011). Focusing on how the consultants actually do their work meant to me a focus on saying and doing in the form of discourse, activities, concepts, objects and materials, design of the room and the use of tools. Most of the activities that this dissertation focuses on is “front stage” performance, which was a selective focus and the account would have been different had I chosen otherwise. I will elaborate further on this element in the end of the chapter.

A way of conceptualizing an observer’s roles is through Gold’s (1958) fourfold typology – ‘complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer and complete participant’ (Gold, 1958; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994: 248). While this typology is helpful, I want to nuance the participatory part in my study through Spradley (1980). To start backwards, Gold (1958) describes the complete participant as a role where the observer’s identity and purpose of research is ‘not known to those whom he observes’ (Gold, 1958: 219). Gold exemplifies this role using a field worker who worked as cab driver for a period of time. Without his costumers knowing about his ‘observer role’, the field worker used his participation as a way to study life as a cab driver. The second mode of observation outlined by Gold (1958) is ‘participant as observer’. Accordingly this mode is rather similar to complete participation, however it differs in one significant way as both the fieldworker and informant is aware that there is a ‘field relationship’ (Ibid: 220). With a reference to Simmel’s sociology of ‘the stranger’, Gold (1958: 221) argues that ‘it behooves him [the participant as observer] to retain sufficient elements of "the stranger" to avoid actually reaching intimate form’. In other words ‘you shouldn’t get too friendly’ (Goffman, 1989: 128). Closeness in the field worker-informant relationship is although also considered as an opportunity for continuing the relationship and gaining more from the study. In the case of studying consultancy practice, the participant as observer could mean that the researcher is employed as consultant and informs his clients and colleagues of the field relationship. The observations from the consulting engagement could then be presented through, for instance, an autoethnography52 (Alvesson, 2003). A third observer role outlined by Gold (1958) is

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52 Alvesson (2003: 175) argue that autoethnography often takes the form of a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988), which is rather introspective describing ‘the authors own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural’ (Alvesson, 2003: 175).
the ‘observer as participant’. Gold (1958, 221) describes the observer as participant as the role involved in, for instance, ‘one-visit interviews’, but it could also be field visits in the form of short meetings supplemented by interviews. This kind of observation role often involves meeting ‘varieties of people for shorter periods of time’ (Gold, 1958: 221). Gold states that this observer role has the risk that things might be superficial or misunderstood. Sturdy et al. (2009) argued deploying the observer as participant in their study of consultancy work where they explicitly distanced themselves from participant observation. The final mode of observation in Gold’s fourfold typology is ‘complete observation’. Here the observer tries to stand back from social interaction, which is a rare position for the field worker. Gold (1958: 222) argues that ‘The complete observer role is illustrated by systematic eavesdropping, or by reconnaissance of any kind of social setting as preparation for more intensive study in another field role’. I only partially experienced this latter mode of observing during my study (I will elaborate on this below). However, when I would be waiting to do an interview at the departments or having a meeting at the consultancy unit, I sometimes noticed information about concepts, theories and issues circulating. Sometimes notes taken in such situations proved to provide a helpful background for qualifying questions and asking for examples through an interview or a meeting.

While this fourfold typology probably is more fluid and overlapping than set up here (e.g. Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), it helps illustrate my observer role. An important aspect to me was how to consider the notion of ‘participation’. I was concerned that I would never actually be a “complete observer”, since I believe it gives the impression that it is possible not to mediate one’s field. The same is indicated by Spradley (1980: 51) when he states that ethnographers ‘do not merely make observations, they also participate’ (Spradley, 1980: 51). Spradley (1980: 59) uses an ethnography made by watching television as an example of non-participation or complete observations. Czarniawska (2007) suggests another example of ‘nonparticipant observation’ where ‘shadowing’ is used (Ibid: 55). She explores shadowing as fieldwork on the move, which contains following (shadowing) selected people ‘in their everyday occupations for a time’ (Ibid: 17). Czarniawska (2007) does not argue that shadowing is not influencing the field; the researcher merely does not take part in the activities observed. As argued by Czarniawska (2007) the boundary between shadowing and participant observation is fluid and sometimes the shadowing researcher ends up as participant. I was

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33 Sturdy et al. (2009) did a study of mainstream consultancy practice mainly through interviews and in an observer as participant role (‘sitting in’ at meetings). They argue that most practitioner literature written by consultants has the character of participant observation. I will nuance the participant part in my study below.
inspired by shadowing throughout my empirical work but was allowed to move more freely than indicated by the shadowing approach. Since consultants are notoriously ‘on the move’, I followed them at various places, but at those places, I also engaged with the leaders. Further, I used shadowing among the clinical leaders in order to get to know the hospital setting and the practice of the clinical leaders, which was the target of the consultant intervention\textsuperscript{54}. Although the observations do not take up much space in this dissertation, they have served as important background information facilitating the interviews and my interpretation work. It was my experience that my background in organization studies, experience in consulting and empirical interest in matters of organization and management, made it difficult to avoid participation. However, it was not participant observation in the sense of taking active part in the “job”. My participation resembled what Spradley (1980: 58-60) describes as passive participation towards moderate participation, where ‘participation’ can be in the form of observing and taking notes. During my study this happened when I was sitting on the sideline observing and taking notes, for instance, at the conference facility. At times my participation, however, also turned into moderate participation. For instance, I would discuss with the consultants what happened during the interventions, making short informal ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1980) asking for their views on a certain activity. Also, I participated in group work during the seminars with the clinical leaders. I did this to get to know how they would handle a task set by the consultants. Here my role was mainly passive but probably still intervening as the clinical leaders would tend to ask me follow up questions on what to do, and if I had the information (usually in my field notes), we talked about what I had observed.

My role as observer hence changed over the process and evolved in the ongoing engagement with the consultants and the clients (see also Goffman, 1989). My experienced role also differed depending on whom you asked, as was the case at department TH (see below). My role did not evolve in a linear trajectory; at times I felt rather detached from the consultants and at other times I felt very close, for instance when visiting the consultants in the HR department. In my reflection notes on those meetings, I have written about this closeness and wondered how I affected the field by discussing, for instance, literature with the consultants. The observation that my role as observer varied also seemed to apply to the consultants, who also to some extent acted in different ‘participation’ roles. It is a common conception in research on consultancy work that consultants are balancing an insider-outsider role.

\textsuperscript{54} I was allowed to shadow three leaders in managerial roles (one senior hospital physicians and two charge nurses) for a day in their everyday work. Although I discussed management with the people I observed, those observations involved no work contribution in the actual activities.
and their stranger’s ability. Smith (2009) argues that the consultant must ‘challenge as an outsider’ while ‘knowing like an insider’, and I could add that sometimes consultants are also expected to not only challenge but also ‘know’ like an (expert) outsider (see chapter 3).

To repeat myself, my observer positions varied. The only position in which I did not find myself was the complete participant. I had been closer to that position during my internship, as my previous story witnesses, but the observations used in the chapters in this dissertation were made mostly in the role of ‘observer as participant’ and participant observation in the sense of ‘passive’ to more ‘moderate’ participation. Table 1 below shows an overview of my observer roles at the hospital. In the study at Fluidtech my observations were limited, the empirical material relied on intense document studies, interviews and participation in two meetings.

**Table 1: List of observed events at the hospital**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations with consultants</th>
<th>Observer role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation meetings</td>
<td>I did not participate in all the preparation meetings. I chose selectively and in dialogue with the consultant which meetings to observe and participate in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meetings between consultants and client</td>
<td>I attended initial meetings between clinical directors or charge nurse and the consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction at conference facility</td>
<td>I observed the interaction taking place at the conference facility. The observations here also included informal conversations during breaks and participation in activities in the evening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional observations</td>
<td>By additional observations I particularly consider meetings in the HR department, for instance when I were presenting my project and through the first negotiations of which assignments to follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadowing everyday life of clinical leaders</td>
<td>Since the hospital was a new setting to me and in order to understand what kind of practice the consultants were intervening in, I followed two charge nurses and two senior hospital physicians in their everyday management practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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55 Schein (2001) even argues that process consulting is to be considered as being between anthropology and psychology.
The observation process

As doing a PhD is a process of becoming a researcher and while fieldwork was new to me, the challenges throughout my observation study were numerous. Even though Spradley (1980) and his examples mostly relate to anthropological topics, his writings became a great inspiration on how to handle the observation process.

Spradley (1980) distinguishes between three modes of observation. ‘Descriptive observations’ constitute very open descriptions of the field and are used throughout the study. ‘Focused observations’ constitute more narrow observations, which are identified through the already conducted descriptive observations and potentially animated by personal or theoretical interest (Ibid: 105-106). Finally, ‘selective observations’ are even narrower; they are typically chosen through careful planning and already identified ‘cultural categories’ (Ibid: 128). While the threefold distinction is indeed informative, it also proves as illustration of some of my challenges with doing fieldwork on process consulting. Spradley (1980: 47-50) argues that ‘frequently reoccurring activities’ usually work well for participant observation; however, as one of the consultants said to me: ‘Not two days are the same’. To me, this made my study of consultancy work a challenging practice. Although many things reoccurred during my observations, for instance, certain concepts, objects and tools, the consultant had a point. Hence, how does one stabilize the object of interest as a field worker when the object is that elusive?56 This elusiveness did not come as a surprise as such. It is both well known in the literature on consulting and I had experienced those issues during my

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56 To some extent process consulting can be argued to circumvent some of the issues known from science and technology studies. When Mol (2002), for instance, does an ethnography of a disease, she shows how a disease is not a singular ontological fact but characterized by multiplicity, which differs depending on the practice in which it is enacted. The object of process consulting is generally accepted as much more elusive and ephemeral; the question here is rather how elusiveness stabilizes with the help of an observer, a process consultants and a “client”.

**Table: Observing at meetings regarding the program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observing at meetings regarding the program</th>
<th>I observed at meetings related to the consultancy interventions but without the consultants being present.</th>
<th>Passive and moderate participant observer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional observations</td>
<td>Meetings regarding presentation of my project. Those meetings were at the start of the process, but were helpful since it provided me with much information about how the respective participants thought of the process.</td>
<td>Participant observer (I was doing the presentation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
internship. My previous experience also to some extent made my observations more focused at the outset. I chose to focus on the consultants’ work front stage and relatively soon ended up focusing on leadership and organization development activities. Hence, my focus was ‘topic oriented’ (Spradley, 1980: 31) and partially focused from the start. The hospital setting was, however, so new to me that my early notes were very open and descriptive. My major interest was to describe how consultancy practice came to “work” in relation to a client practice. In my early observations of meetings or seminars, I used categories provided by Spradley (1980) as orientation devices in order to describe the various social situations. This meant a focus on the ‘place’, the ‘people’ involved, the ‘objects’ involved, ‘speech messages’ and the ‘goal’ of the ‘activity’ (Spradley, 1980: 87). During the process of observation, I started to use ‘cooking practice’ as a metaphor for what I was trying to observe. To me, this metaphor emphasized how it was the consulting practice or process rather than the individuals as such that interested me. If we take cooking as a practice, we see that various objects (cookbooks, ingredients, etc.) and a multitude of maneuvers and actions are involved in this practice. The same goes for the practice of process consulting. My observations illustrated that it would be difficult to understand this practice without, for instance, texts or books on management (see chapter 5) or tools (chapter 4). Those entities would serve as enactments of or vehicles for development, which were deployed when the consultant was engaging with the client practice. Consultancy work obviously also contains a multitude of activities and objects. By working through my descriptive notes while doing fieldwork, the issue of the elusive object of process consulting remained. Many of my descriptions hence focused on how the object of process consultancy practice was enacted through graphical or visual presentations, interview methods, personality tests, games (tools – chapter 4), concepts (chapter 5) and language. Another question re-emerged during the observations. The question of legitimacy is an issue in consulting literature and was a puzzle from my internship; however, I had partially suspended the question of legitimacy as I started my observations at the hospital. As the assignment at department TH evolved, legitimacy became a central focus to me again.

I used different notebooks for all my observations. I had three notebooks: Firstly, a ‘field book’, which was used for observation notes. Many of the observations were made at seminars where I was sitting at a table enabling me to take many notes during the process. In contrast, when I did my shadowing of the leaders, I had to jot down keywords every time there was a free moment. Secondly I used a ‘notebook with expanded accounts’ (this was a word document) where I rewrote my field notes. Finally, an ‘idea notebook’ (materialized in a small physical notebook/calendar and a larger word document) were I listed all my ideas and concerns. The field notes taken during my observations
took the form as ‘jottings’ in the sense of brief sentences, key words or even sometimes just a letter describing events and my immediate impressions (Emerson et al., 2011: 29). I aimed at making partial but verbatim records (Spradley, 1980: 67), which I separated through four lines indicating the five headlines in the example below.

Table 2: Example of field notes used in chapter 4 (the example is translated from Danish)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Saying</th>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>My impression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>‘C stands in front’</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Notice flip over’</td>
<td>‘Notice in logbook + seated’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRL:</td>
<td>‘Noticing + learning points’</td>
<td>‘Who is management?’</td>
<td>‘Notice in logbook + seated’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>‘Who is management?’</td>
<td>‘Henry’</td>
<td>‘Notice in logbook + seated’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRL1:</td>
<td>‘Sounds like you think someone else – you are act. management’</td>
<td>….</td>
<td>‘Notice in logbook + seated’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During my observations or right after I would note down my immediate impressions; this was what the last column was for. Having made the immediate field notes, I would append them and qualify each of them whenever it was possible, typically while I was in the field. Note-taking was complex, but as Emerson et al. (2011: 5) argue, it would be wrong to view the descriptions as texts ‘that correspond accurately to what has been observed’. It would be to assume that there ‘is but one best description of any particular event’ (Ibid). Instead Emerson et al. (2011: 6) argue ‘[…] there is no one “natural” or “correct” way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions of similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable’ (Emerson et al., 2011: 6). At the end of each day of observation, I would rewrite and rework my field notes into more expanded accounts (my second electronic notebook) but also more condensed text (Emerson et al., 2011; Spradley, 1980: 70; Van Maanen, 2006). Although not all field notes translated into an expanded account, the coherent text resulted in more than 350 pages of field notes. In the document with the expanded accounts, I added suggestions for categories in comment boxes. Later these were used through NVivo. Based on the
two other notebooks I used my final document ‘the idea notebook’ (the word document was named ‘ideas and thoughts’) to write down ideas for theoretical discussions, topics for discussion during supervision and things to look for when I re-entered the field.

In sum, I conducted 31 days of observations related to the hospital. The observations took place primarily at the site of the interventions, which meant at the conference facility and in meeting rooms at the hospital. I further made observations at meetings with the consultants and at meetings related to the consultancy assignment in the client organizations. This did not necessarily mean that the consultant participated but I participated in order to get to know more of how the leaders enacted the intervention further. In the table in next section, I have summed up the observation and interview numbers. Since the study in Fluidtech was mainly based on interviews, my empirical material at Fluidtech is also mentioned.

**Enacting the field through interviews**

Given that I only made observation for 31 days; my observation studies as a more active participant observer were far more selective than they could have been. The kind of ethnographic account I was targeting was not a total picture; what I did, resembled what Rubow (2003: 29) describes as a ‘selective form of participant observation’, which consists of doing selective observations and then interviews. Interviews are here to be considered as another device for making up the field and research object, which is created around the themes partially defined by the researcher. I did a series of interviews at the hospital, which usually concerned follow-up questions on what had happened during the process. In these cases the interviews would resemble what Spradley (1980:123-125) describes as formal ethnographic interviews, which for me consisted in interviews with the consultants or leaders exploring how he/she experienced a certain situation. Our common reference enabled me to explore and relate to their situation with other questions compared to if I had not done any observations at all. In those interviews, the informants would act as participant observers parallel to me (Ibid). For all interviews, I had prepared a semi-structured interview guide inspired by the questioning techniques in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), and set up with interview questions that related to my overall research question(s) (Tanggaard and Brinkmann, 2010). In addition to the

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57 Approximately 200 hours of observation in total.
58 Consultants were present 26 of the observed days.
59 Due to the mobility of consultants, my observations and interviews would not be made in the same places, which might differ slightly from how Spradley introduces the ethnographic interview. Spradley (1980) also describes the informal ethnographic interview: ‘The informal ethnographic interview occurs whenever you ask someone a question during the course of participant observation’ (Spradley, 1980: 123).
prepared questions, I always kept a small note with follow-up questions. Inspired by Spradley (1979) I typically used descriptive questions regarding social situations such as ‘could you describe what you experienced? What happened?’ Inspired by Emerson et al. (2011) I also listed questions such as ‘what did you/they do’, ‘which means did you/they use’. Besides the interviews with the consultants, I did a series of interviews at the departments. I conducted all the interviews by myself and the interviews typically took place in the interviewees’ everyday work setting. At department CR I interviewed all the participants, and at department TH I chose interviewees randomly at the outset, but as the process unfolded I based my selection on who had appeared active in the conversations during the consultant engagement. My selection was clarified with the department management team. The average duration of interviews was one hour and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews at the hospital also offered an opportunity to get a feeling of the ‘setting’ and the everyday practice of the leaders. Most of my interviews took place in a rather similar manner, but some of my interviews also provided examples of everyday managerial practice. Through an interview that went wrong, at least at first sight, Michael (2004, 2012) illustrates that interruptions and misbehavior during interviews sometimes provide interesting information in the subsequent analysis. In my study, an interview with a charge nurse (Rie) made me realize how “misbehavior” or interruptions – to be more specific – actually can be very informative regarding everyday practice.

The interview took place at Rie’s office. I had sent her a calendar invitation, which she had accepted. When I arrived, Rie was talking to a nurse. After having finished their conversation, Rie tells the nurse that she will be in a meeting doing an interview for the next hour […] during the interview the telephone rings twice and two nurses enter with a question. After the first phone call, Rie says that she cannot guarantee that there will no more phone calls or questions during the interview. After two interruptions during the interview, Rie says that she might have to change the notice on the door to “busy” – a closed door does not always do the trick […]

The interview did not go wrong but provided illustrative information about Rie’s everyday practice. As the interruptions showed, Rie is a key person at the department, and taking time to do a development program with consultants actually required quite extensive planning. What this example furthermore illustrates is that the interview can be considered as a ‘social practice’ (Brinkmann, 2013: 60)

An assistant helped me transcribe 20 of the interviews.
What is said and done in an interview is shaped by the interview as a practice – the setting in which it takes place but also, as in the example above, shaped by being partially situated in the managerial practice of a charge nurse. The interviewee and the interviewer are both stuck in particular practices, institutions and agendas with a positioning effect. In other words, interviews are not just made to uncover some hidden personal intentions or meanings or to represent them. Rather in qualitative research an interview is, in constructionist writings, increasingly understood as a hybrid practice (Michael, 2012), or a meeting between diverse practices forming the situation and potentially provoking breakdowns – as described above in this chapter (Brinkmann, 2013b, Tanggaard, 2007). Such a breakdown happened to me as I was analyzing one of my interviews. As I started my fieldwork, my idea was that the consultants I was following were of a soft nature, which would make them differ from mainstream consultants and new public management ideals. These consultants would emphasize learning and collaboration, which was hard to oppose, and to me they were different from, for instance, a consultant from finance. This predisposition became evident during an interview. In the situation I was rather puzzled, but as I transcribed the interview and started analyzing the wording, my predispositions became more evident. The excerpt is from a long answer concerning how the clinical leader considered the role of the consultants and the program:

Clinical leader: […] Many senior hospital physicians feel that administrative staff is a burden that you don’t really know what to do with; once in a while they force you to do strange things including odd programs […] [So] another program is forced on you where a huge group of clinical leaders think that they [Hospital Management] do not know what they are doing […] this rekindles what used to be a conflict.

Interviewer: Okay, but this program and the consultants were not administrative consultants and you count those consultants as administrative staff?

Clinical leader: Nobody knows the difference.

I knew that the consultants did not consider themselves as just representing administration. To me, the consultants were neither the hospital management nor administrative staff but different. However, to the clinical leader, the situation was another. There was no significant difference to the clinical leader – the consultants were not clinical staff, hence they were “allies” of administrative staff. The example illustrates how my own predispositions made the research object ‘strike back’ (Latour,
2000), and as Latour (2000) argues, such situations are productive as they spur further analysis and reconsiderations.

The empirical material from Fluidtech (chapter 6) also contained interviews. Only a very limited amount of observations were used in that study: those related to meetings in Fluidtech and the management consultancy (EVALconsult), who provided the assessment tool. In the study we followed the use of the assessment tool among the various actors involved (consultancy company, HRD consultancy unit, participating managers). Twelve interviewees were strategically selected and the interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours and followed a semi-structured guide. Seven of those were selected through the principle of representing the perspective of different stakeholders in the program, and additionally five participants were selected based on their scores in the assessment. This kind of interviewing was more formal than at the hospital since it was not part of a selective participant observation study. The questions for the interviews were derived from extensive document analysis and a research interest in the performativity of assessment tools. All of the interviewees had used the assessment tool and the interviews contained questions on their retrospective observations and how they had used the tool. The whole empirical inquiry at Fluidtech resembled what Adams and Thompson (2011) describe as interviewing an object. During all the interviews the assessment tool was in focus; for instance, the participants had received a print from the assessment which was part of the interview and in the meetings, and the results of the assessment were discussed. The interviewees became spokespersons for different ways of engaging with the assessment object in focus. Like at the hospital, the interview was considered as a social practice. We theorized the interview through the active interview to underscore the fact that we did not consider the interviews as neutral devices but rather as a way to enact our research object (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). During the interviews and the analysis we focused on tensions in the interview, and through our questioning and analysis we aimed to explore how the everyday practice of the interviewees became relevant to their descriptions of the object.

Below is an overview of the interviewed persons for the dissertation and table 4 in the next section summarizes interviews, observations and documents used in the dissertation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Overview of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Enacting the field through documents

Analyzing documents is part of most studies and the analysis worked as another ethnographic element in my empirical work. According to Lynggaard (2010) documents must be considered as fixations of language in time and text, which materialize in various versions of text. At the hospital, three types of documents were of particular use: ‘general documents’, ‘program documents’ and ‘additional documents’. General documents included, for instance, policy documents (e.g. Government 2013, Regions, 2012), documents describing the role of healthcare professionals in managerial positions, a document describing foundations for management at the respective departments, organization chart, and a strategy map containing the espoused organizational values at the hospital. The ‘program documents’ contained consultants’ PowerPoint presentations, management texts provided by the consultants, transcripts of the consultants’ interviews with the leaders, a management report made by the consultants, evaluations, internal formal program descriptions. I used those program documents to deepen my understanding of how the object of the interventions was considered. ‘Additional documents’ contained photographs, email correspondence with the consultants, email correspondence between the consultants and the client and my email correspondence with the leaders. This last category also included the documents used regarding the concept of ‘the core task’, which I analyze in chapter 5. Some of the documents I only went through as background information; others were part of the categorization work. For instance, PowerPoints were used as an example of an object which was analyzed in relation to this theme.

The Fluidtech study (chapter 6) builds on extensive document analysis. The documents used in this setting were primarily from the assessment tool, which aimed to assess the impact and value of the consultant-led leadership development program. Firstly, we analyzed the content of the program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultants</th>
<th>661</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client organization62</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

61 This includes interviews with a management consultant from management consultancy external to the hospital, formal ethnographic interviews and semi-structured interviews with consultants.
62 The persons in the client organization also included managers (see chapter 6) where specified.
63 The additional documents also included documents from public media, which, however, mostly worked as interesting readings. An example was a writing by a senior hospital physician who described current issues by how management were considered in healthcare http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE2323628/doede-skriver-ikke-laeserbrev/. Also descriptions of how consultants in general were depicted in public media were in this category, see: http://politiken.dk/debat/ledere/premium/ECE1695189/staten-og-kommunerne-bruger-milliarder-paa-konsulenter/
mainly through formal program descriptions; secondly, we analyzed the assessment and started looking for patterns (Lynggaard, 2010). We analyzed the questions asked during the assessment, the graphical set-up, the described results of the program and started coding the assessment into themes (e.g. importance of leadership, right/wrong leadership). We used the document analysis to adjust the questions asked in the interviews, which in turn were used to qualify our analysis.

The table 4 below summarizes the dissertation’s empirical data. Table 4 summarizes the empirical material directly used in the dissertation, whereas the table 5 provides an overview of additional background material from the hospital, which was not used specifically in the dissertation.

Table 4: Data collection: Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used in</th>
<th>Chapters 3 and 5</th>
<th>Chapter 4 (partly 5)</th>
<th>Chapter 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Hospital department TH</td>
<td>Hospital department CR</td>
<td>Fluidtech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research period</td>
<td>Summer 2013-Spring 2014</td>
<td>Fall 2013-Spring 2015 (last interviews)</td>
<td>Spring 2015-fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project type (assignment)</td>
<td>Organization and leadership development</td>
<td>Organization and leadership development</td>
<td>Organization and leadership development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants involved</td>
<td>Internal consultants from HR development consultancy unit</td>
<td>Internal consultant from HR consultancy unit assisted by an external management consultant</td>
<td>An internal consultancy unit and external management consultancy unit led the program. The program was evaluated using a tool provided by an external consultancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations related to the process</td>
<td>Approx. 80 hours</td>
<td>Approx. 120 hours</td>
<td>Participation in two meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>19&lt;sup&gt;64&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>Approx. 350 pages (overlap between the two departments)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Approx. 400 pages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Additional interviews and observations at the hospital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<sup>64</sup> Contained in this is an interview with an external consultant in chapter 5
How the field enacted me

My research process spanned from early designs of a study through observations, interviews and document studies, which all have been part of making up my study. While the former three sections related to how I approached the field through my methods and methodological choices, this last section relates to how the field enacted me, and how the research process is not just a matter of choice.

Concerning this aspect of the research process, Law (2004) writes:

To talk of ‘choices’ about which realities to make is too simple and voluntaristic. The hinterland of standardized packages at the very least shapes our ‘choices’. We who ‘choose’ embody and carry a bundle of hinterlands. Nevertheless there are a whole lot of realities that are not, so to speak, real, that would indeed have been so if the apparatus of reality production had been very slightly different (Law, 2004: 33-34).

To me this statement is key to the qualitative research process. Although I had drawn up plans and a research design initially, breakdowns, renegotiations and change of plans were an essential part of my empirical engagement at the hospital. The process at department TH (see chapter 3) illustrates this point and I had meetings with the consultants discussing this issue, not only in relation to my project but also with regard to the requirement of flexibility in their work. One thing is plans another is the situated actions which usually overturn plans (see also Suchman, 1986). My empirical engagement to some extent required a ‘disciplined lack of clarity’ (Law, 2003: 3) and flexibility, which often frustrated me. The fact that I had designed my study in a way that was dependent on how the development process unfolded led to many frustrations about whether my observations would provide sufficient material and if I was all wrong. Re-reading my notes, those frustrations are evident;
however, colleagues more experienced in fieldwork than I incessantly assured me that this was a normal feeling\(^{65}\) (I am not sure I believed that totally until later in the process).

An example of how the field considered me became visible during the process at department TH. My observations there made me aware of how I as an observer was not just considered as a neutral object. An episode during the second seminar at department TH illustrates this. Prior to the second seminar, a physician had filed a serious complaint about the management and collaboration at the department. While several of the leaders invited me to stay and listen, including the department management team, others were slightly more skeptical of my participation. During a plenum discussion at the beginning of the day, this became evident. While discussing how to handle the situation one of the clinical leaders suddenly looked at me and said ‘we have to be aware that we are not alone here’. By using the phrase ‘not alone’, he underscored the fact that my knowledge interest probably differed from theirs. The complaint was so serious that some of the clinical leaders argued that it might result in a critical case if it was leaked to the media. I understood the situation, it was beyond my knowledge interest and I offered to leave the room, which the clinical leader opted for. Although several other participants voiced that it was okay for me to stay, I left the room since not everyone felt completely comfortable with my presence\(^{66}\). Although such situations are described in literature on observation studies (e.g. Czarniawska, 2007), it indeed showed me that my role was not set once and for all, and I did not make all the choices – the field also formed me and the possible empirical account.

**Writing up: Analysis and representation**

You know too little and it doesn’t exist. You know too much and it doesn’t exist. Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out there, but the *there* itself. There, that is writing’s location and aim. But how to get there? (Knausgaard, 2012: 192).

While the chapter so far has focused on the field, this last part of the chapter will focus on the writing part of the ethnography. To me, the introductory sentence from the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard\(^{67}\) underscores an important aspect of writing and an abductive research process. To me,  

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\(^{65}\) I guess this feeling is rather common as one enters a field in order to know something, which is not possible to know in advance or handle through office work. This makes the process unpredictable by definition.

\(^{66}\) Following the episode, I made interviews with several of the participants in order to find out what happened after I had left.

\(^{67}\) During my dissertation, I have often used fiction as a way to unwind from thinking about the dissertation. However, the work of Knausgaard also ended up as a lesson in how to write about everyday practice. Knausgaard’s seven-volume
the process of doing observations was a balance between knowing too much – risking overlooking details – and knowing too little – again risking overlooking details. Although very different in concern, the sentence also underscores an important aspect of writing. Writing up an ethnography is not the same as claiming what “really” happened or what consulting “really” is in the sense of uncovering a hidden truth. It is a product of translation, of office work, institutional attachments and interpretation through analyzing and theorizing (Hastrup, 2010, Jensen, 2007, Van Maanen, 2006: 4). What follows is a description of my process of analysis and theorization followed by a discussion of what kind of knowledge I am re-presenting.

**Analysis**

As part of the abductive research process, the analysis of my empirical material was an ongoing task and so was my coding process (Brinkmann, 2014; Czarniawska, 2014; Peirce, 1955). Dahler-Larsen (2008) argues that since the ‘the most important categories of the inquiry have not been predetermined’ in qualitative research, ‘categories are developed as a function of the actual research undertaken’ (Ibid: 25). This was also the case in my analytical work. As part of my coding process, I, as already mentioned, made comment boxes with tentative categories in my extended account notebook (word document). As suggested by Emerson et al. (2011), I started to examine my field notes by asking myself general questions (Emerson et al., 2011: 177) such as ‘What are the consultants trying to accomplish?’, ‘What are the leaders trying to accomplish?’, ‘How do they do this? Which means and strategies are involved?’, ‘What do I see going on here?’, ‘Does this relate to situations elsewhere?’ and finally ‘What is this a case of?’ I presented my empirical material and reflected on my findings during meetings with my supervisors, but at times also with the practitioners in my study. As my study involved as well consultants as clients, situations would always imply different views on the situation, but as Becker (1967) argue, ‘we can never have a ”balanced picture“’ (Becker, 1967: 247). Reactions from the practitioners were helpful, sometimes they shared my view, and sometimes their reaction was surprise, for instance adding that there were also other perspectives on that situation. The reactions were nonetheless helpful. My supervisor also read some of my transcripts and offered her point of view, which we discussed further in relation to what this could be a case of (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The process of coding the transcripts from the observations and interviews evolved in an iterative and dual process of categorizing and

[wr]i[ng]ings are called ‘My Struggle’ and are a sort of autobiography. It has been described as auto-fic[ti]on since it is his life as he remembers it. Most of the descriptions are of mundane activities in his life.
condensing (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Condensing was what I did when I rewrote my field notes into an extended account, and categories emerged from this process. The initial categories worked mostly as ‘sensitizing concepts’ for further analysis (Becker, 1988). Examples of categories include exercises, PowerPoint and graphic presentations, theory and concepts. Some of these categories translated into other categories; one example is ‘PowerPoint and graphic presentations’, which in the end was contained in the ‘texts’ category. Many of the initial categories were very open and had to be narrowed down through a more focused coding. I largely inferred the categories through an idea of identifying actants in the sense of ‘those who act and are acted upon’ in the process (Czarniawska, 2014: 114). For instance, the concept of the core task was key to the consultants and I started to trace this further (see chapter 5). In addition, I used the ANT idea of programs and anti-programs as a way to grasp how the consultancy work developed and was challenged during the process (Ibid).

As the amount of field notes developed and the number of interview transcripts expanded, I decided to use NVivo 10 as a technology for keeping track of my records. NVivo provides a tool for ordering, coding and searching one’s notes. Some qualitative researchers have warned against ‘coding fetishism’ and more or less explicitly against software solutions as NVivo since it might seduce one to think of coding as an end in itself (see Sturdy et al., 2009). I used NVivo more as a place to keep my notes and as a tool for quickly visualizing my category examples. For instance, since ‘core task’ was one of my categories, NVivo enabled me to make a quick search in my material for condensed examples. For instance, I made a ‘tools’ category, which is illustrated in the table 6 below.

Table 6: Excerpt from coding process (example)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Extract from extended field note:**
The consultant uses many theories and models as vehicles in the process. Today a game was used and the leaders were asked to apply their own case into this game […] The game was introduced as developed on a management theory […] theories do not seem to interest the leaders that much […] the game engaged them […]

**Interview:**

[…] the theories make the consultant different from us due to their knowledge […]
(Clinal research leader)

**Extract from extended field note:**

[…] The consultant makes use of personality profiles […] the consultant visualized the different personality profiles by drawing them on paper […] the drawing made it possible to compare the participants’ profiles […] one of the leaders seemed to
identify a lot with the visualized personality profile even though the consultant kept saying it was not a total picture […]

**Interview:**

[…] when I did this personality test, it became visible that I am required to do things as a manager which do not fit my personality profile […] this creates many troubles […]

I also imported relevant documents into NVivo, for instance, email correspondence with consultants. In sum, the analysis took form as a repetitive reading and reworking of my empirical material through discussions with my supervisors and colleagues. As Hastrup (2010) argues, a social situation cannot be captured through any vocabulary, thus it takes care and many trials to work up an intelligible account. Through this process, I ended up with four central themes, legitimacy struggles, the role of tools, the role of concepts and concerns with value. Although different tools were used (as illustrated in the tables above), and although several concepts were used, I ended up focusing on the change game (chapter 4) and the concept of the core task (chapter 5), which both were influential at the hospital. The issue of value and evaluation (chapter 6) had to some extent puzzled me already during my internship and this issue appeared at the hospital. As already written, when the case at Fluidtech showed up, I decided to focus on this case as a way to address the issue of value and evaluation as representational logic. Finally, issues of legitimacy (chapter 3 and research question) are to some extent visible in all the cases. Legitimacy seems vital to make all kinds of work matter (see also Power, 2003) and in the analysis of this dissertation, focus is on the concrete practical maneuvers, concepts and tools involved in this process.

**Re-presentation and relevance**

[…] we do not just encounter empirical material and see where it leads us. Rather, we are always doing something with it—framing and constructing it (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 1266).

In this chapter, I have shown how the various methods and empirical engagement have made up this study. Since the written account is partially a product of this empirical process and partially a product of a writing process, subject to my interpretations and others continuous feedback, the final product is very much a translation of an entangled process. As Czarniawska (2014) writes, it is the traditional question at this moment whether the analysis is a ‘faithful’ representation of its object ‘. This typically
implies questions like: did I chose the “right” research design? Have my empirical sites been suitable for my research object?

Candea (2007) suggests considering the research site, in my case the sites at the hospital and Fluidtech, as ‘arbitrary locations’. According to Candea the arbitrary location is an inverted ideal type\(^{68}\) as it ‘is the actually existing instance, whose messiness, contingency, and lack of an overarching coherence or meaning serve as a ‘control’ for a broader abstract object of study’ (Candea, 2007: 180). Candea (2007) argues that the arbitrary location is ‘arbitrary’ ‘insofar as it bears no necessary relation to the wider object of study’ (Ibid: 180). Since Candea does not consider there to be any overarching structure controlling everything, all locations are to some extent arbitrary and hence non-ideal. If I create a connection, for instance, between process consulting and ‘soft capitalism’ or certain type of managerialism, it is an analytical move, which is contingent. There is no pure site to be “discovered” rather the research site including the context is enacted as an analytical move. In other words, the research site does not have to be described in one certain way, but the arbitrary location can be used for a ‘broader abstract object of study’. To my study, this means that I might have decided to frame my analysis differently to use another concept than legitimacy (chapter 3) or focus on another tool (chapter 4). Also through my empirical engagement, I am partially enacting the field. I could have studied consultancy work in other situations but I chose to focus my observations mostly “front stage”\(^{69}\) with the client. Instead, I could have focused my observations more concerning the preparation work of consultants, which also would have changed my analysis. While this could be seen as a rather unscientific proposition; Candea (2007) suggests that we are already doing this to some extent – often unknowingly or rather unproblematic. For instance by excluding ‘certain elements, moments, people, factors, words, concepts’ (Candea, 2007: 180). Although I am aware that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive account of what has been excluded and included in a study (see also Strathern, 2000), I believe this is an important awareness as a qualitative researcher. Emerson et al. (2011: 4) argue that the task of the researcher is not ‘to determine the truth’ but to reveal multiple descriptions, which will remain open for further interpretation. Since my descriptions create certain analytical cuts and since words and descriptions

\(^{68}\) In relation to this contrast between ideal types and arbitrary locations, Candea (2007: 180) writes: ‘While the ideal type allows one to connect and compare separate instances, the arbitrary location allows one to reflect on and rethink conceptual entities, to challenge their coherence and their totalizing aspirations. If the ideal type is meaning which cuts through space, the arbitrary location is space which cuts through meaning’ (Ibid: 180).

\(^{69}\) Deploying the front stage metaphor here does not mean that I consider back stage performances in the everyday life at the HR development consultancy unit to be a more true representation of consultancy work. Such an analysis would, however, be different.
do not mirror reality in a one-to-one correspondence (Czarniawska, 2014), the opportunities for empirical experience are many. The writings in this dissertation hence re-present (make present again) situations which could had been presented differently (Cooren, 2006, Cooren et al., 2006). Hence, Czarniawska (2007) capture my knowledge claim, when she argues:

An observer can never know better than an actor; a stranger cannot say more about any culture than a native, but observers and strangers can see different things than actors and natives can (Czarniawska, 2007: 21).

In other words, the sites described in my study can be considered as ‘windows into complexity’ rather than holistic entities, which explain the process consulting activity in ‘totality’ (Candea 2007: 181). Rather the present text is a product of the method assemblage containing selective participant observation, interviews and document studies, which through the writing are transported from the location (Hastrup, 2010; Watson, 2011). It is thus my interpretations and descriptions which have an ambition of providing an account that is relevant and intelligible to others as well (Czarniawska, 2014).

A final question in this chapter then might be who are the others to whom this study is relevant? One relevant “other” is academic colleagues and particularly the academic panel of this dissertation. A second relevant “other” is practitioners in the field. Although I have aimed at making descriptions situated in practice, the ability to infer immediate practical implications of my accounts have not always been as easy as one might think. I guess this has to do with the fact that practical implications usually rely on certain conventions or ideals for relevance, which differ depending on the audience and one’s attachment to this audience (Jensen, 2007). Through the dissertation, I have decided to address the issue of practical implications by adding a section to each chapter (3 till 6), summarizing the main experiences from the article. I do not consider those practical implications as non-ambiguous, neither do I consider them solely relevant to practicing consultants. I also believe some of the implications are relevant to managers, students and practitioners involved in HR.

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CHAPTER 3
WHEN THE CLIENT STRIKES BACK:
LEGITIMACY INVERSION IN THE CONSULTING PROCESS

Author: Kasper Elmholdt

Abstract: In this article I employ a performative approach to explore how legitimacy is produced in consultant-client relations. The article contributes to recent discussions of a bottom-up perspective on legitimacy and its role in consultancy work. Many discussions of legitimacy have focused on legitimacy as given by norms or logics exogenous to- or outside practice making legitimacy and certain actions result from broad cultural support or abstract categories less dependent on practical maintenance and accomplishment. This article presents a position inspired by a practice-oriented stance, which makes legitimacy more endogenous to practice and an effect of certain actions, tools and entities that lend weight to a position. Through an in-depth empirical case of organizational consultants working with a group of clinical leaders on a leadership development effort at a hospital, I show how the consultants were faced with various trials of relevance in their work. By focusing on breakdowns in a consultant-client relation, which at times suffered, the article discusses the role of legitimacy in consultant-client relations and how legitimacy become an ongoing performance, which has to be accomplished on an ongoing basis.

Keywords: Legitimacy, institutional theory, practice-based studies, performativity, consultant-client relations, health care management
Introduction

Legitimacy is often theorized as a vehicle for consultancy work and planned organization development or change (Landau et al. 2014, Wylie et al., 2014, Sturdy et al., 2013, Faust, 2012, Sturdy and Wright, 2011, Sturdy et al., 2009, Wright, 2009, Czarniawska, 2001, Berglund and Werr, 2000, Bloomfield and Best, 1992). However, how legitimacy is produced, negotiated, tested and re-appropriated through situated performances is often left undertheorized, particularly with regard to internal consultancy (Wright, 2009). The questions of interest in this article are: How is legitimacy configured in the consulting process? And how does legitimacy matter? Through an empirical study of a group of internal consultants, who were tasked to conduct a leadership development program at a hospital, I explore this dimension. The consultants worked from a social constructionist-inspired position, which at times made it difficult to evoke sufficient legitimacy to their position in this case. Following much tension, and several trials of relevance or legitimacy tests, the process became gradually taken over by the participants and in the end, an internal conflict made the department management team take over the rest of the program completely. The process proves to be an interesting case of organizational consultant-professional client relations. It was a difficult consulting process, which to some extend seemed to fail as the clinical leaders involved did not seem to acknowledge the consultant-led program as a legitimate attempt to develop their practice. Despite difficulties, breakdowns and explicated discontent, in the end the leaders in the internal ‘client’ organization described the whole process as valuable. Although the consultants struggled to gain and maintain legitimacy, the management team who had requested the consultants explained that they would not have been able to do it without the consultants; I explore this at the outset ambiguous process. Different contributions emanate from this empirical work, which has implications for healthcare management and how we understand the role of legitimacy in consultancy work in such settings.

That legitimacy is important to consultancy work and plays a critical role in understanding how management knowledge flow across boundaries in client organizations has become a rather well established position. Most accounts use legitimacy to illuminate how consultants legitimize certain activities in the client organization or how merits from previous assignments or senior management patronage is necessary for the legitimacy of the consultant position (Sturdy et al., 2009, Wright 2009, Jung 2012, Faust 2012). Although consultancy work tends to be considered as a performance (Nikolova et al., 2013, Clark, 1995), and despite existing literature indicating the importance of legitimacy to consultancy work, the practice of performing legitimacy has not really been the subject
of explicit interrogation. Most of these accounts treat legitimacy as caused by entities that are independent and exogenous practice, which explain actions and cause intervention to happen. Legitimacy has been used to argue that consultants mobilize the context around them in order to produce legitimacy (Currie, 1999); however, others have criticized the use of legitimacy as a concept for only making consultants legitimizing some hidden powerful actor (Latour, 2010). Taking legitimacy as a performative act endogenous to practice supplements the understanding of how legitimacy matters. Thus legitimacy is not elsewhere but is an effect that emerges in practice through various activities and by evoking entities that are constantly transformed. I draw on a performative stance (Jensen, 2014, Cooren, 2004) inspired by a practice-based orientation (Nicolini 2013) to focus on how legitimacy is evoked in consultancy work by enacting entities such as top management, managerial concepts or techniques.

The performative stance provokes sensitivity towards legitimacy as that to be explained and not that which explains. The work that consultants do still depends on their ability to produce legitimacy as regards their descriptions and activities. To paraphrase Power (2003), consultancy ‘techniques must be legitimate before they can be efficient’ (Power, 2003: 383). However, like other social phenomena, legitimacy is leaky (Deleuze, 1995) and it is an ongoing act to negotiate the meaning of legitimacy means. This connects it closely with making consultancy activities sensible and reasonable to the client (Gordon et al., 2009). In this sense the production of legitimacy is not to be understood as consultants’ conscious, political and speculative activity, rather it is to be understood as an effect of entities that assemble and ‘lend weight’ to consultants’ activities and positions in order to make them work (Cooren 2010).

The paper proceeds as follows: Following this introduction, I will elaborate on the theoretical background and place the study in the literature of consultant-client relations. Next, I will outline how legitimacy is used in the paper followed by the empirical analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications of the study.

70 In this article I use the notion of effectiveness rather than efficiency.
Theoretical background: Legitimacy and client-consultant relations

Previous discussions of legitimacy in consultancy work tended not to take point of departure in consultancy work practice. Wylie et al (2014) argue that legitimacy and credibility are critical to consultants claiming that consultants are unlikely to be credible and make their work trusted without legitimacy. While emphasizing the importance of legitimacy, this claim does not tell us much about how consultants actually produce legitimacy in practice nor that legitimacy does not endure. Berglund and Werr (2000) argue that consultants derive their legitimacy from a mix of references to rational myths and experience-based normative prescriptions; in their words legitimacy is a mix of facts and values. Hence, they show how institutionalized norms outline appropriate ways to legitimize consultancy work; it produces what Czarniawska (2001) describes as a ‘logic of representation’. This is a logic where consultants are expected to account for their work in a certain terminology, e.g. in terms of particular management knowledge, efficiency or prescriptions. Hence what counts as legitimate is what influences the acceptability of certain representations. This can be influenced by a range of entities. In a study of internal consultants, Wright (2009) argued that collegial relationships to client managers and executive support to internal consultants was ‘[…] necessary in providing sufficient legitimacy to undertake their work […]’ (2009, p. 311). Likewise Wylie et al. (2014) identify ‘relationships’ (e.g. previous clients or assignments), ‘expertise’ and ability to signal ‘added-value’ as sources of legitimacy and credibility for internal consultants. This may be considered more as aspects of claiming jurisdiction (Ibid) through signaling value (Armbrüster 2006, 9-10) than concrete practical operations.

Yet, despite the fact that previous studies recognize legitimacy as being important to consultants, studies interrogating how legitimacy is performed through situated activities are rare. As consultants often are described as occupying a liminal position in organizations betwixt and between diverse practices, consultancy work seems to provide a particular interesting setting for studying how legitimacy actually is accomplished in practice (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003, Garsten, 1999). Moreover, as an element of the move towards studying consulting from a critical approach (Fincham and Clark 2002), most of these studies have primarily showed how consultancy work reflects a normative rationalistic myth (Clegg et al., 2004: Berglund and Werr, 2000, Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Hence, it has to a lesser degree engaged with ‘soft’ or client-centered consultancy work, for instance, process consulting (Schein, 2008), and consultancy work in the tradition of Human Relations and
organization development (OD) (Rose and Miller 2013, Sturdy 2009, Cooke and Burnes, 2012). The critical consulting literature has treated this kind of consulting as relying on different client-centered modes of legitimization relative to ‘mainstream’ consulting (Nikolova and Devinney, 2012, Nikolova et al., 2013, Sturdy, 2011, Clegg et al., 2007). In other words, whereas most descriptions of mainstream consultancy work have focused on how consultants refer to general knowledge and universal solutions (Berglund and Werr 2000, Heusinkveld and Visscher 2012), descriptions of ‘soft’ consultancy work has emphasized participation, process, dialogue and tailored solutions as ways to accomplish their work (Cooke and Burnes, 2012, Schein, 2008). Hence, in this latter form of consultancy work it has been suggested that legitimacy or authority are evoked through a more ‘therapeutic’ approach (Rose and Miller 2013, Costea et al., 2008, Nikolova et al. 2013). For instance, legitimation can be provided as the consultant deploys techniques used in psychotherapy (e.g. Oliver, 2005) such as reflecting the client’s language back on the client, who then takes ownership of the defined problem (Nikolova et al., 2013).

Previous literature has thus tended to distinguish between expert (mainstream) consultants and process consultants (Schein, 2008, Sturdy, 2011), thus making an implicit argument for a particular difference in the nature of consultants’ work. While acknowledging the difference, between engaging with concepts such as total quality management (TQM) (Legge, 2002), business process reengineering (BPR) (Heusinkveld and Visscher, 2012) and appreciative inquiry (AI) (Van Der Haar and Hosking, 2004) or techniques from the psy-disciplines (Rose and Miller, 2013), both kinds of consultancy work shares the characteristic of enacting some kind of expertise. This expertise is, however, explicated differently in the literature, depending on if legitimacy is considered produced by referring to rationalized methods and knowledge as general (mainstream consulting) (Berglund and Werr, 2000) or by referring to being an expert on process and social constructionist approaches to management (Schein, 2008, Czarniawska, 2001, Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012). Before engaging in an analysis of the role and production of legitimacy in consulting practice, I will elaborate on the concept of legitimacy.

**An exogenous versus performative view on legitimacy**

Discussions of legitimacy and authority are often associated with Weber (1914, 320), who argued that the ‘belief in legitimacy’ was tightly connected to acquiring reliable authority. In continuation of this argument Suchman (1995) provided an influential definition of organizational legitimacy defining it as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable,
proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995: 574). In other words ‘for something to be seen as legitimate it also needs to be seen as sensible’ (Gordon et al., 2009: 30) and that is an ongoing accomplishment. In organization studies, Weber’s seminal work has placed legitimacy as a key concept in coming to terms with organizational activities. I will roughly infer two views on legitimacy in organization studies, where legitimacy is treated as either caused by independent exogenous entities or an effect emerging through practice.

**Exogenous views on legitimacy—institutionalist perspectives**

Institutionalist theories consider ideal types of norms/logics/standards/myths etc. exogenous to practice as the primary cause of formal organization and a fundamental reason for the emergence of institutional isomorphism (Suchman, 1995: 574, Scott, 2013, DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Within those theories actors strive for legitimacy or contribute to maintain ‘the legitimacy’ or status of an institution through their activities (Trank and Washington, 2009: 256). Neo-institutional perspectives have emphasized how legitimacy is derived from rationalized institutional myths in the organizational environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In more recent work on institutional logics, focus has turned towards ideal type orders such as the market, professions or the state (Thornton et al., 2012), which compose logics or reasonable underlying assumptions from which legitimacy can be derived. Institutional logics analyze how legitimacy can be derived from, for instance, a profession or the market (e.g. Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005, Noordegraaf, 2011). An example of analysis is the medical profession, which often is understood as a strong profession able to maintain dominance and jurisdiction over particular tasks through their cultural legitimacy (Evetts, 2011, Coburn, 2006). However, to an increasing extent doctors now need to incorporate logics of the market or managerialism into their work (see also Noordegraaf 2011). Evetts (2011) argues that legitimacy is not only composed by professional institutions beyond organizations; accordingly organizations are sites in themselves where managerialism can provide legitimacy and task dominance. While institutionalist perspectives make visible how environments influence organizational forms, many of those studies, particularly within neo-institutional theory, have been criticized for leaving out the ‘actual interactions taking place in time and space’, (Czarniawska, 2004: 781). When institutionalist perspectives analyze legitimacy as derived from ‘immaterial’ logics or myths, they tend to leave out the sociomaterial dimension of legitimacy (De Vaujany and Vaast, 2013) and hence actors ultimately
end up as either having to ‘conform with’ or ‘deviate from abstract institutional logics’ (Patriotta et al., 2011: 1808).

In sum, what institutionalist perspectives continuously have argued is that organizations and organizational actions do not come to work due to immediate efficacy but by being legitimate in accordance with social norms (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, while particularly neo-institutional (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) perspectives has focused on these norms or logics as social facts or ideal types existing beyond individual practices, they have tended to neglect how legitimacy is produced, appropriated or contested through concrete work practices (see also Patriotta et al., 2011). This argument has also been made in regards to an increasing focus on the material and rhetoric aspects of legitimacy (De Vaujany and Vaast, 2013, Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005, Berglund and Werr, 2000). In the following section I will suggest to relate a performative stance to legitimacy, which is a more practice oriented approach insisting on the ongoing mediation of all kinds of entities.

**Legitimacy as effected – a performative stance**

Recent interest in performativity (Gond et al., 2015, Callon, 2010, Muniesa, 2014, Cooren 2010) and practice (Nicolini, 2013) within organization studies supplement the scarcity of practice-oriented engagement in institutionalist perspectives. The practice based approach emphasize how ‘[…] what is appropriate, what is legitimate, and what can be done are continuously tested in action so that practice is necessarily provisional and tied to specific historical and material conditions’ (Nicolini, 2013: 228). This argument resonates well with a performative stance, which emphasize the practical engagement of making practices and actors legitimate and relevant in action. A performative stance related to ‘actor-network-theory’ (ANT) writings (Muniesa 2015: 1, Latour 2005) make legitimacy and authority an effect of a ‘network of bits and pieces’ that assemble (Law, 2003). Callon (1986) describe this as a matter of enrolling participants into a program of action hence becoming a ‘spokesperson’ authorized to speak legitimately on behalf of others. Becoming a spokesperson requires translation, which means ‘to displace’ or transform and in a broad sense ‘to express in one’s own language what others say and want’ (Callon, 1986: 19). This line of reasoning emphasizes an empirical and pragmatic interest in how reality is affected and how signification is an active process (Muniesa, 2014: 15-6). Instead of seeing legitimacy as only caused by underlying powerful institutions (e.g. Latour, 2010: 168n), actions can be understood as ‘legiti-made’ in practice. This does not imply legitimacy as accumulated, rather legitimacy is an ongoing accomplishment and a process of enrolling allies into a ‘program of action’, which might be complicated by ‘anti-programs’
and counter-enrolment that challenge the former program making it fragile (Latour, 1990: 111-113, Akrich and Latour, 1992, Callon and Law, 1982). A performative stance pays attention to how signs or ‘figures’, e.g. ‘principles, absent persons, facts, institutions, expertise’ (Cooren, 2010: 9-10) are evoked as allies in a program of action in order to become legitimate. This might also be a matter of imbricating or folding (Taylor and Van Every, 2000) different smaller programs of action in the organization into each other (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011). For instance, an organizational consultant might be assigned to a planned development project by a management team in order to improve collaboration in the organization. The consultants could argue that experience from past assignments tells them that in order to ensure that the project gets off well; they need to start by conducting a series of interviews with relevant persons. The management team indeed can be understood as animating the consultants and providing legitimacy to their work (Cooren, 2006). However, legitimacy is not just a position granted. In the interviews the ‘management team’ and ‘past experience’ very likely are evoked as figures, and current small programs of action in the organization that lend weight to the consultants’ work might be found. The consultants only become legitimate and sensible through sharing their program of action with other entities, programs or participants (Bencherki and Cooren 2011, Taylor and Van Every, 2014), and the act of making those entities present in the situation can be an important part. Benoit-Barne and Cooren (2009) uses the concept of presentification to describe this point. Presentifications ‘signify those ways of speaking and acting that are involved in making present things and beings that, although not physically present, can influence the unfolding of a situation’ (Benoit-Barne and Cooren, 2009: 10). The consultant making present such figures or agencies (things and beings) as allies that lends weight to the position; it shows that the consultant is ‘not the sole authors of what is put forward’ (Cooren, 2010: 10). A performative stance indeed consider attachment to professions, top management and values as important to the process, it can be part of what animates practice. However those animators are not ideal types unmediated but enacted and hence translated or ‘appropriated’ by the practitioner when made present (De Vaujany and Vaast, 2013). Even though these attachments partially exist as ‘immaterial’ recognizable entities, Cooren still insist on studying how these translate by being embodied, voiced or inscribed in materials instead of concluding their immaterial existence. Hence it challenges rationalized institutional myths as independent explanatory categories, but recognizes that through their materialization they are, so to speak also, caused to be (Cooren, 2010: 146). In other words, following Cooren (2010) legitimacy takes on passivity and activity. Passivity in the sense of that which animates action, but is not necessarily present. This underscores how action and agency is distributed between humans,
organizational allies, tools and the actual framing of the situation. Activity is what is performed into being through action or that which is made present in the situation, for instance a tool or a figure (Cooren, 2010: 58). Exploring legitimacy from a practice based and performative stance enable an empirical analysis, which focus on how a program of action become legitimate as an ongoing practical accomplishment and how complications might emerge due to anti-programs or counter-enrolment.

**Methodology**

The empirical material in this paper is based on field work done at a Danish hospital, where I followed a consultant-led leadership development initiative at a medical department, department TH. In spring 2013 to winter 2014 the group of clinical leaders at department ‘TH’ was involved in the hospital’s leadership development initiative. Due to a governmental decision to merge several hospitals, this hospital was undergoing significant transformations at that time; this included various cost-cutting requirements. Department TH was also affected by these cost cuts and the merger, a relocation was pending within a few years, which also would include a merger of two units and a closure of positions. The department has approximately 260 employees. It is organized with a department management team that consists of a clinical director and a head nurse. The department is divided into units with each unit having a unit management team, typically consisting of two clinical leaders. The total group of clinical leaders consists of eighteen people, who were the primary participants in the program. Department TH was one among several departments that participated in the development program. Whereas the program had worked well at other departments, department TH proved to resist the program in a different way.

Access to the site was negotiated through the manager of the HR development consultancy unit, who were in charge of the program. He agreed to let me follow the organizational consultants in their work. Further access was negotiated with the group of clinical leaders and the department management team of the medical department around which this article centres. With an interest in the accomplishment of consultancy work, the design was informed by practice-oriented studies (Czarniawska, 2007, Gherardi 2012, Czarniawska, 2014, Nicolini, 2013), with an aim of being situated in practice and an ANT-inspired orientation. The study focused on different actors or actants in the program. The latter orientation indeed worked as a sensitivity tool towards how concepts and objects constitute practice and potentially help performances under way (Latour, 2005, Jensen 2014, Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010). In accordance with this orientation, I had an awareness on moments
of controversy, breakdowns and ambiguity, such situations have often been described as offering interesting insights in qualitative research (Alvesson, 2011, Latour 2000). This orientation, however, makes me focus mostly on when legitimacy was contested. This might give the impression, that the consultants work were never legitimate in relation to the client practice - it were. Most of the times people act legitimately in accordance with what is appropriate, otherwise social interaction would break down continuously and the discussion would never stop. I although considered the breakdowns as containing much learning, which made me focus on these situations.

The whole design involved a multi-sited approach ‘on the move’ (Czarniawska, 2007), where organizational consultants and clinical leaders were followed in their work both on and ‘off’ the leadership development programme. The research process took place over a one-year period and a range of materials and methods was used. These included three types of data: observational, interviews and document analysis, see table 1 below.

Table 1: Empirical material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of material</th>
<th>Form of material</th>
<th>Used in article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observational</strong></td>
<td>31 days of observation.</td>
<td>Observation notes have been rewritten and are used in the empirical analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Meetings regarding the program with clinical leaders</td>
<td>Rewritten into text: Approx. 350 pages.</td>
<td>Observations also worked as contextual background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consultant-client meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Consultant preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Shadowing of consultants in everyday work</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Shadowing of middle managers in everyday work.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Interviews</strong></th>
<th>20 semi-structured interviews.</th>
<th>Transcribed and coded. I used NVIVO to create an overview of the codes and empirical examples.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Individual interviews with middle managers</td>
<td>Rewritten into text:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individual interviews with department management team</td>
<td>Approx. 380 pages.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individual interviews with consultants</td>
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</table>
In general the material generated by observation followed a multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995, Czarniawska 2007) of which the degree of participation varied in the various activities and situations (Spradley 1980). I participated in meetings with the consultants to learn how the interventions were prepared; at these meetings I was involved in discussions regarding the consultants’ work activities. Also, I shadowed (Czarniawska 2007) the clinical leaders in their everyday work and observed at their meetings, mostly to learn how they experienced the process but also to learn about their everyday practice. Further observations were made in all the work between the consultants and the middle managers. This enabled me to conduct a range of more informal ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979) during coffee breaks and other situations that allowed conversation. In incidents in the process which did not allow my participation, I subsequently interviewed the participants about the situation. One part of the program consisted of an interview between the consultants and the participants; the consultants took notes which I was allowed to study and analyse afterwards. If possible, notes were taken during all the observations and if not, it was done as soon as possible. At the end of the day, all notes were entered into a computer (Emerson et al., 2011). In the end the material consisted of more than 350 pages, which were organized by questions such as: how do the consultants accomplish their work? Or what is this a case of? In addition to the observations, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted and added as another ‘ethnographic element’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, Spradley, 1980). The interviews were oriented towards the program and topics in the process and were designed and reworked iteratively to approach relevant participants with pertinent questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). The interviews varied from 45 minutes to two hours and were all recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded with a focus on legitimacy using NVIVO. Finally a range of documents related to the program was analysed including the formal program description (internal document) approved
with budgets and by hospital management, documents describing cost reductions at the hospital and reorganization plans, management strategy, organizational diagrams and a range of policy documents.

The analysis can be split into two phases; it followed an initial open coding strategy, which was reworked into a more focused coding phase while writing this article (Emerson et al., 2011: 172). This resulted in a series of categories (Ruppert, 2012, Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). The first phase of the analysis took place during field work; it worked as an iterative process where the empirical material was ‘asked’ questions, hence general themes were discerned (Emerson et al., 2011). Recalling the moments of controversy and ambiguity related to the consultancy work, a series of situations emerged where the consultants needed to account for the relevance or value and effects of their work. Hence, how the consultants made their position and their work count emerged during this first part. What emerged was a range of figures or allies, which the consultants evoked in their work. Examples included ‘the hospital management’, ‘a theory’, ‘an exercise’ or ‘a previous event’. Those examples worked as themes of heuristic value for the continued analysis, since they demonstrated some of the constituents for the situated accomplishment of making consultancy work count. Hence, to some degree this first phase consisted in data reduction and a display of the material being outlined (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

In the second phase of the analysis, which was conducted while writing this paper, the themes were re-interpreted by relating to the literature on consultancy work and legitimacy, and focus was on figures used to evoke legitimacy. Through an abductive analytical methodology (Brinkmann, 2012, Peirce 1955), the literature and empirical material were consulted using four main categories to order the figures (Ruppert 2012). Those were ‘Organization’, ’Tools’, ‘Texts’ and ‘Physical configurations’ (see table 2 below). The first three categories in general worked as entities or allies both animating the program and as activated allies by the consultants in their engagement with the clinical leaders. The fourth category was discerned since the inclusions and exclusions afforded by the physical configurations of, for instance, a room or a PowerPoint Show also animate consulting practice and the program. For instance clothing or how a room is arranged also animate certain actions, even though they might not be considered so, they situate the consultants’ work in a sort of script.
Table 2: Coding process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of references</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Top Management</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The hospital</td>
<td>Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Department management team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Projects</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dialogic exercises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Concepts and theories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A workplace assessment (AKU)</td>
<td>Texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Documents describing cost reductions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PowerPoints</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The set-up of the room in which the consultant-client engagement unfolded.</td>
<td>Physical configuration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The site of the intervention (e.g. conference centre)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Projector and computer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dressing</td>
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</table>

To present the empirical analysis, the paper draws on a zooming in and out approach (Nicolini, 2013). This idea is used as an ongoing move between different sites during the program presented through the empirical analysis. Zooming out regards how the overall LDP2 program and how it was introduced to a department. I will specifically draw on material from department TH during the LDP2 program (hereafter LD program), which was one of two departments that I followed and observed in relation to LDP2 at the hospital. The consultants’ work during the program is an interesting case concerning legitimacy for several reasons. First, during interviews the consultants described themselves as working from a process consulting and ‘social constructionist’ inspired approach. Accordingly this indicated a focus on communication and context, but also, as we will see, a more ambiguous or subtle expert position, which normally is more explicit in consultancy work. Secondly, department TH became an interesting case where the relevance and legitimacy of the program and consultants’ work was several times tested during the program (Flyvbjerg, 2002). In continuation of this, it appears as an interesting case concerning the role of legitimacy in process consultancy work.
Zooming in thus consists in focusing on a thematization meeting, which happened at department TH during the program and where controversy occurred.

**Empirical analysis**

*Zooming-out: Making an overall program of action and animating legitimacy*

In 2009, Hospital Management and the HR department decided to initiate a large-scale leadership development program. This development program of action was introduced as a way to improve workplace environment and health care services by improving collaboration among managers and strengthen reflection on managerial practice. Along with policy makers, the development program of action emphasised better management and leadership as a solution to challenges in delivering welfare services at the hospital (Curristine et al., 2007, Noordegraaf and Van der Meulen, 2008, Government 2007). The program was outlined as a consequence of an unsatisfying psychological workplace assessment along with experiences from a series of interventions led by consultants from the hospital’s HR development consultancy unit. Previously the consultants had completed a leadership development program (LDP 1) for middle managers (clinical leaders, ward managers and managing secretaries) at a number of departments; this had stimulated a new strategy for leadership development at the hospital. As part of the strategy, another development program was initiated among department management teams (see table 3 for an overview). According to the consultants from the HR consultancy unit, this program revealed how department management teams grappled with how to handle their group of middle managers. A psychological workplace assessment was conducted supporting the consultants more vague personal experience. In an interview, one of the consultants explained how the workplace assessment worked as a vehicle for their experience from previous development programs:

‘[...] it [the workplace assessment] showed dissatisfaction with management, and it also showed, and this may be a coincidence, but very convenient, that in the departments where middle managers had done the leadership development program [LDP 1], satisfaction with management was significantly higher […]’

The workplace assessment was conducted as a survey, and a need for further leadership development interventions among the middle managers was inferred as part of the solution to the problems. The
personal experience of the consultants from previous interventions was strengthened by being allied with the workplace assessment. A decision was made to initiate a project led by the HR consultancy unit investigating ‘good leadership at the hospital’ (Internal note). The project completed, the hospital management decided to conduct a new leadership development program among middle managers (LDP 2), which although being mandatory for all departments, should be tailored to each department’s current needs. The program would be anchored in change projects at each department and only the group of middle managers would participate directly not their department management team. The program contained individual interviews with- and psychological tests of each manager and three three-day residential seminars, which however was altered along the way.

Table 3: Overview of critical events in mobilizing LPD 2 as program of action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-2007</td>
<td>Management development program 1 is performed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>New strategy for leadership development is decided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2010</td>
<td>Leadership development for department management teams. The consultants experience issues with the clinical leaders at each department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Psychological workplace assessment showing improved results with regard to management at the departments that attended LPD1 compared to those that did not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Project of ‘good leadership at the hospital’ is conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Decision on carrying through leadership development program 2 (LPD 2) among middle managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>Execution of LDP 2, the program is at the outset structured in the following way:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Meeting between consultants and department management team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intro meeting</td>
<td>Consultants present the programme to the participating middle managers</td>
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</table>
What this description illustrates is how LDP 2 was animated by a series of events and actors that are folded into the program. The LDP 2 program hence became an overall program of action, which consisted in a relatively intensive investment in mobilizing leadership resources at the hospital.

**Strengthening the LD program by enrolling participants**

Information about the LD2 program was sent out by email to all departments at the hospital. At the outset the program was presented as mandatory; however, in order to participate each department management team had to assign their group of middle managers to the program. This “voluntary” assignment to the mandatory program created a bit of double communication, which also became visible when communicated by the consultants. The following excerpt is from an intro meeting where the consultants were questioned about the mandatory outset:

Consultant: […] Participation is mandatory in the sense that you [the department] have been assigned for the program. When at the outset someone said I would like to do this, then we expect you to participate […] (field note, Hospital)

As the quote reflects the program was both required from the Hospital Management and simultaneously considered as a voluntary act of the department management team, who had to assign their middle managers to the program. A few departments did not sign up and although this sounded equivocal, making departments sign up worked as a first step in circumventing who acts on whom. Was the consultants just acting on behalf of Hospital management or the department management or both? This might sound like an unimportant detail, but by making the department management assign
to the program, the general program is starting to be translated and the department management appear to serve as legitimating the program. Following the voluntary assignment, the consultants had a meeting with the department management team. Here the consultants wanted to learn about challenges at the department, which the management team would like the program to address. Following the meeting with the department management team, the consultants would continue their work on making the program relevant and meaningful to the middle managers. The consultants were aware that their program could not work if the middle managers did not believe in the program as a legitimate practice or attempt to develop their practice. The following interview quotes from two of the consultants (Mary and Ann) illustrate this point:

Mary [said with a note of humour]: ‘I usually compare it [their work] to going to church – it makes a difference if you believe in it’

Ann: ‘I truly don’t believe leaders can develop if they don’t want to’.  

Convincing middle managers about the relevance of the program to their local programs of action was an important part of making the program work; however it was not an easy task. The following interview excerpt with a middle manager (clinical leader) at department TH illustrates this issue:

Clinical leader: […] Many doctors feel that administrative staff is a burden that you don’t really know what to use for; once in a while they force you to do strange things including odd programs […] [So] another program is forced on you where a huge group of clinical leaders think that they [Hospital Management] do not know what they are doing […] this rekindles a conflict which used to be huge.

What the quote illustrates is how the clinical leader counted the LD program as another ‘odd’ managerial program. The consultants viewed the program differently since they considered their role more as process consultants addressing communication and the human side of development. Although the clinical leader probably was able to tell the difference between a finance assistant and HR staff, the difference was blurred to the clinical leader since the organizational consultants promoted a similar program of action – a program of management. The consultants hence needed to attract the clinical leaders’ interest and translate the program into something sensible to the everyday practice of the participants. The individual semi-structured interviews with each of the participating leaders in the program were an important device in this endeavor, as argued by one of the consultants:
We insist on making these personal interviews prior to the program. To build connections to the participants, but also to tailor the program to the exact needs at the department. Otherwise we risk doing the exact same thing from one department to the next – we simply have to make particular adjustments […] (Group interview with consultants)

As the quote illustrate, the interview were presented as a way to prevent the series of interventions from becoming too standardized- a risk the consultants related to the fact that they were doing similar programs at other departments. The program had to appear tailored and singularized to the individual department in order to work as a legitimate attempt of development. Besides signalling customization of the intervention, the consultants also emphasised how the interview was a tool for bonding with the individual participants. By asking ‘Which specific focus areas would you like to work with on this program?’ and ‘what are your expectations in terms of the program?’ the consultants positioned the program as a conveyor of middle manager interests. This turned the program into something the middle managers were requiring up to a point and not just obliged to do, in other words the interview appeared to further enrol participants in the program. The consultants recorded the concerns stated by the participants in the interview; the concerns were written down and later it was discussed which topics to address in the program.

Looking back on this enrolment process, it appears that the program was mobilized as part of an overall program of action regarding mobilization of leadership. This program was authorized by hospital top management to handle difficulties regarding management at the hospital. This indeed provides top management patronage, but the process also exemplifies how the program needs to enrol new participants as well. By making the department management team assign their department or clinical leaders to the program, and by making the middle managers explain what they want the program to address, a shift in who represents who is generated. The consultant representing hospital management designation (in the general program description) transforms into consultant also representing department management team (through assigning to the program), and finally to consultant also representing middle managers (through interviews). The consultants now appeared to partially represent all these organizational entities as allies. However, this process of translating the program and making more allies also appears to make the positions ambiguous as the consultants’ represent them all.
Zooming-in: Activating allies at the thematization meeting

The interviews at department TH completed, the consultants discussed how to handle the many concerns and interests that had been voiced in the interviews. Some of the participants had expressed issues with regard to collaboration, and the consultants found that several of the participants did not experience a common task in the group. Department TH had previously engaged with an external management consultant who had introduced the concept of ‘the core task’. This concept was well-known and already much used by the consultants as an object for crossing diverse occupational practices. They decided to use ‘the core task’ to frame the focus of the program. In continuation of this, the consultants boiled some of the concerns articulated during the interviews down into bullet points in a series of PowerPoint slides. The concept of ‘the core task’ thus appeared as an entity or language through which the clinical leaders hopefully could ‘recognize and manage’ some of the problems identified by the consultants (Clegg et al., 2004: 32). In other words, using a familiar concept to the leaders as a tool could allow the consultants to present the current challenges on behalf of the group of clinical leaders at the ‘thematization meeting’ where the consultancy findings would be disclosed. What mattered now was how the consultants’ description connected with the everyday challenges experienced by the clinical leaders.

Using projects to position the program within the department

One afternoon in October 2013, the framing of the program was to be tested. I was the third person to arrive at the thematization meeting, only Mary and Ann, the two consultants, had arrived before me. The event took place in a conference room at department TH. The black chairs in the room were set up auditorium style; at the front of the room ‘Thematization meeting at Department TH’ was projected on a PowerPoint screen. One of the organizational consultants had previously told me that she would always try to be in the room when the participants were arriving – to be sure to ‘set the stage’. Indeed the room signalled the consultants to be in charge, the consultants were standing next to the PowerPoint projector authorized to speak to the leaders who would be seated. I took a seat at the back of the room, and soon after the participants arrived. The consultants welcomed each of them and the atmosphere appeared welcoming. Soon I found myself seated just behind the clinical leaders. A difference was clearly enacted at this point, in contrast to Mary, Ann and me, all of the clinical leaders were wearing their white coats since they were in the middle of their work. The meeting formally started, the consultants welcomed the middle managers to this ‘recap on the interviews at the department’. After a short introduction to their organizational attachment to the HR development
consultancy unit and educational background, the consultants moved on to explain their ‘way’ to the current meeting:

Consultant: […] We initiated this process by speaking with the department management team about what they expected from the program. The department management team believed this program could develop you as a group […] they also hoped that you would be able to achieve some kind of joint responsibility for the common task at the whole department. Fortunately this is rather well aligned with the overall goal of the hospital’s leadership development program […] The program must provide value, so we are making adjustments to fit your requests regarding projects to work on […] In the interviews with you, you had some specific expectations […] optimization of the outpatient clinic and better continuity of care […] and also you want to address your problems in relation to the relocation and reorganization of even more of the services to outpatient treatment (field notes, thematization meeting hospital, October 2013).

As the excerpt illustrate, various figures or allies are made present and attached to the program. The hospital, the department management team and the interviews are presented as things that has authorized and animated the program. In continuation of this, the ambiguous figure of added value is inscribed into the program as the main contribution. These figures appear, as we see through the quote, as allies to the program. An upcoming relocation and the ongoing changes in the continuity of care were suggested as local programs of action that could be turned into change projects during the program. All these figures or allies made present appear to share the activities in the program and as part of making the program and the consultants’ position legitimate and relevant.

The consultants continued by emphasizing that the interviews had left them with a difficult task of describing the group’s common task. This was presented as one of the main current issues at the department:

Consultant: ‘For some of the managers we interviewed, the specific task of being a manager was rather unclear. Perhaps not so much in relation to themselves, but perhaps more in relation to others. There is no doubt that you have a common goal of doing what is best for the patient, but you become more hesitant when we are asking if you also have a common task as leaders of the department’.
‘[A] common goal to do the best for the patient’ was enacted as different to ‘a common task’ as leaders. This kind of questioning appeared as a way to illustrate a problem, which would interest the leaders in the program. By evoking the figure of the core task at the department, the consultants emphasized that they would start working with the core task and address current difficulties through the projects. The projects would be change projects that the participants had to carry out alongside their everyday work. The consultants argued that the content was still unsettled as the projects were to be driven by the leaders themselves. The consultants came up with a few more examples from the interviews, one was ‘reorganizing the work of the doctors’ and another a future ‘merger of two units’. The interview and the organizational entities indicated insight into the current challenges of the department. Besides these allies, the consultants explained that they had decided to engage with a University Professor, who would participate during the first day at the first seminar. Hence, the many allies to the program appeared to position the program as a legitimate attempt to make changes at the department with the consultants as facilitators. Even though this approach had worked out at other departments, the change projects as vehicles for the program, which was financially unsupported and uncertain, took over.

**Testing the strength of the LD program of action**

Until then, scepticism towards the program was quite low, but as the program was outlined, the atmosphere changed. Questions were raised regarding the purpose of the program and particularly the role of the change projects during the program. Some of the middle managers raised their hands and started to question the fact that the department management team was not going to participate. Accordingly they were uneasy that articulating or agreeing on certain actions would necessarily have much impact if department management did not agree. The middle managers’ reactions seemed to contest the relevance of the program by evoking counter figures, such as finances as a way to question the legitimacy of any attempt of change without the department management team. The following exchange between the consultants (C), two clinical leaders (CL1, CL2) and a ward manager (WM) is illustrative of the situation:

CL1: […] ‘I don’t know whether you’ve heard it, or if it's just not part of the consideration. My main concern is to make sure that the place I have to run is working smoothly […] the executive stuff at the department like finances and collaboration across departments is something I think the department management team must deal with […]"
C: […] ‘But we do not address finances; actually we do not care about finances’

CL1: ‘We do care about them [finances] […] it is a large part of our everyday task’

C: [the consultants seemed to wonder if this was not dissonant to the first remark from CL1] 'Well of the department management task, isn’t it?’

CL1: ‘There are two elements, one is that they [the department management] have a big part of the job [stops shortly]’.

CL2: ‘You’ve mentioned that the aim was development on the conditions at the department; finances are also an important condition, I think’.

C: ‘The financial situation is a condition like the physical environment, which we, of course, have to take into account’.

WM: ‘What if it involves costs to get the projects completed? Who it is going to pay for that?

C: ‘There are not additional funds available as such’

What the exchange of words illustrate is how the legitimate contribution of the program is contested by arguing that finances is overseen. In contrast, the overall program with a focus on communication and collaborative matters rather than finances becomes visible. ‘The financial situation is a condition like the physical environment’, the consultant argued. When the consultants argued, ‘we do not care about finances’, it seemed, at first sight, as an attempt to connect with the leaders by indicating that this could be a chance for not engaging with finances. However, their wisecrack seemed to miss a key legitimating figure to the middle managers everyday practice. The previous descriptions of a lack of ‘common task’ and suggestions for change projects seemed at once complicated by the middle managers through the figures of finance and the absent department management team. Only the department management team has the power to make financial decisions on behalf of the department and must support any plan on organizational change. Accordingly, the change projects, which was essential to anchor the program in the middle managers’ everyday practice and allow them to engage with everyday matters of concern, was at risk of not being able to gain footing in a practice where finances have a significant role. Realising that this was challenging the program, Mary and Ann tried to respond to the new situation saying that they would not be able to ‘control what happens’ in the projects. Through the statement the consultants’ social constructionist background appeared, their
role would be to ‘figure out what to do to increase the chance of projects successes’, but what would happen was unknowable in advance. This statement did not quite satisfy the middle managers, it appeared as if the consultants would not take on an expert or knowing position. One of the clinical leaders raised his concern regarding the change projects:

CL: It seems that it is a project from our everyday practice that we can work on, a non-simulated project; it is our core task [...] But I would like to know what your core task is.

C: In this process?

CL: I'm curious about your core task.

C: Our core task in this program is to be process managers, we must teach, be your sparring partners. We are process consultants of sorts.

CL: If I may ask, what are the success criteria? Is it the definition of some projects? That some people uncover their managerial role in the organization? That some projects get implemented? Are there success criteria for your work?

C: [...] actually we often experience among clinical leaders that, and now I’m going to use a theoretical expression, there is much fog and haze in the ‘domain of production’ [theoretical social constructionist concept red.]. Meaning that there are many things which are not explicit. We often act into a reality because we believe it to be in a certain way [...] if there is more clarity in relation to your role and task compared to that un-clarity some of you expressed, then I think there’ll be some improvement - haze is not effective.

What we see in the exchange of words is how, the middle manager tries to resist consultancy by going along with the figure of the core task, which the consultants had introduced. Again, the social constructionist background of the consultants became visible and they were hesitant to promise anything. The consultants’ response seemed to fail as a legitimate account, which could convince the critical leaders, that the program and their consultancy practice was relevant to their problems. These leaders expected more specific descriptions of their current problems and possible solutions. For instance, regarding reorganization, financial matters and the lack of participation of the department management team. By going along with the figures deployed by the consultants, such as the core task
and the projects, and by questioning the value of the program, the middle managers ended up challenging the legitimacy and relevance of the consultants and the program. This ended up changing the program.

**Zooming out: Translating and appropriating the program of action further**

The controversy had challenged the legitimacy of the position of the consultants and the day after the controversy, the consultants discussed the situation with the department management team: As the consultants explained:

[...] the department management has to renegotiate with the middle managers in terms of whether it is sensible to them to move on with the program within the given framework [...] (Email correspondence between consultants and me)

The consultants decided to call off the program after the meeting and let the department management team discuss, what the department management team (head nurse) described as a ‘lack of trust’ from some of the middle managers to the consultants. Different topics were brought up in this renegotiation. What becomes interesting in this part was two different understandings of how the participants were enrolled to the program. While the middle managers considered the program as mandatory – ‘they had not been asked’, as they argued – the consultants acted as if they were acting in the interest of the middle managers and their voluntary participation. Further, while the consultants had used the interviews to tailor the program and bond to the concerns of the middle managers, the latter did not recognize this. Several of the middle managers argued that the conclusions the consultants made from the interviews did not justify the resources spent on conducting them. Clinical leaders and ward managers questioned ‘the purpose of the interviews’ (CL) and even the ‘purpose of the program’ (CL) and argued that the consultants seemed to miss the point. Some middle managers interviewed argued that the thematization meeting had made it evident that the consultants and the program would not be able to take the position of the middle managers. Another argued the meeting to be like a ‘clash between two different worlds’, accordingly the consultants’ should had been able to provide a more elaborate plan with propositions for action (CL). At the same time, the consultants argued that the middle managers had tried to challenge the program by turning it into ‘a discussion on evidence’. According to the consultants their ‘social constructionist mind-set did not fit into such a discussion since we will never be able to convince them of any kind of factual evidence’ (Interview,
consultant). According to the consultants the effects of the program depended largely on what would be said and done in the process, which was difficult to decide at the outset. The impact of the consultancy practice and program appeared slightly uncertain, which, by the middle managers, was assessed as too ambiguous and not a legitimate attempt to develop the clinical managerial practice.

Weeks passed and meetings between the consultants and the department management team took place. The lack of participation from the department management team was a major topic and the rather loose structure of the development projects was discussed. After discussions with the middle managers, the consultants and the department management team finally decided to resume the program in a modified form. Now it consisted of two seminars of respectively three and two days instead of three seminars and the department management team were now participating. The dates and the place was kept, but the program was altered, and a decision was made to focus on the upcoming relocation, which had been mentioned in the interviews and by the consultants. By re-negotiating the program, the consultants had again acquired a legitimate position as process consultants in the now modified program. The first seminar of three days passed well, the consultants’ role had although changed significantly and the department management team were much more active. The product of this first seminar was a new document describing organization and management at department TH. During my following interviews among the middle managers, the program was now assessed as a legitimate attempt at developing their practice. As one clinical leader explained immediately after the first seminar, […] I was not sure the consultants could come back, but they did […] (Interview, clinical leader). The contribution by the consultants among other things consisted in documenting the process, and although challenges remained, the seminar unfolded largely unproblematic. Most of the middle managers and the department management team were optimistic about the new modified program; soon, however, the program would be re-negotiated yet once more.

On the fourth intervention day (day one at the second seminar), an internal conflict had taken focus at the department. A doctor, who was quitting his job at the department, had made a complaint on management and collaboration at the department. Since the complaint related collaborative and managerial issues to damaging patient treatment. In order to maintain a legitimate position, the consultants quickly offered to change focus and discuss the complaint. This action seemed, at first sight, appropriate to the situation and the consultants were able to start the day. However, the situation were dramatically changed and soon critical voices took over again. The change in the program
contested the relevance of the consultants’ contribution yet another time. After some discussion, the consultants asked the group to reconsider if they should stay or leave. While discussing this in the group, the consultants started to consider if there was sufficient trust in their position, as one of the consultants explained ‘we had lost a position from which something can be done’ (Interview). The messages regarding the consultants’ relevance were very mixed, but it seemed difficult to get the middle managers to agree on whether the consultants’ presence was relevant. This ambiguous situation and the fact that some of the middle managers; ‘[…] did not put trust in us [the consultants] […]’ (Consultant, Interview, after seminar), resulted in the consultants leaving the place. The department management instead led the rest of the, again, modified seminar without the consultants.

According to several of the middle managers, the most significant contribution happened due to the complaint from the doctor and the discussion, which appeared at the second seminar after the consultants had left the program. Here they had discussed issues concerning management and collaboration, which according to one of the middle managers ‘[…] had been issues already at the first seminar, but no one had wanted to use that opportunity to discuss this issue’ […] (personal email correspondence after interview). The program ended with an agreement that should improve the collaboration at the department, a process, which would be supported by the department management team. After the program, a middle manager summed up the process in an interview:

Clinical leader: Compared to the original program, where the consultants were set to be in charge, what happened was that our department management team were put in charge and I think that was a great move. It made the department management team much more visible, and it also made the content more concrete […] make no mistake about who makes the decisions in the end, it is the department management team.

The quote seems to capture many of the central legitimacy issues in the process, but also contain what appeared to make the program work anyway. The consultants’ initial position as someone being in charge, but ambiguous in defining their contribution through the program had not been considered as a legitimate attempt to develop managerial practice by several of the middle managers. Although the consultants had been able to make many allies present, it appeared that the consultants’ social constructionist equivocal stance were not accepted. Rather participation by the department management team and the ability to discuss different matters seemed to translate the program into something legitimate and thereby relevant to the specific clinical managerial practice.
In sum, although this case proved to be slightly dramatic, it nevertheless provides an interesting case of how legitimacy matters to process consulting. As the program translated compared to the initial one and became appropriated by the middle managers and department management team, legitimacy also became re-ascribed to the program and partially to the consultants’ position. The program developed from a leadership development effort led by consultants, involving middle managers and with the department management team on the side, towards a program, which the department management team were leading with the consultants more or less on the side. Although the consultants ended up being right – it was impossible to know what would happen in the process, the consultants social constructionist appearance proved not to connect very well with the client practice. However, through the different relevance tests, the program transformed and gained legitimacy throughout the process. What appeared to be happening was a gradual take over by the middle managers and department management team. The case thus illustrates at least two aspects of process consulting practice. Firstly, through the process of zooming out, we saw how legitimacy was produced in the first place; however, it proved to be fragile and require an ongoing accomplishment, which became visible by zooming-in at the thematization meeting. Secondly, by zooming out again, it became visible how the program’s legitimacy, as it appeared in the case, gained another quality as the middle managers appropriated it.

**Discussion**

By means of the empirical case, it is possible to reconsider how legitimacy matters as an ongoing accomplishment within the consulting process. Through a range of allies, the consultants’ program of action gained legitimacy, but through the process anti-programs were also enacted and complicated the process. The empirical case thus becomes an example of how legitimacy emerges and dissolves. From an institutionalist perspective, the process could be argued to be a strong medico-professional logic appropriating a weak managerial logic to fit their concerns; hence the consultants failed claiming jurisdiction over the change agency (e.g. Wylie et al., 2014). Although this is one way of explaining some of the process, the empirical analysis also illustrates something more. For instance, the clinical professionals could be argued to deploy a managerial logic by evoking finances to challenge the consultancy program of action. Further, the consultants’ social constructionist inspired process consulting approach also appears to deviate from most ideal type managerial logics. In other
words, the practice-based and performative view on legitimacy thus contributes to a legitimacy inversion, which makes legitimacy a practical, socio-material and ongoing performance, which is dependent on our way of knowing practice.

A practice-based and performative approach to legitimacy makes it possible to theorize the accomplishment of legitimate performances as entwined with strengthening the development program of action. Although this can be analysed as a process of enrolling allies to the program and connecting programs to further programs, it is just an accumulative process, the previously introduced distinction between what animates action but is not necessarily made present and what is activated or performed as present becomes relevant now (Cooren, 2010). Through the initial zooming-out focus in the empirical case, we see how the program of action is composed by a previous workplace assessment in the form of a text (category from initial coding) — showing lack of satisfaction with management, and by gaining back up from the hospital top management as a part of the organization. As the program enrolls department management teams and middle managers to the program by using a meeting, and an interview as tool, it gains more support from entities who now all partially animate the program — they are not necessarily present (e.g. hospital top management) but nonetheless important. This becomes visible in the confusion about whether the program was mandatory or voluntary. It is the fact that the program was introduced as a mandatory program from hospital top management, which made the middle managers enact it that way. In contrast, the consultants enacted the program more ambiguously, as we see in the case where they acted as if the middle managers had more or less voluntarily agreed to participate in the program. By zooming in on this case we see how the consultants activate those allies by making them present, this includes hospital management, department management and the interview. Further, it shows how the consultants impose order on the current situation at department TH by problematizing a lack of ‘common task’ as leaders, which the program can help resolve in some way. Paraphrasing Bloomfield and Danieli (1995: 31), the legitimacy of consultancy work also rests on the key feature of consultants identity – namely, claiming to tackle problems recognized as real to the client — thus the problem indeed is essential to the program. The consultants mobilize the development program of action further by activating insights from the interviews and by using a core task concept and the ability to work on change projects as tools. Although acknowledging the attempt at the outset, the middle managers start to challenge the consultants and the program as a legitimate attempt at development. The consultants’ wisecrack on finances becomes the beginning of making finances an anti-program to the original LD program of action. The middle managers seem to consider the lack of ability to address finances as
making the change projects uncertain, thus, some of the middle managers mobilize the lack of participation from the department management team as an important part of the anti-program. Finally, the ambiguous value of the program seems to connect poorly as a legitimate attempt at development in the practice of the middle managers and works as another anti-program. In the final zooming-out part of the analysis, the program is further transformed and the anti-programs continue being activated and gradually take over the original program. Now the department management team participates and the success criteria are changed, as they address the forthcoming relocation. Although the now translated program has gained a new legitimate status, which includes the consultants in a new position, for a while another translation happens in the end. The activated complaint from a physician again sets the legitimate and relevant participation of the consultants on trial, which in the end translates the consultants out of the transformed program. While the LD program at the outset was akin to the consultants and the consultants’ ability to position the program and their contribution as a legitimate attempt at development at department TH, the nature of the program transformed during the process. The performative stance thus helps theorize legitimacy as not just given by organizational allies such as the hospital management animating the program, but as subject to constant active maintenance. The empirical case in this paper provides insight into how at a very practical level consultants actually produce legitimacy in their work; in other words how they aim to make their techniques or programs relevant, thus effective. The contribution of the analysis is threefold, however related. First, the analysis contributes to the stream of research discussing the role of legitimacy in consultancy work. Second, through the performative approach the article responds to recent calls for studies on how legitimacy is produced at a micro level (Cloutier and Langley 2013). Finally, by being situated in the nexus between health care professionals and managerial professionals (consultants), the paper advances discussions of the professionalization of management in health care settings. I will elaborate on those three parts below.

Firstly, extant literature has argued for the importance of legitimacy in consultancy work (e.g. Czarniawska, 2001, Sturdy et al., 2009, Wright, 2009, Bloomfield, 1995) and has questioned if, for instance, process consulting requires another mode of legitimization (Sturdy, 2011, Nikolova et.al., 2013) and even if it is possible to be a social constructionist consultant (Czarniawska, 2001). Although there are examples from kinds of process consulting, which have illustrated how legitimacy is emerging, for instance, ‘by mimicking the client’s language back on to the client’ in the process (Nikolova et al., 2013: 74), the amount of studies situated in practice is scarce. Most studies of consultancy work tend to discuss legitimacy as a rather stable point emphasizing, as previously
described, ‘expertise’, ‘relationships’ and ability to signal ‘added value’ as essential (Wylie et al., 2014). Wright (2009) further finds that senior management patronage and collegial relationships is essential to consultants and their work. The empirical case in this article qualify those aspects of the consulting process, as it shows how legitimacy is leaky and that it is put to the test (Latour, 1987) when the consultants are required to assert their relevance. Legitimacy still is animated and challenged in the consulting process by aspects of senior management patronage, expertise and added value, but as the case illustrate, those aspects are much more fluid and distributed. ‘Expertise’, ‘relationships’ and ‘added value’ is not ostensive categories in the process consulting practice, indeed they must be activated and translated in order to evoke a legitimate performance. We see this in the program, where the consultants are hesitant to assert their expertise. Through their social constructionist background their expertise is presented as a sensitivity towards facilitating process, which appear as too ambiguous to several of the middle managers. Aspects of expertise, added value, senior management patronage has to be activated in a sensible way to the client practice, which in the case require ongoing maintenance. By theorizing legitimacy in the consulting process from a performative stance, general categories, which has been illustrated in the literature on consulting is nuanced (e.g. Wylie et al. 2014; Wright, 2009). The practice based and performative stance makes such categories distributed. The legitimacy and agency of the consultant become configured in a distributed network of allies, programs and anti-programs. This latter point relate to another aspect of the consulting process. When at the end the program is evaluated as useful, it can be understood also as an example of how the program not only relies on the legitimacy of the consultant position but also takes on a life of its own. Legitimacy and relevance is ascribed to the program of action along the way through its appropriation. Hence, legitimacy is not just ascribed to the consultant identity (Wright, 2009), but rather to the ideas and knowledge the consultancy work provokes through translation. In other words, the department management team might have had an agenda prior to the program, as they wanted to address certain issues with regard to collaboration. The process consulting dimension gets a double sense in this situation. Not only is the intervention a process, which has a beginning and an end to the consultant (Schein, 2008), but the consultants are consulting a process (Weick and Quinn, 1999) in the sense that they convene or consult a process, which already are going on and continue after the consultants’ exclusion. The consultants indeed ascribe legitimacy to the program, as Sturdy et al. (2009) point out, the consultants might act as legitimating certain conversations or actions to take place in the client organization at first sight. However, it was through the ongoing reassessments and translations that the program proved to become effective and
legitimate, the knowledge ‘fit’ (McGivern and Dopson, 2010) emerged as a process of translation during the program. Although the program changed and we do not know what would have happened if the middle managers had just accepted to go along with the consultants in the first place, it appeared that legitimacy was ascribed by the middle managers as a result of their gradually taking possession of the program. In other words, their acts of resistance appropriated the program into something evaluated as useful (Thomas and Hardy, 2011). What the empirical analysis showed is that although the consultants might not have appeared, to a dramatic extent, as legitimate and relevant actors, the program gradually gained legitimacy and actually ended up as very effective. This transposes a focus on legitimacy as a matter of consultants’ identity as insiders or outsiders (Wright, 2009) towards a matter of enabling program legitimacy in the process consulting engagement. This program legitimacy is not necessarily dependent on one human being but distributed amongst various entities. Had the dates not been in the calendar and had the conference facility not been booked, department TH would not have continued the process the same way. As we see in the empirical case, gaining program legitimacy is a process of including and excluding actors along the way in order to become legitimate, thus effective.

The analysis described in this article also shows how legitimacy is produced through an imbricated process. Hence, the empirical case relates to recent broader discussions of micro-level legitimacy in management and organization studies (Bitektine and Haack, 2014, Reay et al., 2006, Cloutier and Langley, 2013). Here, contributions to micro-level ‘blind spots’ of institutional accounts have been suggested, for instance by incorporating alternative perspectives to the study of legitimacy struggles (Cloutier and Langley, 2013) and by exploring how legitimacy emerges ‘bottom-up’ in practice (Thévenot, 2001). Accounts of legitimacy tend to focus on how legitimacy is provided by rather stable logics such as a profession, the state, top management or various regimes which exist outside an observed practice (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006, Thornton et al., 2012, Brandl et al., 2014). Such accounts present legitimacy to be granted if the work of consultants is evaluated as having an appropriate normativity in relation to institutional or societal standards. In other words legitimacy is granted in accordance with certain categories or scripts which are dependent on abstract culturally and historically produced societal categories. From this perspective, illegitimacy can be a matter of, for instance, the program combining incommensurable professional logics (Brandl et al., 2014). The performative approach deployed in my analysis adds another element since it does not employ strict sociological categories rather it focuses on the entities and devices, which are used in the production of legitimacy. This means a more dynamic and distributed take on the production of legitimacy, which
is more sensitive towards what appears as appropriate and legitimate is continuously tested and negotiated in practice (Nicolini, 2013: 228). Such a view makes visible how various devices such as the interview or the concept of ‘the core task’ the problem of ‘common tasks’ are used to enrol participants and try to ‘impose a certain order on a part of the social world’ (Callon and Law, 1982) by which legitimacy is produced. Bencherki and Cooren (2011) argue that this process involves the imbrication of different programs of action. The empirical case in this paper advances this idea of legitimacy as produced in the imbrication of different programs of action. The case shows an example of how the program of action gains legitimacy by imbricating different smaller programs of action or allies, which transforms along the way. The case in focus here shows how the different programs of action end up producing a hybrid program of action. This program extends previous programs of action as well as adjusting the set of legitimate participants in this program. The practice based and performative stance towards legitimacy transpose the focus from how certain actors (e.g. the consultant) gain legitimacy, towards how legitimacy is continuously tested in practice, the legitimacy of the program of action is always only provisional and has to maintained again and again.

A third contribution of the article lies within the literature on professionalization of management in health care settings (Noordegraaf, 2005, Noordegraaf and Van der Meulen, 2008, Noordegraaf 2011). The case in focus illustrates an attempt to impose a consultancy practice and a managerial and organizational development agenda on the practice of a group of professional clinicians in managerial roles. In the empirical case, we see these diverse practices, which also acts through the consultants and clinical leaders respectively. What appears legitimate in one practice, a social constructionist take on consulting with a focus on collaborative aspects and common tasks unlikely to address financial matters, appeared inappropriate to the client practice since financial matters were a significant part of solving the common task. The professionalization of management has typically focused on demands for documentation and performance measurement in New Public Management (e.g. Noordegraaf 2007). However, this case illustrates another political agenda in the stream of interventions aimed at promoting professional managers in health care. By interrogating the connection between legitimacy and consultancy work in health care settings, the inevitable political dimension of legitimacy becomes visible (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). However, based on the practice based and performative stance the political dimension change slightly, from a neo-liberal or new public management discussion towards a practical description of politics. The political dimensions of consultancy work have been interrogated but also called upon from various perspectives (e.g. Sturdy, 2011), and Alvesson (2002) argues that the political element in process consultancy work is embedded in the
power of language. I believe the empirical case illustrate, how the program of action and the consultancy practice is not only a discursive manoeuvre but also has to be related to the various entities associated with the program, which contain the diverse practices and organization, tools, texts and physical arrangements. The agency of the program of action and the consultant is composed by these elements, which configure or literally frame the situations observed, hence also are part of the politics of the program. I consider the political aspect to be embedded in the framing of the program, how it is designed, conducted by the consultants, and now described by me. It is a political act since it holds several elements by one (Latour, 1988: 158) and it is not given but it is a process of shaping or constructing certain parts of the social world, which although is still open and contestable (Mol, 1999). We see this kind of political element several times through the empirical case through its contestations. The interviews and the non-participating department management team is illustrative in these contestations. By using the interview as a tool, the consultants became able to impose a certain order on a part of the organizational and the program reality. But this act as part of the general program also draw boundaries and rejects certain parts of reality, thus becomes political. The diagnosis that the department lacks awareness of their common task as leaders excludes other issues and end up neglecting financial matters. If finances were not up for discussion, then improvements appeared as limited to inter- or even intrapersonal matters of developing collaboration and services without increased financial resources. What appeared to concern the middle managers as well was the lack of participation from the department management team. The middle managers at department TH expressed confusion regarding this sudden distance between those who usually make decisions and their work (see also Sturdy, 2009: 459). This had been a deliberate choice in the original program, but the middle managers at department TH considered it unfortunate. It is these acts in the process of activating certain elements of practice by making them present and likewise making other elements absent, which makes the program and consultants’ intervention a political act as well.

This argument is in line with Noordegraaf’s description (2011); he claims that ‘[i]nterventions in professional and managerial fields can never escape institutional constraints and power relations’ (Noordegraaf, 2011: 1365). While it is hard to be against improved collaboration, and indeed it is important to health care (Gittell et al., 2000), the political dimensions of such program framings should not be underestimated. The concepts, devices and theories that the consultants use could all be analysed as potentially efficiency promoting tools, whether so is as well an analytical and empirical question. In their studies of the Tavisstock Institute of Human Relations, Rose and Miller (2013) showed how interventions can be a way to turn a larger problem back on the individual. Hence,
consultants indeed become political actors positioned in the nexus between government or top management agendas and the everyday practice of the professionals (Smolovic Jones et al., 2015).

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to investigate how legitimacy is configured in the consulting process. And how does legitimacy matter? Much research on consultancy work tends to treat legitimacy as either caused by exogenous entities, either in the sense that consultants act as an extension of top management legitimizing their ideas or as legitimized by logics or myths external to their practice. Drawing on a performative and practice-based approach I set out to explore legitimacy as a practical engagement and an ongoing performance. An empirical case from a shaky consultant-client relation in a hospital setting was used to explore the role of legitimacy. Through the analysis it is possible to learn several things with regard to the role of legitimacy in consultant-client relations and more specifically with regards to process consulting. Firstly, legitimacy is to be understood as a distributed aspect of consulting practice. While the legitimacy of the consultant to some extent is animated or created through institutional back up and organizational entities (for instance, top management) or tools, the consultant also has to activate these entities. In this case it becomes visible, how the consultant becomes legitimate by activating various entities or making them present, which means that the consultant constantly becomes legitimate if their actions are considered appropriate in accordance with client practice. What we see is that when the consultant’s actions are considered inappropriate, legitimacy dissolves, and they cannot rely on the previous enrolled actors animating their work — they have to continuously make their work count. Legitimacy is never granted once and for all, it must be renegotiated again and again. Secondly, what appears through the empirical analysis is how the consultant takes part in a program of action where legitimacy is not necessarily bound to the consultant’s individual position but rather to the program. Legitimacy is not to be owned but is much more processesual. At the outset, the legitimacy of the program of action was largely akin to the consultant’s ability to make it so, but it was gradually taken over and appropriated by the client and different anti-programs that created a better knowledge ‘fit’ across consultancy and client practices. This second finding underscores that the impact of consultancy interventions is not equal to the individual consultant’s ability to become legitimate, rather the process ascribes legitimacy to a program, which might in the end, make the consultant irrelevant. A third interesting aspect of this analysis has to do with the possibility of being a social constructionist consultant (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012, Czarniawska, 2001). Indeed the case illustrates aspects of the consultants’ social
constructionist attachment. The consultants argued that they would not be able to provide ‘evidence’ for their work due to their social constructionist ‘mind-set’. This is a particular version of social constructionism, which according to the consultants appears through their hesitance in providing prescriptions at the thematization meeting, but also through their different implicit theoretical references and communicative interest. The original program design largely embodied an ambition of creating more clarity – a common task, by means of dialogue. The social constructionist consultancy practice, which ascribed much potential to communication, dialogue and human interaction seemed to have a hard time connecting with not only the facts, evidence and financial restrictions mediating the practice of the clinical leaders, but also the fact that the department management team was considered as those ‘who make the decisions in the end’. Although this case proved to develop rather dramatically, it also illustrates some of the difficulties in gaining legitimacy as a social constructionist process consultant. The question raised by Czarniawska (2001), whether it is ‘possible to be a constructionist consultant’ remains valid. As it appears in this article, does the social constructionist consultant seem challenged when they are to enact expertise and perform knowledgeably in a conventional sense. This aspect is somehow different from most descriptions of mainstream consulting (e.g. Armbrüster, 2006, Berglund and Werr, 2000).

In sum, research on legitimacy in relation to consultancy work and particularly process consulting is still limited, particularly from a performative stance and a practice-based approach. What the analytical approach in this paper has offered is a focus on how legitimacy maintenance is constant work, which requires as well enrolling allies and the ability to activate allies appropriately as the situation develops. Consulting in action always acts on the boundary of client practice and what appears as legitimate at one moment in the consulting process is likely to change in the next. While the analytical framework for this analysis has been experimental in this endeavour, future research could develop a performative stance and practice-based view on legitimacy further. For instance by relating it to recent work within institutional studies (Cloutier and Langley, 2013, Patriotta et al., 2011, Lawrence et al., 2009), or by deploying a similar framework to other kinds of consultancy practice, for instance mainstream consulting.

**Practical implications**

Finally, what are the practical implications of this analysis? By outlining how legitimacy can be acquired and potentially dissolve in practice, my ambition has been to refocus on how legitimacy is
not only acquired through abstract categories such as expertise, added value or senior management patronage. Rather my aim has been to illustrate legitimacy struggles as a practical engagement where how to perform legitimately cannot be settled in advance because it is constantly to be tested. I have suggested that acquiring and dissolving legitimacy requires a much more dynamic process of animation and activation where legitimacy is not a position given but has to be constantly acquired or taken. This does not mean that consulting is not animated by, for instance, educational merits or professional background, previous qualifications or a certain organizational mandate (for instance being employed as a consultant or requested by senior management). All these entities are likely to animate consultant practice but what is at stake is how the consultant is able to deploy or activate and thereby make these animators appropriately presented or combined in the situation. By use of the empirical case where the consultants struggled to maintain and produce legitimacy it becomes visible how legitimacy is fragile and the consultants have to balance diverse attachments in their own and client practice. While the consultants in this case to some extend only temporary acquired legitimacy in client practice the case nonetheless illustrates how legitimacy is derived and contested through very concrete practical operations, tools and organizational entities. By understanding how legitimacy is acquired or dissolved in such practical situations, practitioners might achieve a better understanding, which will enable them to engage with various legitimacy struggles in new ways in their own practice.

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CHAPTER 4
SEDUCTIVE ATMOSPHERES: REFLECTION TOOLS AT WORK IN CONSULTANT-CLIENT RELATIONS

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Abstract: In this article, we draw on an ethnographic case study among a group of research leaders at a Hospital, to discuss the role of tools for organizing reflection in consultant-facilitated leadership development work. By drawing on the Lewinian concept of atmospheres and the theory of affordances, we show how consultants use tools to produce seductive atmospheres where everyday practice is bracketed into an object amenable for change and learning. In this attempt we argue that tools provide a flexible but configurative action repertoire that shape atmospheres and provoke current realities. Our findings show however that facilitators and organizational change agents may risk provoking an illusory atmosphere, in which theatrical play-acting takes over. We discuss how balancing different tool affordances are important in order to organize a ‘functional equivalence’ in development work where illusory atmospheres do not take over. We conclude by commenting on the implications of our analysis for future studies on leadership development work.

Keywords: Reflection tools, consultant-client-relation, atmospheres, process consultation, ethnographic case study
Introduction

Studies of management development and education have advanced the understanding of professional attempts to manage learning (Fox, 1997). Those attempts frequently involve consultant-facilitated development work (Czarniawska, 2001, Sambrook and Willmott, 2013, Sturdy, 2011) that attempt to enhance managerial practice through deploying various tools such as games in their work (Karriker and Aaron, 2014, Lewis and Grosser, 2012). The majority of studies that investigate consultant-client relations tend to concentrate on ‘rationalistic’ or ‘mainstream consultants’ (O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2015, Sturdy, 2011: 526). For instance, consultancy in relation to total quality management (Legge, 2002) and business process redesign (Heusinkveld and Visscher, 2012). Contemporary ‘soft’ management consultancy work adopting insights from the psy-disciplines and which is embedded in the trajectory of organization development and human relations are generally under-investigated and theorized (Costea et al., 2008, Swan and Fox, 2009). We see soft management consultancy work as involving process consultancy or facilitation (Schein, 2008), consultancy work targeting reflection (Oliver, 2005) or other kinds of facilitation addressing soft skills (Clegg et al., 2007, Hurrell, 2015). Likewise, reflective facilitation is a key concern to extant literature in management and organization studies (Cunliffe, 2004, Gray, 2007, Hibbert, 2013, Keevers and Treleaven, 2011). While, for instance, process consulting is widely used in organizations to facilitate learning (Costea et al., 2008, Wright, 2009), it is mostly within leadership development studies they are mentioned (e.g. Carroll and Nicholson, 2014). Calls have been made for studies on these neglected traditions of consultancy work (Cooke and Burnes, 2012, Andrew Sturdy, 2011), and we agree with Smolovic Jones et al. (2015) who describe a ‘need in the literature’ to engage with this kind of consultancy and facilitation work. Particularly, there is a lack of studies engaging not only with discursive manoeuvres, but also with how artefacts and objects along discourses are used to accomplish this kind of process consultancy work.

Consultancy work in the tradition of organizational development (OD) and human relations is often ascribed to the work of Kurt Lewin and colleagues (Trahair and Bruce, 2012). Lewin emphasized intangible matters such as group dynamics and social climate or atmosphere in his intervention studies. One of the insights provided was that development practitioners (consultants, facilitators or teachers) depend on the creation of appropriate atmospheres in order to accomplish their work (Lewin, 1939). Lewin (1939: 74) argued that: 'It is well known that the amount of success a teacher [or consultant] has in the classroom depends not only on her skill but to a great extent on the
atmosphere she creates'. Along with recent calls for ‘retrospection’ in organization studies towards old organizational theories (Hassard et al., 2013), we suggest to revisit this old concept of atmospheres. Recently, Lezaun and Calvillo (2014) discussed Lewin’s ‘atmospheres’ arguing that practitioners within the tradition of soft consultancy work can be considered as ‘engineers of atmospheres and architects of interiors’. In their analysis of Lewin’s socio-scientific experiments, Lezaun and Calvillo show how the material furnishings and physical configuration of the ‘experiment’ were essential to render certain political forms observable. Likewise literature on the role of tools in strategic development work has emphasized the physical configuration of development spaces arguing that tools provide affordances that shape work processes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). In line with this reasoning, we argue that tools and artefacts are important in consultant-facilitated development work in order to devise ‘seductive’ atmospheres for change and development. We draw the term ‘seductive’ from the Latin translation, meaning to ‘lead’ (ducere) ‘away’ (se-) (Oxford Learners dictionary). Seduction stress the affective effort involved in animating the ‘expiring social energy’ (Czarniawska, 2013: 17) that feed development and change. Consequently the following research question is formulated: How do reflection tools shape the consultant-client relation and what do they enable?

To bridge tools and atmospheres, we employ the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1986). An affordance lens allows analytical sensitivity towards how atmospheres are produced through being inextricably linked to the physical characteristics of the tool, and how users appropriate it in actual use. We draw on an empirical example where consultants undertook leadership development among research leaders at a research department in a hospital. The site provides an apposite case to our study as it shows how the consultants use a particular board game as a tool to assist the construction of atmospheres in which development processes could unfold. Our findings suggest that the game afforded delegation of roles, affecting attention and bracketing of reality. We discuss how the affordances offered a flexible but configurative action repertoire to provoke current realities.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline the concept of tools in relation to process consultancy work. This section is followed by an outline of the theory of affordances, which is our conceptual framework. We then present the research methodology followed by our empirical analysis. Finally, we discuss how our findings add to the current and future research.
Tools and process consultancy work

Extant literature within management and organization studies deploy the concept of tools to investigate how reflection is evoked (Gorli et al., 2015, Gray, 2007), strategy is made (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015) and personnel is managed (Townley, 1993). Gray (2007) argues that tools are used to accomplish aims more efficiently. Consultants use more or less standardized tools and materials in their work to facilitate and perform their interventions. Examples of tools used in consultancy work are PowerPoint slides (Kaplan, 2011, Smith, forthcoming), SWOT strategy maps (Paroutis et al., 2015) or journals (Gray, 2007). The tools of interest in this paper can be termed group reflection tools. Since such tools evoke human interaction to afford social influence and transformation of human conduct, they can be considered as kinds of ‘human technologies’ (Rose, 1998). Consultants who promote a soft managerial discourse such as process consultants (Schein, 2008) and facilitators (Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015) are typically depicted as using these tools when ‘rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of action’ (Rose and Miller, 2013: 31). Given the lack of studies explicitly scrutinizing the role of tools in process consultancy work, we draw more broadly on discussions of the role of tools to evoke reflection (Gorli, et al., 2015, Gray, 2007) and strategic work (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015).

Various tools to foster modes of reflection have been described in the literature. ‘Reflective journals’, ‘concept mapping’ and ‘metaphors’ are examples of tools, which has been argued to encourage managers to examine their personal thinking and organizational practices in new ways (Cunliffe, 2002, Gray, 2007: 498). Moreover Gorli et al. (2015) find that an interview functions as a tool for advancing reflection arguing that the interview can be used to uncover current assumptions about how one is affecting the organization. They present this as ‘a form of self-research’ at group level (Gorli, et al., 2015: 11). These studies show how interviews and writing can be used as tools for transforming human conduct in organizations. Research on the role of tools in strategic work shows how tools help construct spaces for development work (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2015). In this stream of research, tools are described as ‘the concepts, models, and methods employed by managers during strategy making’ (Paroutis, et al., 2015: 48). For instance, BCG matrixes, scenario-planning, Porter’s five forces and SWOT may be used to create a common language about strategy and enact spaces for negotiation of interests (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). However, tools not only shape reality, tools both shape reality and are shaped back. To describe this, the literature has found inspiration in the theory of affordance that is used to describe what tools do. To paraphrase Jarzabkowski and Kaplan
‘tools have affordances that shape the way actors frame problems’; however, they can also be shaped back as they ‘enable actors to advance their own interests in that problem’ (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015: 539).

The focus on ‘affordances’ guides our investigation of the role of group reflection tools in consultant-client relations. We infer two important insights from the literature on tools. One is how tools are deployed to change human conduct and the other is how tool affordances both shape and is shaped back in this activity. By foregrounding how practitioners interact with tools to shape atmospheres and produce knowledge, the theory of affordances advances our understanding of how situations are perceived in a certain way with particular possibilities for action.

**Atmospheric affordances and tools**

In recent years the theory of affordances has attracted new interest from various research communities. Catalysed by studies of socio-materiality and the impact of information systems on organization practices, the affordance lens has gained ground in management and organization studies (Fayard and Weeks, 2014, Orlikowski and Scott, 2008, Zammuto et al., 2007) and also as a way to illustrate how consultants use artefacts as mediators (Hicks, Wilderom, and Nair, 2009).

Developed by Gibson (1986), the concept of affordances refers to the possibilities and constraints of the environment relative to any observer. Affordances are unique and relational in the sense of being tied simultaneously to the situated use of multiple purposes (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). The value and meaning of our environment is a complementary effort carried out by both observer and environment (Gibson, 1986). A tool’s affordances are discovered by users through courses of action and interaction with the particular object or design. Affordances are both objective and persisting and subjective and transient (Costall, 1995) because they ‘are properties taken with reference to the observer’ (Gibson, 1986: 143). Many affordances are perceived by direct observation, but they may also be discovered without when they are situated, distributed, and social (Scarantino, 2003, Zhang and Patel, 2006). Cognitive and social processes as well as embeddedness are thus important aspects of affordances (Dale, 2005). Since affordances are relational and dispositional (Fayard and Weeks, 2014), our environment is not value free awaiting to be ‘bestowed by a need of the observer’ (Gibson, 1986: 138) but rather it holds an array of values and meanings. Such affordances point both to the observer and the observed (Gibson, 1986). Therefore the affordances of our work environment exist regardless of whether organizational members use the work space in specific ways or not. The value
and the meaning of the environment becomes manifest when it is in fact used for the purpose (Hutchby, 2001) or when it is repurposed for other values and meanings than intended (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). In this regard, the physical aspects of the work environment become embodied in the projects of employees and their programs of action, and vice versa. Hence, a tool and its use cannot be separated since they shape each other (Gibson, 1986).

The inextricability between practitioners and their work environment, which the concept of affordances brings to the fore, is essential to this paper. An affordance lens is particularly oriented towards action, making it appropriate when studying the complementary production of atmospheres for development. It has been argued that many studies uncritically deploy the concept of affordance without noticing the difference between the original interests of Gibson and the appropriation to “social” and organizational matters (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). While Gibson (1986) was critical towards Lewin’s mentalistic emphasis, we argue that affordances and atmospheres entwine in organizational settings and we see atmospheric affordances as produced simultaneously by both organizational subjects and objects.

**Methodology**

**Research site**

In 2009 the University Hospital (UH) set out on a large-scale initiative consisting of a series of interventions to improve clinical leadership. The goal was to ‘foster reflection’ and ‘to mobilize the leadership resources’ among professionals thereby effect an improved work environment and accommodate current organizational changes at the Hospital. Departments at the hospital were enrolled in the project through a series of planned leadership development interventions led by internal organization development consultants assisted by external counterparts – all mostly acting in a process consultant role (Schein, 2008).

The first author investigated the hospital project as a case for studying consultancy work in health care settings and the entwinement of managerial and specialized knowledge. The process was followed closely at two departments – a research department and a medical department over a period of 18 months. Throughout the empirical work, the consultants used various tools: reflection journal (logbook), dialogic exercises, psychological tests, team-building exercises and learning games. One tool, a simulation board game, turned out to be particularly influential. It circulated widely among the
organizational consultants at the Hospital, and a series of leadership development workshops were conducted where the tool was used to foster reflection on current and forthcoming changes. The tool was developed in an outside consultancy and was broadly promoted in other large corporations. The consultancy having developed the tool argued that the strength of the tool was its ability to ‘simulate organizations’, leaders’ and professionals’ reality and everyday work’. The role of this tool as a simulation game for reflection and preparation for change projects triggered our curiosity. It provided interesting ground for advancing our understanding of which kinds of organizational realities tools afford and the atmospheres for reflection and development they foster. Hence, we decided to focus on the use of this particular reflection tool ‘cutting’ our empirical material to a three-day session at a conference facility involving a group of clinical research leaders. The clinical research department has approximately 100 employees, most of them with an educational background in medicine, statistics or mathematics; it is managed by a director and a group of five research leaders who participated as a group in the process. The total process, which this session is part of, involved eight full intervention days divided into three sessions. During the first session, the participants mapped current issues. In the next session, which we focus on in this paper, they discussed leadership in times of change and the topic of the final session was self-management. During the first session, the leaders described how two informal cultures of medical researchers and statisticians caused controversy between the two occupations, which was detrimental to the department. The aim requested by the research department director was to develop their leadership abilities as a group, thus they were tasked to improve their collaboration with a view to a smoother cross-occupational collaboration.

**Research approach**

The study sets out to do a fine-grained analysis of tools involved in consultant-client relations with regard to leadership development. The object of analysis was the board game as a reflection tool, which also involved supporting props and artefacts such as post-its and logbooks. Pursuing this aim we designed our research approach to follow the actual work of the consultants, thereby allowing a focus on how tools are involved in this (Gherardi, 2012). In line with previous studies on consultant-client relations in action (Mueller and Whittle, 2011, Sturdy, Handley, Clark, and Fincham, 2009), our design was informed by participant observation studies (Spradley, 1980) and the production of an ethnographic account (Van Maanen, 2006). Hence, we employed a qualitative and explorative research approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As we acknowledge that the situated descriptions of
singular cases can reveal aspects of more general and useful importance, our case was purposely selected (Cooren et al., 2006, Flyvbjerg, 2006, Quattrone, 2006).

**Data collection and analysis**

Our data was gathered through a three-step strategy of semi-structured interviews, observational methods and document studies. The data for this article is part of a large ethnographic material from the Hospital study containing observations, 37 interviews and document studies that in total affords a dense background. Access to the process was negotiated through the HRD manager; further access was negotiated with each client at the Hospital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Volume</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Approx. 200 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with consultants</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews with participants (client)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document studies (internal documents, email exchanges and PowerPoints)</td>
<td>Approx. 500 pages</td>
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We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants prior to, under and after the process; all research leaders and consultants were interviewed. The average duration of interviews was one hour and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The observations conducted took place primarily on site of the intervention days but we also went “off-site” and observed meetings related to the process planning among both the consultants as well as the client organization. During these observations, the participation level varied, from observing to participating in conversations (Spradley, 1980). Focus were on how the relation between the consultant and the participants unfolded and in this article we focus on observations and follow up interviews, which illustrate how the tool appeared to be used by the participants and consultant in action. After each day of observation, field notes were rewritten and reworked into coherent text resulting in more than 300 pages of field notes. Additionally, we analyzed how the tool was presented in various materials by the consultancy who had designed the tool. The collected and analyzed documents consisted of PowerPoints, email streams, referred literature, concepts and models produced by the consultants and
finally various internal documents at the Hospital. Those were used to refine the interview questions and guide the observations.

In the data analysis we inquired into our empirical material to unfold what the participants actually were doing, with what aim and through which means (Emerson et al., 2011: 177). We collectively reflected on the transcripts from the observations and interviews following the dual process of ‘categorizing’ and ‘condensing’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In this process, the concept of tools was then used as a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Becker, 1988) for further ‘disciplined imagination’ (Weick, 1989). The categorization process followed an abductive approach (Brinkmann, 2014), which was theoretically informed and open in relation to the empirical material. We ended up grouping the data into three parts, which we further developed into three illustrative vignettes that let us discuss the affordances of tools in consultant-client relations.

Empirical analysis

The empirical material made us consider whether artefacts, objects and tools furnishing leadership development interventions play an important role in constructing atmospheres for development. The case study shows how the consultant, during the process, steps in and out of the shadow of theories, concepts and models while keeping the client-consultant relation stable and out in the open through the presence of a board game. We demonstrate how the particular setting and the positioning of the board game mobilizes the consultant and participants in ways that provides an interesting case for process consulting and facilitation. In the following, we present three illustrative vignettes that show what happened. Whereas vignette 1 illustrates the consultant’s attempt to fertilize the participants towards learning how to use and be affected by the board game, vignette 2 illustrates how the participants experimentally enacted the game based on their pre-dispositions. Finally, vignette 3 illustrates how the different directions in attention, ignited by the board game, produced performative tensions.

Vignette 1: Affecting a different state of mind

The physical surrounding of the learning intervention that is about to take place is set up with a minimalistic but functional configuration. The five participating leaders (Mary, Simon, Vito, Ragner and Carl) and a researcher (first author) are seated at a u-shaped table arrangement and on the floor; a large board game is laid out. The atmosphere is informal, which is emphasized by the consultant’s
casual attire. The consultant, Karen⁷¹, moves around the board explaining the purpose of involving the game as a tool for development. The participants listen carefully and some of them write some notes in their logbooks. Karen explains that the game is intended to provoke awareness of and reflection on current difficulties with regard to change and leadership.

Figure 1: The physical configuration of the room in vignette 1

The consultant start out by explaining how the game is developed by a group of psychologists to facilitate learning interventions. It is designed with a round board representing a ‘cycle of change’ with different phases. It contains various artefacts: ‘counters’ representing stakeholders, a ‘boat’ representing current tasks or projects and cards with questions and suggested considerations in relation to ‘leadership style’ and employee ‘levels of resistance’ (see picture 1). At this point, the consultant begins to circle the board placing artefacts on the board while explaining the ‘rules of the game’. Next, the participants will be playing the game while working on managerial issues at the department.

⁷¹ Names are changed for the purpose of this article
With reference to the theories and models behind the game, the consultant emphasizes that change is constant, which is why they need to understand change from various perspectives if they are to operate under such circumstances. This is hard work, she explains. The participants have to learn a new discipline, which is not about learning ‘facts’. As the consultant puts it:

‘We expect so much from our managers at the hospital since they are highly educated within medical sciences; however, what we need to grasp here is another paradigm – it has to do with psychology’.

According to the consultant, in a time of change it is much more about identity and psychology. On the PowerPoint screen, she shows a distinction between ‘above or below the line’. Above the line are images and words of controlling, planning and numbers, while the images and words below the line are emotions, a heart, passions, identity and culture. Those ‘psychological matters’ are of importance when we want to change our ‘mental map’, the consultant explains. To underpin the psychological matters, she refers to psychodynamic theory and places cards on the board game representing different levels of resistance, the consultant explains:

‘It [the tool] divides resistance into three levels, the first level exemplifies resistance resulting from lack of understanding […] the second level is resistance as an emotional reaction whereas the third level is resistance as a lack of trust in the leader. We lack the ability to address level two […]. This is a new way to engage with resistance without making the person abnormal.’

The consultant draws on a whiteboard to illustrate how this correlates. The participants relate to the order introduced by the consultant through adopting her vocabulary, by e.g. speaking of current issues and problems at the department as matters of resistance levels or as a matter of failing to recognize
certain phases in the change cycle. For example, one participant voiced that the department has many different ongoing projects, and the level of resistance could be a reason for management not recognizing what actually takes place at the department. However, the participants’ facial expressions and their questioning of the tool and its concepts seem to produce uncertainty as regards their position. Referring to the earlier discussion of “above and below the line”, one of the participants says:

Carl: ‘we just have to accept and take into consideration that this process [looking at the boat and the consultant] is not clear; this is not just something that sorts itself out’.

Another participant supports the claim as illustrated below:

Ragner: ‘Maybe it’s easier for us to be above the line, it’s more intellectually graspable. Below the line is much more difficult – this is about gut-feeling and emotions, which are things you cannot learn from a book’.

Vico: [after the consultant’s introduction] ‘Can we take a picture of the board otherwise it will be difficult to remember’

While the participants appear hesitant to adopt the theoretical concepts, they also seem to signal willingness to reflect by means of the framing. Mediated by the tool, the consultant actively worked to shape the participants’ attention towards the need for reflection and to affect a ‘different state of mind’. On the one hand, the visualizations and the imagining of change at the department that the board game initiated helped the consultant to make the participants enact an organizational reality grounded in the daily operations of the participants. On the other hand, it was the consultant that made the participants receptive to the board game by mediating their attention and state of mind, thus making them able to begin visualize and imagine. It seems that by distinguishing between above and below the line the attention and concern of the participants was directed towards psychological matters. These manoeuvre affords the consultant an ability to influence, which enacts a demarcation between her consultancy expertise and the participants. In this way, the tool enable the consultant to be in charge and to address matters, which are unclear to the participants. However, the script that the consultant defines in this setting is put to a test when later the participants are to engage with the tool. In the next vignette, we illustrate how the tool gains significance in different ways depending on how the participants engage in and appropriate its script.
**Vignette 2: Enacting reflection**

The consultant has rearranged the room. Instead of the large game board, a smaller one is placed on two tables that have been put together. A flip-over and a whiteboard are set up. Altogether, the various props and artefacts function as a demarcation of ‘a room’ within the room (see figure 2).

![Figure 2](image-url) - New furnishing of the room in vignette 2

Further, post-its, paper and pencils are at the table as materials for ordering and supporting the activity that is about to take place. In the break the consultant explains that it is important to talk about and reflect on issues that they normally keep to themselves since unspoken matters of concern are important and hard to change without explicating them. The tactic, by which the consultant establishes an atmosphere, where ‘below the line’ issues can be addressed, is to let participants start to work with the game. The research leaders are tasked by the consultant to play the board game in relation to current department issues and to relate those to the concepts of ‘cycle of change’, ‘leadership styles’ and ‘resistance’ levels. The consultant continues:

‘What is essential is to understand human change, the cycle of change and the levels of resistance to be able to initiate the right activities. This tool offers you a conceptual repertoire through which you can orient yourself’.

The consultant wants them to ‘test’ how the theories can help them in practice, by settling on a case or a project that can fuel the game. The leaders choose to focus on a new research program regarding
clinical quality that spans statisticians and medical researchers. In order to give the participants the opportunity to discuss current organizational matters the consultant withdraws to a listening position at the table behind the whiteboard. The participants start to discuss where the new research program is and by placing counters on the board and discuss how each of them is situated in the change process. The consultant remain only seated shortly whereas she leaves the room. During this part of the session, the consultant enters the room a few times but otherwise the leaders are led on their own discussing the research program in relation to the game. Observing this dynamic, it becomes clear that when the consultant is present; the participants’ attention is guided back to the theoretical script of the game. When the consultant withdraws, the atmosphere changes and the use of concepts and theories during the conversation become less intense while attention is reoriented towards more idiosyncratic issues at the department. By taking up counters from the game the research leaders start to discuss where the stakeholders are placed compared to the project (symbolized through the boat). The conversation is vivid and when pauses occur, silence is quickly taken over by another generative perspective or idea on the issue discussed. Soon several artefacts are in use and while some figures are placed close to the boat, others are far behind the boat. They use the game as visualization and mapping of stakeholders. As the consultant reappears, the atmosphere changes again. The consultant (C) redirects attention towards the phases and steps in to join the game:

C: How about it?

V: The boat is probably approximately there [points to initial actions]

C: But it is not in a fixed position? It can turn back to random incidents? So, there are initial actions, or? [Random incidents and initial actions are phases in the cycle of change]

V: It failed to deliver what we wanted, so the project turned back a little.

S: The problem is probably that the strategy draws on different trajectories

C: So where are the people? Is your leader in the boat

V: Yes

C: There are many project members who are not in the boat – where are they?
With the consultant’s help it gradually becomes clear to the participants that to place the project in the ‘cycle of change’ is contestable. While the participants voice how difficult it is to relate the theories to the process, the consultant reminds them that they have to do things that they find objectionable. Then, Carl takes a marker and starts to note down on post-it’s the stakeholders involved in the program – he lists eight key stakeholders and places them on a flip-over. The participants subsequently reach a conclusion: the project is in the implementation phase. After the reminder and some redirecting questions, the consultant leaves the room again. After some time the conversation drifts again and Mary tries to get the concepts from the game back into the conversation; she takes up a question card and says (see picture 2):

M: ‘Maurer speaks of levels of resistance; I suppose we already discussed that. And Kotter, that is about these steps in the change process’.

Ragner starts to laugh and he mimics Mary’s statement and points out that they are now starting to adopt the consultants’ language.

Picture 2: The conversation was more or less spurred by the concepts from the game. Sometimes the conversation was vivid without being able to apply the concepts (left) and at other times the participants tried by reading aloud from the question cards (right).

It appears to be hard for the participants to appropriate the theories of the tool. They turn towards matters that are closer to their daily modus operandi, which may explain why the ‘resistance’ to the conceptual language and script of the tool dominated. Instead, appropriation seemed to happen
through a suspension of concepts like ‘leadership styles’, ‘resistance levels’ and ‘phases of change’ in the conversations. Where the tool scripted reality in a conceptual way, which was important to the consultant, the tool had a much more pragmatic value to the participants. The physical objects such as the boat and the counters seemed to facilitate a visual scaffold and reflection on everyday matters. What becomes visible is how the physical re-arrangement of the room around the board game and the absence of the consultant at some crucial points in time made the conversation go new ways. The board game gained new affordances and the atmosphere of developmental space changed towards experimenting with everyday matters. This shift was recognized afterwards by one of the managers:

‘I did not need that many concepts; to me it was more about practical matters […] however, the theories make the consultant different from us due to their knowledge […] I do not believe the consultants would be well equipped without those theories and concepts and then they would not be convincing’.

We observe how the participants leave out some of the rigor of the game. Although still using the ‘boat’ and mentioning emotional states among the employees and opportunities for changing dominating issues at the department, they appropriate the game to their everyday concerns instead of following the guideline as outlined by the consultant. However, each time the consultant re-appropriates the participants’ work, they also acknowledge her authority in adapting to this. This ambiguous relationship between the consultant who proposes a certain use of the tool and the participants’ appropriation, expose an important affordance of the tool. The ability to offer a learning space, in which participants and consultant can meet, argue and discuss. Based on our observations this space seems to be the effect of both the agency of the consultant, the game, the room and participants, simultaneously. However, the different ways of enacting the tool may produce performative tensions between the involved parties that disrupt the objective of the game. In our third vignette we discern an example of how performative tensions unfolded in our case.

**Vignette 3: Performative tensions**

Three days of work with the tool have now almost passed. For the final session, the room is again re-arranged. The participants are seated with the consultant standing in front of them. Attention is directed towards the consultant who takes centre stage and does the talking (see figure 3).
Figure 3: The set-up of the room in vignette 3

The consultant is standing at the large game board ready to wrap up on the work; she asks the participants to note their reflections on learning in their logbooks and afterwards to explicate the reflections and the learning. She writes the questions: ‘what did I particularly take note of?’ and ‘what do I know that I did not know before’. Through this questioning, the consultant seem to aim for enacting learning from the game. She encourage the participants to use the conceptual terminology and to relate their own projects to the process. After some minutes of silence, the consultant asks them to share their thoughts. The consultant moves to the whiteboard with a marker in hand, ready to take notes (see picture 3).
The participants accept the need to list their reflections in the logbook and afterwards to visualize them at the flip-over. As they start voicing their reflections, certain tensions are illuminated. Describing their reflections, the participants kept referring to the topics covered as important to ‘the management’. This led the consultant to question how the research leaders regarded their role as managers in the intervention format:

C: Okay, who is “the management”?  
R: That is Henry.  
C: It puzzles me when you say management - it sounds like you think it is someone else, because you are actually the management, you just seem to have different task in management  
R: But …  
C: You are not top management, but you fill certain tasks?  
S: Yes.  
C: Now I am being a language police officer since language creates reality.  
C: You have a thin history of leadership right now; it has to be “thickened”. Henry [director at the department] needs to get out of the boat, you have to be aware were you are […] the more specialized and skilled one becomes, the harder it gets to do something different.  
R: We probably identify ourselves as researchers but then you suddenly have to become a leader, however you do not get the chance to find out if you really want to be just that.
The consultant continues saying that fundamentally the process they are engaging in is an identity project. She draws a model and explains that the process is like travelling from a known territory of professional skills and taken-for-granted practices towards unknown ground. The excerpts above show how the consultant insisting on using theories and concepts is in tension with the participants’ focus on everyday matters of concern. The tension was confirmed after the intervention:

‘Models seem complex […] To me, models are good when they can be grasped intuitively and when there is a case that I can connect it to. The consultant is very interested in getting into the theories. For me, there must be something specific to link it to.’ (Interview, Ragner)

‘It made sense that we had to talk about change, the different phases and it became more relevant while working with it. However, it also began to turn into a bit like play-acting. The question was whether we did it because we knew that this was the way to do it or because we actually believed we could do so. I think it showed a tendency toward play-acting […]’ (Interview, Mary).

The quotes accentuate how, from a participant point of view, the use of theories and concepts was critically assessed and judged to be of more value to the consultant than to the participants themselves. However, this did not mean that the concepts were irrelevant. According to Mary did the concepts and theories also enable the consultant to act convincingly and to influence the agenda, Mary explained; ‘I doubt they [the consultants] would be that confident if they did not have their theories. And then they would not be convincing to us’ (Interview). The theories made the consultants different to them with a different kind of knowledge and importantly, they enabled the participants to break free of their daily modus operandi. But the consultants insisting on using theories and concepts collided with the participants’ focus on everyday matters of concern. The consultant acted by insisting on conceptual theories (abstract-talk) that could disrupt and mobilize reflection whereas the participants aimed at bringing it down to earth by drifting towards everyday matters (practical-talk). As we argue, a too narrow and deterministic focus on the former decouple the game from reality whereas the latter risk instill status quo. These sides were difficult to reconcile and produced a performative tension in the interstitial space between consultancy practice and the everyday practice of the participants.
Discussion and conclusion

Through our analysis we focused on a single tool for group reflection - the board game the consultant used when engaging the participants from the client organization. The game was employed by the consultant not only to draw attention to current organizational issues, but also to affect a certain state of mind towards the everyday practice. Initially, we set out to examine how tools shape an atmosphere for development work. Our findings relate to soft consultancy work but have relevance beyond this field. In the next sections we will discuss three overlapping tool affordances emanating from our analysis: delegating, affecting and bracketing and how they can provoke certain atmospheric affordances. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of our empirical findings.

Role delegation

Throughout our analysis we have shown how roles change during the work with the game (see figures 1, 2 and 3). Sometimes the consultant is authorized to speak on behalf of the game and is in charge of the process, and sometimes the participants are in charge. The tool positions the consultant in an instructing and expert position while the participants are positioned as the ones who listen, learn and reflect. This positioning effect (Munro, 2004) of the game alters the atmosphere in respect to how the tool is appropriated by the consultant and the participants. If the consultant had facilitated a group dialogue only involving chairs and people, then the positions had to rely even more on the use of discourse or affectivity (Vince, 2011). In this sense, the game affords a concrete and more enduring manifestation of the delegation of roles. However, the game is never all there is - tools shape the atmosphere through the engagement with practitioners. Whereas extant literature has shown how consultants shape practice, or atmospheres, through language (Mueller and Whittle, 2011; Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015), we demonstrate how shaping an atmosphere for development is equally co-produced by the tool embedded in a physical configuration and its material furnishing. The delegation of the participants’ role is framed by the game but only to the extent that the participants discover this role and enact it or re-appropriate the role in a different manner. In this regard, a tool affords certain roles to be delegated but the roles have to be taken and reconciled. Through the flexibility as regards the roles taken, the tool becomes an object for continuing negotiation. This is of importance for the tool’s performance since it offers practitioners an opportunity to appropriate the game to address their everyday issues.
**Affecting attention**

In our case the consultant several times tried to infuse leadership with a certain kind of affectivity (Staunæs, 2011). This shows when the consultant illustrates a demarcation between ‘above or below the line’. Here the consultant infuses leadership with emotions and human relational potential. The tool afforded the consultant the ability to affect the clinical leaders’ attention towards issues of concern in relation to the intervention format. As our results illustrate, the tool affords the consultant to teach the participants how to be affected by the tool and, if the game is played right, also to regulate attention. This affordance is constitutional in shaping an atmosphere enabling the consultant’s authority or expert mode of comportment. Through its affective and material configurations the tool evokes power to the ideas the consultant supports and theories she introduces. It enables a self-affectuation that turns the consultant into an authority (Lezaun and Calvillo, 2014). This authority to affect attention is vital to the consultant’s declared aim of transforming the leadership style to fit emotional issues ‘below the line’. Drawing on Gibson (1986), we see how the consultant continuously ‘attunes the attention’ of the clinical leaders towards specific enactments of the tool. This is done to prevent attention to drift from the consultant’s mission. In this respect, the consultant makes a difference in the given situation (Benoit-Barne and Cooren, 2009) using the tool to manipulate the situation and signalling the competence necessary to solve current issues (Cooren, 2001; Cooren, et al., 2006). She enacts competence by speaking negatively about the clinical leaders’ ability to do leadership through their medical knowledge instead making leadership a matter of emotions and psychology. Throughout the analysis, we see how the authority to affect is evoked as the tool mobilizes the consultant as a competent and knowledgeable helper. When the consultant solicits the participants’ reflections and learnings from their work with the game, she so to speak, sanctions or confirms her own mission. By visualizing learning and reflection at a flip-over and in logbooks, the consultant affects the clinical leaders’ attention towards such matters. In this sense, the situation unfolds like the participants had to see their reflections in order to be aware of them (Cooren, et al., 2006). In sum, as an effect of the role delegation the tool affords the consultant to affect attention towards the ‘right state of mind’, which relate to the final affordance.

**Bracketing reality into a manageable object**

The combination of role delegation and affecting attention enables a ‘collaborative frame’ (Tsoukas, 2009), allowing the everyday practice of the clinical leaders to be bracketed into a manageable object. This tool affordance is an effect of the former two, whereby intervention possibilities are produced.
by making leadership an amenable object (Rose and Miller, 2013). Bracketing shapes a seductive atmosphere where things can be ‘tested’ and ‘played’ out in a safe environment (Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2015). Brown (2012) argues that making an ‘experiment’ work is a matter of making it ‘functionally equivalent’ to the practice it simulates. This is a delicate operation since it must be able to recall supposedly ‘real’ experiences and responses. Despite the declared simulation setup in our study, the game was experienced as less ‘functional equivalent’ to the participants’ everyday practice, which expresses how they end up in a kind of play-acting with the consultant. We see how the participants tried to appropriate the tool in order for the ‘experiment’ to become more ‘functionally equivalent’ to their everyday practice, however this was difficult.

While bracketing reality through concepts and theories was the tactic of the consultant, the research leaders were less interested in concepts and used the tool to discuss idiosyncratic matters. Despite the difference, the process proceeded without breakdowns. Hence, our results illustrate how tools do not necessarily have a ‘right’ usage that will lead to success or failure. Rather it is also a matter of ‘adaptive behaviour to make tools useful’ that is of importance (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015: 546). While the tool directs attention towards certain matters of importance, it is exactly because the tool lets the users assert local tactics in their appropriation of the tool that it becomes performable (Quattrone, 2009). Due to its flexibility, the consultant is in a tension balancing to assert her difference while allowing an experimental atmosphere for development to emerge. The emerging atmosphere is then shaped by how the delegation of roles and the affecting of attention are negotiated within the collaborative frame.

**Theoretical implications**

By focusing on the role of tools in consultancy work, and by bridging literature on management consulting and leadership development, this article have taken up calls for studies of ‘soft’ consultancy approaches (Cooke and Burnes, 2012, Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015, Sturdy, 2011). By exploring consultancy work in the context of leadership development we evoke implications for the role of tools, politics and tangible dimensions of consultancy work.

The tool affordances that emanate from our analysis illustrate how atmospheres both shape and are shaped by the tool. While previous studies tend to divide activities of reflection into ‘processes’ or ‘methods’ and ‘tools’ (Gorli, et al., 2015, Gray, 2007), our case provides an example of how the tool and the process of producing an atmosphere shape each other in a reciprocal relationship. Hence, atmospheres become shaped by tools as they provide different affordances depending on the
appropriation of a practitioner. For instance, an experimental atmosphere emerges when the participants work on their own. They joke, discuss and appropriate the tool to their interests. When the consultant is present the atmosphere changes; she is in charge affecting attention through the tool. Drawing on the theory of affordances and atmospheres, we propose that the consultant by centralizing her tactics around the tool shapes seductive atmospheric affordances. Seduction is an appropriate term to illustrate the soft play with appearances and simulation (Baudrillard, 1990), which also becomes visible in the empirical case. Seduction shift the focus from objective goals of a consultant or a tool towards how seductive atmospheres are produced as ideas, bodies and materials interact (Nickelsen, 2010). This kind of atmosphere is performative, in the sense that it performs the organization and particular opportunities into being (Law and Moser, 1999). However, as we see attempts to produce seductive atmospheres easily turn into illusory atmospheres, where the participants are play-acting. The lack of ‘functional equivalence’ makes it hard to connect with for the participants.

This latter point relate to previous discussions on how knowledge is shaped in consultant-client relations and the role of politics herein. Existing literature have observed the discursive manoeuvres that are involved in shaping knowledge and ‘doing’ politics in consultancy work (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, Mueller and Whittle, 2011). For instance, it has been discussed how discursive representations in consultant-led public leadership development are exercising power that guide the process and become political as they frame situations (Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015). To Lewin, atmospheres meant political affects and his experiments aimed at creating the ‘right’ (political) atmospheres (Lezaun and Calvillo, 2014). What unfolds in our case, in this classroom-like setting away from everyday practice, is a real (organizational) world with political agendas as well (Fox, 2009). What we observe is how consultants are not just doing politics with words; they produce political affects by seductive atmospheres. In other words, ‘the politics’ of soft consultancy work and facilitation (Smolovic Jones, et al., 2015, Sturdy, 2009, Vince, 2011), is advanced by our focus on how tools shape seductive and illusory atmospheres.

Finally, by focusing on the role of tools we also set out to highlight the importance of interrogating the tangible dimensions of consultancy work and particularly leadership development. Most studies describe consultancy work as immaterial work or intangible services (Clark, 1995, Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003, Smith, forthcoming). In line with previous studies of the spatial relations of management education (Vince, 2011), we show how tools provide tangible dimensions to consultant-client relations in leadership development. By arguing that tools ‘do’ things in the hand of
practitioners and help shape atmospheres, we also bring to the fore the active nature of the ‘physical space’, which Lewin (1939) omitted in many of his accounts. Lewin’s theory was criticized for being ‘mentalistically fashioned’ (Dewey and Bentley, 1960: 141) and the idea of atmospheres as only ‘social’ and related to a mental space is what the theory of affordances has helped us challenge. Hence, our study provides an example of how the tangible dimension of atmospheres and facilitation can be studied through the focus on tools. Taking our study further, we envisage studies that advance the material anchoring of consultancy work and leadership development, such as; what does the texts produced in consultant-client relations mean in the home organization? And what values are infused in the tools used?

What, then, can we then take from this investigation? Initially we asked how tools shape atmospheres in consultant-facilitated leadership development and what they enable. This question was investigated by looking at a particular tool for group reflection that was deployed in a Hospital leadership development effort. Through an affordance lens we inferred three interrelated tool affordances that allowed the practitioners to delegate roles, affect attention, and bracket reality into something amenable for change. This attempt by the consultant is what we describe as a tactical production of seductive atmospheres for development. However, the consultant did not quite succeed. While our empirical case shows an activity that prolongs the trajectory of organization development and group relations training, it however also differs. Rose and Miller (2013) describe how the germ of the group relations training was a matter of letting a group of managers solve a task and then afterwards have the consultant help them see their own behaviour in the problem-solving. This was handled quite different in our case. While the game was an attempt to simulate everyday practice, it ended too abstract with all the involved presumptions about human and organizational nature, thus it became less relevant to the participants. We argue that the lack of functional equivalence or work integration made it hard to connect with for the participants, an equivalence that was already attempted in the group relations training.

Our findings point towards the criticality and difficulty in using tools to shape ‘seductive’ atmospheres or ‘disrupt’ managerial practice (Clegg et al., 2004) in order to enhance it. In our study the tool provided a flexible but configurative action repertoire to shape atmospheres and provoke current realities. Hence, it is not just a matter of the tool being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ or ‘standardized’ or ‘tailored’. The ability to take different affordances from the tool is what makes the tool performable to different matters of concern but also difficult to deploy. In sum, by looking at the particular
dynamics involved in the use of tools, and given the important role of tools and things in processes of organizing (Cooren, et al., 2006), our study offers insights into the shaping of atmospheres in consultant-client relations while nuancing the broader role of tools in organizing.

**Practical implications**

Now, what is the practical implications of the analysis of this article? Games are gaining acceptance and seem to appear as legitimate development tools in relation to strategy making and change and development. Across various organizations, consultants and managers deploy games as a tool for intervention. This affords different abilities and difficulties as we have illustrated in the analysis. Through our analysis, we see how the consultant’s position and legitimate authority become strengthened by the use of the concepts and theories inscribed in the game. Through its theoretical foundation, the game further enact a certain simplified version of organizational reality amenable for change (as all theories are to some extend). This simplification of organizational reality is both the game’s lack, since reality overflows the game, and ability as it makes it possible to order, visualize and discuss organizational matters.

As we have pointed out through the title of the article, we analyze the role of the game as *seductive*. In common sense language seduction often is thought of as something that distracts or makes reality blurry - maybe even in a problematic sense. In contrast, we have used the term not in a superficial or critical sense, but as the ability to ‘lead’ (*ducere*) ‘away’ (*se*-), which is a well-known purpose of work-place seminars and away-days – to lead away from everyday practical matters. The ambiguity of the notion of seduction is, however, purposefully chosen. The practical implications and questions that emerge through our analysis is whether the enacted simplified organizational reality is reasonable and helpful or if games are an appropriate tool for consulting? We consider those questions as empirical questions, which we have addressed throughout the paper. Like the term *seduction* the answer in our analysis is also ambiguous. Indeed, we see how the tool enable the participants to discuss things, which they would not have discussed if they had not used the game – it is the ‘power of play’ (see also Åkerstrøm, 2009). We also see how the purpose of the game might end up just being to “play” the game. In that sense, the game might risk leading too much away, that is a balance to be made by the consultant. When the consultant leave the room the conversation changes. By leaving the room, the consultant allow the participants to appropriate the game to their everyday

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72 https://hbr.org/2015/09/games-can-make-you-a-better-strategist
concerns, but simultaneously the conversation might also drift in directions, which are not within the purpose of the seminar. This is the critical balance, which are to be made, allowing the game as a development tool to be appropriated, while allowing it to configure the process and lead the participants enough away to reconsider practical matters. This aspect of the development practice makes it relevant to practitioners to consider how they use games and how they use rules to frame the development practice while allowing "leap holes" to be created. A final implication, which our analysis do not really answer but makes us consider as a relevant question is, how come games have become a legitimate tool for constructing and representing development? Games are obviously not the only tools deployed by consultants but why do they gain increasingly acceptance? Those questions makes it relevant for practitioners to engage critically with games, and consider whether the simplified organizational reality, is actually helpful or what it enables.

Note

1 For the purpose of this article the names of the persons have been changed.

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CHAPTER 5
CONCEPTUAL TENSIONS AND TRANSLATIONS: STRUGGLING WITH THE CORE TASK IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: There is an increasing awareness of how management and organization concepts and theories circulate through consultants and universities in public sector institutions. By focusing on how the concept of ‘the core task’ was deployed in a consultant-led development process at a hospital, this article addresses how the concept relates to everyday organizational practice. The concept of ‘the core task’ revives old ideas about what makes an organization and has become a widespread concept in the Danish public sector as a way to account for organizational work. Also several consultancies and handbooks on organization development use the core task as a concept for developing an organization. The article contributes to discussions of the performative effects of concepts in the practice of public sector organizations and questions what kind of organization the core task constitutively shapes. Through document analysis and an empirical case, I illustrate how the concept helps enact an ‘ideal organization’, which happens to produce conceptual tensions in the ‘actual organization’ of everyday practice. The implications of those findings are discussed at the end.

Keywords Concepts, practice, consultancy work, core task, organization development, public sector management
Introduction

‘As mentioned, we have discussed social capital but we also discuss the concept of the core task – what is our core task? This is some of the concepts that I am working with and some of the things that I have begun explicating.’ (Managing occupational therapist. Interview after participation in consultant-led development process).

‘Increasingly, that world is being constructed by business, and furthermore by a business that uses theory as an instrumental method, as a source of expertise and as an affective register to inform an everyday life that is increasingly built from that theory. Yet, still, too few social theorists seem willing to recognize that fact or to consider what it might mean for the practice of social theory’ (Thrift 2006, 302).

How does a concept of organization relate to the practical reality of public sector organization? And how does an organization shape a concept? Reflecting the initial quotes, and Kurt Lewin’s famous dictum ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (Lewin 1951, 169), organization development consultants deploy a range of theories and concepts as instrumental methods to connect to the everyday work of public sector servants. Concepts related to innovation, change and learning are offering ‘break-through phenomena’ to the ‘uplands of change, innovation and human flourishing’ (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2013: 274) often promoted as a counter discourse to new public management (Ratner, 2013) or as another dimension (Lindberg et al., 2015). In the wake of the expansion of management concepts (Engwall 2003), public management scholars has started to interrogate how management concepts and ideas are constantly developing in the nexus between universities, consultancies and public sector practitioners (Ferlie et al., 2015, Radnor and Osborne 2013).For instance it has been discussed how concepts and ideas of learning (Ratner, 2013), innovation (Jordan, 2014) and change (Waterhouse and Lewis, 2004) intervene in public sector organization.

This, in turn, relates to a recent discussion in organization studies. Here du Gay and Vikkelsø (2013) argue that over the last decade’s classical organization concepts like ‘the core task’ have been replaced by a notion of organization as innovation, change or learning. Accordingly there is an overriding concern with matters of ‘exploration’ rather than matters of ‘exploitation’ in studies of organizations (Ibid citing March, 1991). Accordingly, this occupation with matters of exploration risk to exclude other important aspects of the organizational realm , du Gay and Vikkelsø (2014) suggest that contemporary ‘matters of organizational concern’ might be better captured by a concept like ‘the
core task’ compared to ‘process’ or ‘organizational becoming’ (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). An interest in matters of exploration is not only visible among management scholars, but is also discernable when, for instance, public sector organizations increasingly are encouraged to become more innovative, learning or collaborative (c.f. Sørensen and Torfing, 2012). This engagement with matters of ‘exploration’ is also reflected among organization development consultants. Over the years their focus has shifted from analyzing the organization as a ‘sociotechnical system’ (Bamforth and Trist, 1951) towards a more visionary and process-oriented focus (Schein, 1969) where organizational consultants are considered to be sensitive to discourse and managing dialogue (Weick and Quinn 1999, Ford and Ford, 1995) and focused on the human side of development. This development is as well reflected in public sector organizations, when people and human relationships are foregrounded for developing organization and making them more innovative (Bertucci, 2006, Brown, 2004, Staunæs, 2011, Lindberg et al., 2015, Ratner, 2012). When learning, dialogue and reflexivity is emphasized as vehicles for developing public sector organization (c.f. Ratner, 2013, Hartley and Benington, 2010, Stoker, 2006, Elkjaer, 2001) it sometimes become at the expense of practical organizational operations. In recent years, the concept of the core task has, however, gained acceptance among consultants as a ‘new’ vehicle for developing Danish public sector organizations (Christensen and Seneca, 2012, Hasle et al., 2010, Moltke and Graff, 2014, Klausen, 2014, Government, 2015). While Vikkelsø (2014) relates the core task concept to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and to ‘the primary task’ (Miller and Rice, 1967), the version promoted by consultants in the Danish public sector relates to discussions of ‘core competency’ (Klausen, 2014) and ‘task integration’ or ‘relational coordination’ in public sector service (Gittell et al., 2010, Moltke and Graff, 2014, Hasle et al., 2010).

Studies analyzing how concepts translate and enact organizations at the micro level are scarce (Sturdy, 2002, Mueller and Whittle, 2011) and while du Gay and Vikkelsø (2014) revive ‘the core task’ as an analytical device, I explore how the core task translates into practical use to perform public sector organization. The empirical part of the study is situated at a hospital in the nexus between organizational consultants and a group of medical professionals in managerial roles (McGivern et al., 2015). The nexus of managerial and professional practices at a hospital is often contested with regard to task distribution (Reay and Hinings, 2009, Noordegraaf, 2011b). Hence the site provides an apt case for analyzing how the idea of a core task relates to the practical reality of public sector organization. In the empirical case the consultants used ‘the core task’ concept to establish organizational common ground at the department. Despite the effort, the concept proved to produce
conceptual tensions in the everyday practice in the sense that practitioners struggled to translate the concept to everyday practice.

By analyzing how consultants assemble public sector organization through conceptualization, it is my contention that it can provide a way to know more about how organization is enacted among practitioners in the public sector and how organization is enacted in the transaction between concepts and practical action (Prince, 2014, Taylor, 2014a). As a result the research questions can be outlined as follows: ‘how does the core task concept translate in developing public sector organization? And how does it relate to practical organization?’ To study these questions I draw on a performative stance (Jensen, 2014, Latour, 2005) and related writings on how ideas translate (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) and act through discourse (Learmonth, 2005). The following section is an introduction to how a performative stance matters. After that I will describe how the core task is translated in organization thought and into the concept in the Danish public sector, and I then illustrate how the concept was used in an empirical case. The article concludes with a critical discussion of what this means to conceptual-empirical relations and the core task in developing public sector organization.

Theoretical framework

A performative stance to the study of an organization concept

In recent years scholars of organization have to an increasing degree drawn on performative dispositions to analyze how concepts not only describe organization but constitutively shape organizational reality as a performative effect of the concepts practical engagement (D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014, Vikkelsø, 2014, Callon, 2010). Organization studies include two particularly relevant bodies of literature when it comes to a performative disposition in relation to concepts; those will be described as a translation perspective and a discourse perspective.

In their study of management fashions and how ideas circulate between organizations, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) outline a translation perspective on how ideas gain acceptance. They argue that ideas spread through a process of dis-embedding, translation and re-embedding. Here translation acts as a vehicle (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005) through which ideas gain strength, but also transform as they are performed (Sevón, 1996). Idea or concept attributes and the perceived problem of a practice will match as an effect of a collective process of translation and negotiation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996: 25, Latour, 1986a). The translation perspective argues that it is not the properties of
an idea which should be of concern but how the idea translates as it is performed. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996: 32) claim that the simplest way to objectify and spread ideas is by turning them into ‘linguistic artefacts’, for instance, making an idea travel through a book or a consultant. An idea might start with a word, an example is ‘decentralization’, which by repetition turns into a label that can contain many activities hence making decentralization a taken-for-granted step rather than one requiring further argumentation (Ibid: 32). I argue that this is what happened to ‘the core task’ concept in Danish public sector organizations. As already described, the core task can be used as a pragmatic and concrete description of tasks in an organization. However, by being packaged in books, circulated and thereby translated in the public sector, the core task has become objectified or a label holding particular connotations. The concept can now be used to ‘legitimise an already existing practice’ since it can take ‘the status of an institution carrier’, which transfer legitimacy and label already ‘existing actions’ (Ibid: 39). Czarniawska (2001) distinguishes between a ‘logic of practice’ and a ‘logic of representation’, where concepts relate to the latter. Hence, when consultants use concepts to organize development, the concepts can act as vehicles for legitimate ‘logic of representation’ (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012) and also as vehicles that incite ‘social energy’ and hope among practitioners (Czarniawska. 2013, Fish, 2004).

Benders and Van Veen (2001) argue that concepts become successful as a result of their ‘interpretative viability’. A concept might fit almost any organizational problem due to the flexible repertoire that enables framing the concept as enacted practice (Heusinkveld and Visscher, 2012). However, as previously argued a successful concept can take on a ‘taken for granted’ status (Quattrone and Hopper, 2001) or the status of an ‘empty signifier’ that mobilizes political agendas (Morgan and Spicer, 2009). The translation perspective illustrates very well how a concept becomes successful, but it omits how a concept as a word might be used in everyday practice to make distinctions and appropriate practice. Discursive perspectives have emphasized a sensitivity towards the words that make up a concept as such being resources that fuel change and act to constitute reality (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, Cooren et al., 2014). For instance, concepts like ‘leadership’ or ‘management’ perform a reality into being as their connotations in discourse are infused with certain potentiality and attributes that interpellate or arouse practitioners’ positive interest compared to ‘administration’ in public sector organization (Learmonth, 2005, Martin and Learmonth, 2012). Again, I argue this can be seen with ‘the core task’ in the Danish public sector. ‘The core task’ becomes an appealing label with its intuitively positive connotations, for instance, in terms of less documentation and more focus on patient treatment. The discursive perspectives encourage an
awareness towards what espoused concepts mean to everyday practice (Learmonth, 2005). Whereas the translation perspective affords sensitivity towards how concepts travel, the discursive perspective affords sensitivity towards how words perform and value things.

**Analyzing how the core task concept acts**

The performative disposition echoes a pragmatist stance to ideas and concepts ‘as tools to play with’ that changes practice (Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011: 73). Thus, paraphrasing William James, the aim is to ‘bring out of each word its practical cash-value’ and to ‘set it at work within the stream of your experience’ (James, 1907/1995). The performative approach to organizational concepts change the focus from how a concept ‘explains the world’ towards how it ‘affects the world’ (Ferraro et al., 2005: 10). As a re-description of pragmatism actor-network-theory (ANT) offers a sensitivity to study how concepts affect the world. Here the task is to trace associations between humans and artefacts, for instance, concepts or theories and practitioners and how they compose organization or management (Latour, 2005). Within this orientation humans as well as non-humans can be an actant denoting an entity that acts and is acted upon (Gomart and Hennion, 1999, Latour, 1996). This allows an analytical maneuver where the concept of ‘the core task’ can be considered as an actant that is ‘punctualized’ into a single node in a large discursive and sociotechnical network of many actants (Callon, 1990: 153). The concept gets its meaning through its associations in a sociotechnical network containing text, technologies, practices and discourse (Law, 2009a). Hence, ‘the core task’ as an actant is not just analyzed as a particular activity but as a concept composed by associations in a network and as a concept that makes certain things performable. In other words, the core task is not considered as having a fixed nature but can take different actantial shapes (Latour, 1994) which provides different actantial roles to an organizational consultant or a managing professional (Cooren and Taylor, 2006). Thus the purpose is not to argue that this is the ‘real’ core task, but to study how the core task as a concept helps practitioners do things and draw distinctions.

In the next section, I will review the history of the core task concept in organization thought to illustrate how it relates and transforms into the version promoted in contemporary Danish public sector organizations.

**Actual and Ideal organization in the history of the core task**

As institutionalist analysis has shown, ideas or concepts pop up in different places simultaneously without necessarily being explicitly related (Czarniawska, 2004). Hence, the version of the core task
promoted in public sector organizations is not explicitly associated to recent academic writings that try to revitalize old ideas through the core task concept (c.f. du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2013, Vikkelsø 2014). As a classical idea of organization, the ‘core task’ can be traced many places (c.f. Vikkelsø, 2014). Often the core task concept is treated as a ‘leaky black box’ meaning an often unquestioned complex category (Callon and Latour, 1981, Latour, 1987: 2) that mostly is used in a taken-for-granted and intuitive sense (c.f. Martin et al., 2013). However, the composition of ‘core’ and ‘task’ mix two influential concepts in management thought – ‘core competency’ (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990) and ‘the primary task’ (Miller, 1976). Although unrelated and although the core task concept promoted in public sector can be traced elsewhere as well, for instance to discussions of ‘task integration’ (Gittell et al., 2000), those two influential concepts illustrate aspects of the core task concept promoted in public sector organization, which are of interest to this article.

Du Gay and Vikkelsø (2012) and Vikkelsø (2014) relate the ‘core task’ concept to classical organization theory particularly to Tavistock. In the Tavistock tradition of consultancy work the concept of ‘task’ and later ‘primary task’ was used as a pragmatic and empirically oriented concept of what constitutes organization (Bion and Rickman, 1943, Bamforth and Trist, 1951, du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014, Dartington, 1998, Miller, 1976, Brown 1967, Menzies, 1960). The primary task was described by Rice (1963: 185) ‘as the task an institution had been created to perform’. Miller and Rice (1967) argued that in organizational analysis, one could use the primary task concept to make inferences from observations like ‘this enterprise is behaving as if their primary task were…’ (Ibid: 64). In other words the primary task is what keeps organization together; it is an ontological claim of organization that can be derived from the actual doings. Miller and Rice argued that

‘The primary task is not a normative concept we do not say that every enterprise must have a primary task or even that it must define its primary task; we put forward the proposition that every enterprise, or part of it, has, at any given moment, one task which is primary’ (Miller and Rice, 1967: 28).

Although arguing that the concept did not have to be defined, at the same time they argued that disorganization would be at risk without an adequate definition of the primary task. The concept was also problematized as it afforded a static connotation since ‘primary’ means ‘by definition there could be no more than one primary task’ (Rice, 1963: 185). The concept was depicted as too constraining and as almost similar to the concept of ‘mission’ known from Selznick’s work (Menzies, 1960, Rice 1963). It was therefore emphasized that institutions do not perform one but different primary tasks.
Hence the concept remained central as an ‘analytical instrument’ (Rice, 1963) and ‘heuristic concept’ (Miller and Rice, 1967) that defined the task to be performed in order to survive as an organization. According to du Gay and Vikkelsø (2013), the concern in this Tavistock style of thought was with ‘exploitation’ and ‘organization’. Here organization is not a container, it is organization as ‘the function of coordination’ (Boltanski, 2013: 53) and as concrete and actual contributions to the task at hand (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2013).

Although rather unrelated to the tradition of Tavistock, the concept of the core task can be analyzed as resembling the later and more corporate concept of core competency (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Prahalad and Hamel (1990) argued that organizations must focus on the essential and life giving activities that they excel in. Using a tree metaphor they argued: ‘The diversified corporation is a large tree […] The root system that provides nourishment, sustenance, and stability is the core competence’ (Ibid: 4). The core competence is described as an aspirational core or life-giving source of the organization and is infused with potentiality. Prahalad and Hamel suggest managers ask themselves ‘what future opportunities would we lose without it [the core competency]’ (Ibid: 1). Core competency does not describe the actual organization like the primary task concept. It is oriented at potential and virtual forms of organizing, which must be clarified and the organization must strive for continuous mobilization of this core competence. Prahalad and Hamel argue this is a matter of collective learning.

If core competence is about harmonizing streams of technology, it is also about the organization of work and the delivery of value […] Core competence is communication, involvement, and a deep commitment to work across organizational boundaries […] The skills that together constitute core competence must coalesce around individuals whose efforts are not so narrowly focused that they cannot recognize the opportunities for blending their functional expertise with those of others in new and interesting ways (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990: 5).

The core competency is not only infused with a vital idea of the life-giving force of organization. Accordingly core competence is also about potentially spanning diverse functional expertise and hence confines the amount of conflicts in the organization. In sum, core competency becomes a ‘source of vitality’ that is hidden underneath the organization (Olma, 2007: 173). While the core competency encourages exploiting current organizational resources, it simultaneously presents an idea of purification and a concept of hope about how to explore and uncover the true organization.
(Fish, 2004). This idea of ‘vital organizing’ (Olma, 2007) differs from the primary task concept, and paraphrasing du Gay and Vikkelsø (2013: 272) ‘exaltation’ seems to replace ‘exploitation’.

In sum, the two concepts represent two different versions of organization. The core task concept derived from the primary task concept represents an ontological claim of ‘actual organization’ oriented towards concrete practical doings. Core competency is not an actual organization but suggests a conceptual discourse oriented towards an ‘ideal organization’ that evokes a harmonic picture and hope. This review illustrates two different organizational concepts that fold into the core task concept.

**Methodology**

*Research approach and context*

The data for this article primarily draws from a study of organizational consultant-client relations in a hospital context. At the outset I was interested in studying ‘how things work’ in internal organizational consultant-client relations at a hospital including the role of theories and concepts (Watson, 2011). As concepts and ideas are known to be essential to consultancy work (Kieser et al., 2015, Sturdy, 2004), my attention was directed towards how concepts were deployed. Inspired by previous studies of the role of theories and concepts in organizational practice, the approach was multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) oriented towards tracing the concept on-the-move and not limited to one single person or site (D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014, Czarniawska, 2007). I followed the consultants’ work and my research strategy was in general informed by the ANT-oriented methodological injunction ‘to follow the actors’ (Latour, 2005). Hence consultants and clients were followed in their concrete physical collaboration and at relevant meetings in their everyday practice. One of my first observation days with the consultants, I encountered the concept of the core task in a presentation by the chief nurse officer who referred to the small handbook ‘Know your core task: Everyday innovation’ (my translation). Apparently the authors of this handbook had conducted a series of speeches and interventions at the hospital and the concept proved to be deployed immensely by the consultants and at the hospital in general. Hence I started to follow and analyze the idea of the core task further, which proved to have countless ramifications and be evoked widely in the Danish public sector.
The research took place from May 2013 to April 2015 and was led by a group of internal consultants at the hospital, which employs more than 10,000 employees. The consultancy unit is located in the HR department as a staff function below the Hospital Management. Access was negotiated through the HR consultancy unit head of development. The hospital was, as are many other Danish hospitals, undergoing changes due to a governmental decision to merge small hospitals into larger units. This merger would tighten the hospital’s budgets by 8 percent and reduce physical space and the number of beds. Treatment would shift towards more outpatient treatment, and at many departments this demanded some kind of re-organization and relocation. My focus will be on a case at a medical department, which also had to prepare for the coming changes, which required relocation and a merger of two wards causing a reduction of beds and a tightened budget. The department management team called in a group of internal consultants to help them prepare. The core task concept was used as a vehicle for creating common ground in order to handle the coming changes. With a case at a Danish hospital one could question if this is idiosyncratic. However, along several case study researchers, I argue that issues of broader relevance can be illuminated in a very local case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, Quattrone, 2006). As Flyvbjerg (2001: 74) argue, it is a matter of the case and how it is chosen, which decide whether the insights are generalizable. The case emerged out of fieldwork and it proves to offer an interesting case to discuss translations of organizational concepts and tasks.

Methods

The empirical material is drawn from approximately 200 hours of observation studies, 16 semi-structured interviews with consultants and leaders discussing the topic of the ‘core task’, email correspondence and telephone calls. Of particular relevance to this article I observed meetings between consultants and professionals in managerial roles (mainly clinical leaders and ward managers), preparatory meetings among the consultants and afterwards at relevant meetings in the consulted departments (without the consultants). Following Emerson et al. (2011) the empirical material was analyzed on an ongoing basis and after each day of observation studies, notes were rewritten. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Interview transcripts and field notes were organized according to situations that addressed the core task and interviews were coded to address different approaches to the core task. The process generally followed the process described as ‘categorizing’ and ‘condensing’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). As it turned out, the material differed depending on whether the concept was evoked by consultants or professionals in managerial roles; hence I
distinguish between ‘ideal organization’ and ‘actual organization’. My observations at the hospital and the document analysis made me aware of the widespread associations of the core task concept across many public sector institutions. Hence, I traced the core task concept through a range of additional sources such as webpages, databases and public media, handbooks, documents and reports (21 in total).

**Webpages and databases:** As an example, almost all Danish municipality and hospital websites demonstrated the concept of ‘the core task’ as a way to account for the organization. Often the core task would be listed along mission and vision and sometimes replacing those terms. Also through Infomedia, which is a database that gathers articles from most Danish media (also online media) it became apparent that the ‘core task’ had expanded remarkably in frequency. From 1990 to 2000 the core task occurred 134 times, from 2000 to 2007 it occurred 1,158 times and from 2007 to 1 November 2015 it occurred 15,816 times. While ‘the core task’ concept has become an institutionalized way of defining and accounting for organizational activities, it has also been labelled and packaged into handbooks amenable for circulation in public sector organizations.

**Handbooks:** Several handbooks have taken up the core task concept as a vehicle for innovation (Christensen and Seneca, 2012), ‘task coordination’ and social capital (Moltke and Graff, 2014), and ‘core competencies’ (Klausen, 2014). The books mentioned are in general popular practitioner handbooks. However, the ‘Know your core task’ handbook that relates the core task to innovation (Christensen and Seneca, 2012) was particularly successful in labelling, circulating and infusing the concept with potentials both at the hospital and in the broader public sector. This book has sold more than 10,000 copies with a 9th edition being published (based on information from the publisher), which is quite a lot for a book in Danish targeting public sector managers. The success of the book fertilized the ground for the internal hospital consultants who often referred to this book. The other handbooks deploying the core task concept cited the ‘Know your core task’ book and hence it is exemplary in relation to other books, which is why I have chosen to draw on this book in the article.

In order to provide a background for the consultants’ work in the empirical case at the medical department, I will elaborate on the core task concept evoked in the books. This elaboration is based on an analysis of the handbook and an ‘expert’ interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) with the author. Here I will illustrate how a particular version of the core task concept was evoked as important at the hospital and subsequently how it translated through the empirical case at the medical department.
Analysis: Developing organization through the core task

The core task: From exploitation to innovation and ideal organization

The ‘Know your core task’ handbook is written by two management consultants, one of them employed in a think tank on public sector development. Like other handbooks, it stresses the importance of defining and explicating the core task in public sector organizations. The handbook is based on their consultancy work, managerial experience and some research. They found that successful organizations are characterized by a clear core task.

Resembling the primary task definition, the core task is defined as: ‘the fundamental reason for the organization’ and ‘the focal point of every act in the organization [...]’ (Christensen and Seneca, 2012: 01: my translation). However, the relation to core competency is also traceable. The ‘vital and ideal’ discourse of organization becomes visible in the following:

With a clearly defined core task it is possible to deliver better welfare services for a lower amount of resources – this is innovation [...] it [the core task] ensures that everyone is pulling in the same direction – mind you, if it is shared. In other words the core task is the key to understanding the goal and meaning of the organization [...] (Christensen and Seneca, 2012: 01: my translation).

The core task is, so to speak, the hidden source which has to be unlocked by being defined and shared. Prahalad and Hamel (1990: 1) suggested managers define their core competency by asking ‘what future opportunities would we lose without it’. Similarly the ‘Know your core task’ handbook encourages managers to define the core task by ‘considering what the world would lose if your workplace is gone tomorrow’ (Christensen and Seneca, 2012, 1 my translation). Although the focus shifts from ‘we’ to ‘the world’ as a part of a translation to public sector, the similarity is striking. Like core competency potential harmony is inscribed in this version of the core task concept. The handbook suggests that a clearly defined core task can devise order and be a vehicle for development that spans and recognizes the expertise of various functions. Accordingly the core task has several dimensions. It is argued that it needs to reflect the ‘public value’ the organization creates, ‘the ambition’ of the organization, how to solve the task ‘with’ the citizen and the ‘target group’. In order to provide guidance the book argues that ‘it is necessary to have one and only one core task. Several core tasks would imply that there is not only one organization but several’ (Ibid: 5). What the authors
argue is that it is the ‘why’ of the organizing process and hence one organization is needed. In an interview one of the authors argued that the book marks a shift in public sector management:

The core task takes its starting point in the paradigm shift where we have actually come to the realization that we cannot ensure future welfare for the citizen but we have to solve that task with the citizen […] take the hospital, changes occur when they start to involve the patients […] (Interview with author)

The author argues that what is important is to mobilize the ‘whole’ organization, i.e. both citizens and employees. Apparently this promotes a shift from a ‘service’ focus towards a ‘task’ focus in public sector organizations, where the idea of co-creation is the potential. The problem, he argues, is that too few organizations are aware of their core task:

[…]The challenge is that many managers experience that they know the core task in their organization. I believe they do, or at least they think they do; so until we start asking their employees […] they say they does not experience that the core task is shared in the organization […] Managers now seem to have realized that if they want to succeed then they have to be aware of the core task (Interview).

Accordingly not being able to collectively explicate the core task is what makes up many problems in public sector organization. What the author accentuates is the collective social resource, which is argued to be unresolved in so many public sector organizations due to the lack of definition of the core task. Hence, defining the core task is introduced as an essential vehicle for developing organization. During my observations of the consultants at the medical department, the potential of defining the core task was evoked as a driver in the process at the department. The core task concept enabled a vehicle for positioning the consultants’ work along the practitioners’ everyday practice and the interests of the department. As one of the consultants explained; […] it is almost always possible to engage the leaders through the core task, it becomes a way to speak about management and organization […] (Interview). Through my empirical case, I will illustrate how the core task was used as a vehicle for developing the organization and how this connected to the everyday practice at the medical department.
**Empirical case**

It was not only the consultants who deployed the core task concept, at the medical department many leaders deployed the core task concept to demarcate ‘this is important’ and as a way to account for a desirable mode of organization stripped of unnecessary tasks and irrelevant activities. The following process unfolded over a series of meetings and I followed the process of the consultants’ work with the department and afterwards through interviews and observations at the department; here is what happened.

**The core task and enacting ideal organization**

The department management team – in collaboration with the internal consultants, a head nurse and a clinical director decided to have a series of meetings. The plan entailed two three-day seminars at a conference facility. It involved the total group of the departments’ 20 leaders, i.e. clinical leaders, ward managers, a chief secretary and the department management team. The purpose of the meetings were to have the group discuss the coming changes and relocation and how to handle them. Prior to the seminar the consultants did interviews at the department finding that the participants were hesitant to define a shared core task. Hence, to situate their work along the interest of the participants, the consultants introduced the ‘core task’ as an object to guide the coming changes at the department. It could provide a ‘theory to speak from’ in this development effort, as one of the consultants said. The potential of being explicit about the core task was vividly enacted by the consultants. One of the PowerPoint slides showed a picture of the ‘Know your core task’ book followed by a definition, which the consultants read out loud:

Consultant: ‘You must now define the core task as ‘the task we are in this world to solve’ and ‘the task all development efforts must use as their point of departure’.

To propel the process the consultants tasked the leaders to reflect on the core task in small groups and come up with a definition. Three guidelines were listed on another slide to help them define their core task:

1. A core task is defined in the singular
2. A core task involves the active participation of the citizen
3. A core task is solved in collaboration
After some discussion, the groups had to present their suggestions. The department had already discussed their core task as part of their mission statement coming up with a very broad and long but unsatisfactory definition. The groups suggested several definitions. Most of them condensations of the old one; however, the leaders argued that it was still too broad and that it resembled a slogan. Encouraged by the consultants, one group finally suggested the definition ‘core task is to make the patient well again’. Some of the leaders found this definition counter intuitive as an ambition and hence, a vivid discussion unfolded. One group argued that the department is organized into different units: some provide curing treatment and others life prolonging treatment (palliation). The task of the latter is not to cure diseases and hence it would be difficult ‘to make the patient well again’. Another group argued that opposed to a private hospital, this is a public hospital that has to treat patients who are very weak and hence difficult ‘to make well’. The first group argued against the notion that ‘cured’ and ‘being well’ is the same. This counter argument was endorsed by the consultants who argued that if one takes the perspective of the citizen or patient involved, the definition ‘to make the patient well again’ is a very satisfying core task. While this closed the discussion, the definition was not considered useful to all the leaders. At the end of the seminar the department management team decided that each unit leader should work on defining their individual tasks and enter them into a formal organization and management document.

After additional unit meetings, this broad but condensed definition of the core task was committed to paper: ‘The department’s core task is: To ensure that our patients are offered the best course of treatment’. This was an adjustment of the definition that was used at the department prior to the seminar; instead of ‘core service’ the definition now contained ‘core task’ and was shortened a bit.

As became visible in the process just described, the consultants drew heavily on the core task discourse known from the book. The core task promoted is not just any description; it is inspired by the book and has certain noteworthy points. This troubled the leaders, and although the final definition ended up capturing the requirements it had to be a rather vague and abstract definition to include everything. Hence, the vital core of organization was translated into organization as an ideal, united and harmonious object. Now the question was what does the definition or core task mean to everyday organizing? Does it connect? Those questions I pursued in the everyday practice of the leaders.
Conceptual tensions: The core task and actual organization

While the leaders accepted to define the core task, the definition also produced some confusion as to its use. After the definition was committed to paper, in an interview some of the clinical leaders voiced their concern that the document might just be filed somewhere until the event of another seminar. Other leaders did not seem to care that much about the commitment to the definition; one clinical leader argued ‘the core task is the patient, but it is very individual how this is accomplished’ (Interview). While disagreeing on the definition, most of them said that the core task mattered. A ward manager explained: ‘it [the core task as a concept] is something we mention every day’.

I followed three different leaders in their work (one clinical leader and two ward managers) who all worked hard to balance finances, continuity of care, communication with patients, division of labor and time spent on registration. Indeed the ambition to ensure that the patient is offered the best treatment was deeply institutionalized as a common endeavor in their work. I was thus surprised when Catherine, one of the ward managers that I shadowed and did a series of interviews with, explained that they had ‘not defined their core task’. It became clear that the idea of the core task had a different status in the everyday practice of the participants compared to the consultant-led development process. It involved more concrete operations like deciding on the information to give a patient or whether to transfer a patient to another department. Catherine’s practice illustrates how the status of the core task had changed and had only been partially explicated at the seminar.

Catherine has been the department leader for approximately two years. She often refers to the core task and told me that the seminar spurred some discussions; however it did not really clarify the core task in her everyday practice. The core task is a messy and entangled object of concern, which is constantly challenged, she argues. At Catherine’s ward they have had some outrageous months with overcrowding and seriously ill patients so they had to use many temporary workers which challenge their budgets. Her concern is balancing off the need to offer the best course of treatment while struggling with overcrowding, seriously ill patients and financial restrictions. She concludes that to balance those diverging demands actually ‘is the core task’ in her work. In Catherine’s everyday work the core task is taking care of seriously ill patients while balancing financial matters: ‘the budget is an ongoing issue’, she argues. The core task still is not clear at the department. According to Catherine the core task is not only a matter of offering the best treatment, it is also the limits to her practice or what is given as her domain of work:
‘When we receive a patient and we think, couldn’t he be put somewhere else – then we have not defined our core task. Due to our financial situation, we now have to define more clearly – what is our core task’ (Interview, Catherine).

What is at stake, from Catherine’s perspective, is how new demands shift the perspective on their core task; it sets up boundaries as to which patients they can or must handle. While being unclear on their core task, she still uses the concept to question their practice and continues:

We are in a paradigm shift, as I see it. Between what used to be our core task until a few years ago and now we are in a vacuum where we have to redefine our core task […] For instance, we have dying patients, are we going to let them go? Or put them somewhere else? They cannot stay here because we must provide curing treatment - we are entering a paradigm of cure now. […] Now what is the core task? (Interview)

It becomes apparent how Catherine speaks of the core task in a quite different way compared to at the seminar. The ambition has not changed, but she argues that the core task of their everyday practice is changing. This is a result of the government deciding to merge hospitals, to have more outpatient treatment and to limit the resources. It is clear that the endeavor ‘to ensure offering the best treatment’ is still living; however, she argues that the core task is changing and she only believes there is room for ‘must do’ tasks in this ‘new way of thinking’. She explains:

Okay, we must define our core task, but when I participate in a seminar with the Minister of Health and the Danish Cancer Society, I get really concerned. They tell us the number of people with cancer will increase so much that in ten years’ time we will need thirty percent more beds compared to today – and now we are about to dismantle twenty percent of our beds […] It becomes much more complex now […] at the moment we have a patient: she is undergoing cancer treatment and she takes up so many resources, what is the core task there? Who is taking over when she is discharged? We have a patient who does not want to be discharged - what is the core task then? (Interview)

Seen from an everyday practice viewpoint, the core task is indeed relevant to Catherine. However, the changes in the core task lie in the tension field between an ambition to do one’s best for the patient while experiencing difficult patients and new incommensurable demands. In Catherine’s everyday practice the core task is very concrete practical operations, which are not captured by ‘the core task’
concept described in the handbook. The handbook concept has become a buzzword with positive connotations; the following quote is illustrative:

It [the core task] almost becomes some kind of guru rhetoric. It’s obvious that we are changing, isn’t it. However it is only going to work if everything around us works out […] actually I am a bit worried that this little 135-page book – or whatever, has the ability to change an entire health care system, I’m sorry to say. It is a bit frightening I think […] how is it that such buzzwords or some kind of mantra become something that everybody wants to follow? All we like sheep […] I have read it [the book].(Interview)

But what does this mean? Analytically speaking, it appears that ‘the-core-task’ handbook concept is ontologically different from the core task as actual organization through everyday operations. In other words, what Catherine considers as her core task in her everyday practice is at odds with what appears as an abstract or ideal conception of the core task. The ideal definition indeed still exist but it is in tension with how the core task in Catherine’s everyday practice is enacted. Through the process we see how the concept is translated, thus altered, and it illustrate how legitimating an aspirational definition of the core task is one thing, doing the core task is another.

**Discussion**

In the introduction I raised the research question ‘how does the core task concept translate in developing public sector organization? And how does it relate to practical organization?’ I have investigated this through an empirical analysis that illustrates how the concept of the core task takes different actantial shapes as it is translated in different practices. The book ‘Know your core task’ and the consultant-led development process change the ontology of what the core task means, since they promotes and legitimizes a particular version that has the characteristics of a clearly defined value, a singular definition, the involved citizen and an aspirational target. Those characteristics work as a vehicle for the consultants in developing organization. The consultants become spokespersons for the book and ‘cite’ it in order to perform a particular defined organization into being (Gond et al., 2015). The consultancy practice has an explicated core task as its goal, which translates into an ‘ideal organization’. The empirical case revealed a tension that emerges between the ‘ideal organization’ and the ‘actual organization’ confronted in the everyday practice of the leaders involved. This makes it difficult to connect to everyday practical organization and the ‘ideal organization’ hardly provides
any guidance. The core task turns into a tricky concept which can be appropriated at one’s discretion while at the same time being regulated elsewhere, as Catherine points out.

The contributions that emanate from the empirical analysis are twofold. Firstly, the article contributes to a discussion of how concepts, exemplified by the core task, relate to organizational practice in consultant-led development. Secondly, it contributes to discussions of the notion of a singular core task in public sector organization and organizational analysis.

**Conceptual tensions and developing organization**

By analyzing the core task concept as an actant, it is possible to discern the different actantial roles enabled by it. The core task promoted in the handbook version enables the consultants to act as spokespersons promoting a defined shared core task as important. Calling into question an explicit shared core task introduces the problem of lack of explicitness. Defining the core task was instrumental in overcoming this lack, and this practice rested on an idea of explicitness of the core task establishing common ground. In the development process the consultants legitimize a core task definition, which conceptualizes an ‘ideal organization’. However as James (1977: 253-4) writes:

> When we conceptualize, we cut out and fix, and exclude everything but what we have fixed. A concept means a that-and-no-other […] whereas in the real concrete sensible flux of life experiences compenetrate each other so that it is not easy to know just what is excluded and what not.

This quote captures what the empirical case reveals. The ‘ideal organization’ that is enacted through the core task in the consultant-led part of the process creates a conceptual tension towards ‘actual organization’ that produces frustration in everyday practice.

By being situated in a consultant-led development process, the analysis contributes to previous studies of the role of concepts in consultant-led development work. Previous studies have shown how concepts can be derived as enactments of practice (Heusinkveld and Visscher: 2012) or as a ‘logic of representation’ that makes the consultant a legitimate spokesperson that is able to affect practice (Czarniawska, 2001). While both of these aspects are possible inferences from this study, the concept of the core task also differ from more mainstream logics of representation, for instance, business process re-engineering (Werr, 1999, Heusinkveld and Visscher 2012). The distinction between ‘logic of representation’ and ‘logic of practice’, which Czarniawska and Mazza (2012) suggest researchers
take up in studies of consultancy work, is blurry in the empirical case. Czarniawska (2015) suggests consultants lay bare the process of legitimation and engage with ‘the logic of practice’ or ‘actual organization’, as I have called it. However, the tricky part of the core task concept is that in public discourse it has an intuitive meaning at the same time becoming both a perceptual and affectual organizational device. Thrift (2008) discusses how the idea of communities of practice (COP) as an analytical idea (Lave and Wenger, 1991) has transmuted into practical organization, where it now also serves as a strategic method of organizing and intentionally constructing realities of COP (c.f. Wenger et al., 2002). Due to several translations the COP concept can now ‘simultaneously become affect and percept’ (Thrift, 2008: 91). Likewise, the core task concept can be considered as a way to perceive organization, as something performed through a core task (Vikkelsø, 2014), or as a concept to intentionally affect organization improvement. This subtle ability to be makes the core task concept interesting as an analytical object, since it can be used to affect a reality that is informed by that concept as well. The core task concept enables a transaction that brings consultancy practice and leaders’ everyday practice into a common space. This common space is a ‘practice of legitimization’ (Czarniawska, 2015: 110) where consultants and leaders engage in explicating a legitimate definition of the core task. The legitimated definition ‘to ensure that the patient is offered the best course of treatment’ is hard to oppose. Knowing the definition is, however, different from ‘knowing how’ (Ryle, 2009) to handle future demands on patient treatment and new organizing at the department. What makes up ‘actual organization’ disappearing as mundane sensible operations is to some extent absent. It raises the questions ‘best treatment relative to what?’ and ‘what to do about finances, electronic patient records, policies etc.?‘

While it probably would be considered as less appropriate to define the core task as ‘offering the best course of treatment within the limits of policies, our budgets and physical space’, this, however, was the leaders’ struggle in the aftermath. The parts of everyday practice, which the definition legitimates, clearly frustrates Catherine since the ‘ideal organization’ is still what she aims to perform in her ‘actual organization’ struggle. The ‘ideal organization’ that the definition enacts does not provide much guidance and hence is not considered that valuable. The core task concept and the empirical case illustrate how a ‘logic of practice’ fold into a ‘logic of representation’ (the defined core task), which produces conceptual tensions. One way of theorizing the provoked tensions further is as an example of noise (Clegg et al., 2004) or irritation, which has been argued to be a productive performative effect of consultancy work as it potentially spurs further action (Czarniawska, 2015, Luhmann, 2005). The performative power of speech or ‘aspirational talk’ about ideal organization
should not be underestimated either (Austin, 1975, Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges 1988, Christensen et al., 2013). However, although the ideal organization and the core task concept are aspirational in actual organization at the hospital, the definition does not seem to be of much help. Hence, another way of reading the tensions is as a struggle of ‘what makes organization’, which has been an important discussion in revitalizing the core task concept in organization studies (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014). The core task as ideal organization performs organization as something to be explicitly defined and as a harmonious definition that unites the whole department. The core task as actual organization performs organization as an effect of concrete sensible doings that are constantly performed.

Through this process of translating the concept from a book, to a consultant-led development practice and further into managerial practice the concept is altered. As the concept appears in the handbook it underscores co-creation ‘with the citizen’, and the author suggest involving the patient as an active citizen in the creation of welfare solutions. The concept translate further during the consultant-led development effort, although the guidelines still resemble the handbook, focus become to define the core task. During the development effort the primary focus is on the discursive aspects of the core task, the clinical leaders are tasked to come up with a definition, and the sociotechnical dimension of actual organization is partially suspended. Accordingly, is the active citizen translated into a matter of ensuring that the patients ‘are offered the best course of treatment’. Whereas much potential is inscribed in the definition during the development practice, this creates tensions as the core task is translated further. As Catherine argue, is the core task changing due to new demands that alter health care practice, the sociotechnical dimensions of everyday practice comes into play. Through these various translations, it becomes visible how the core task is enacted differently across diverse practice and create conceptual tensions as it translate.

**The core task concept in public sector organization and organizational analysis**

Another contribution that emanates from this article relates to the core task concept in public administration. As described in the review of the core task concept, Vikkelsø (2014) relates the concept or idea to the ‘the primary task’. Although the primary task was considered as part of a Tavistock psychodynamic organization theory, the practical difficulties described in this article resemble problems pointed out in relation to the primary task (Hirschhorn, 1999) and public sector organization (Hoggett, 2006). The core task indeed suggests a singular mode of organization where
tasks can be integrated and different functional boundaries transgressed through one shared core task. The concept promotes a harmonious picture where everybody is pulling in the same direction contributing to the same core task, for instance ‘proper treatment’ or ‘the patient’ without considering whether they were cleaners or doctors. In an analysis of the primary task concept in public sector organizations, Hoggett (2006) concludes that this kind of thinking is misleading and fruitless. Public sector organizations, including hospitals, have much higher task complexity and hence practitioners rather need tools, in a broad sense, to meet the incommensurable values and the contested nature of the multiple tasks. Hoggett’s analysis indeed lends weight to the difficulties witnessed in the conceptualization of the core task. In recent discussions of values in public administration research, it has been discussed whether public value is in the singular or the plural and how to understand values (West and Davis, 2011: 227). West and Davis (2011) conclude that much research on values is abstracted from concrete situations and call for an awareness of non-human entities in public sector organization. Similarly through a fine-grained analysis, the empirical analysis in this article illustrates how one defined core task must be abstracted to capture the different functions and end up as an ideal organization. The actual organization, constituted by information systems, machines, buildings, policies and finances, are omitted from the description and hence the sociotechnical dimension, which composed the primary task idea (Bamforth and Trist, 1951, Miller and Rice, 1967), is largely overlooked.

This does not mean that the core task and primary task concept cannot inform organizational analysis and intervention. Vikkelsø (2014) suggests that the notion of core task can provide a core object of organization as a way to analyse and understand what makes organization happen and hence also intervenes in practical organization. As a way to analyse organization, one can ask, as in the Tavistock idea of the primary task, ‘this organization is acting as if their primary task was to...’ From this position the core task can be derived from observation and description. This was to some extent what the ward manager did as she explained how the hospital was changing. The new organizational form promoted was presented as if cure and finances were the most important instead of care. While this might be reasonable, it was far from what was discussed with the consultants. The version of the core task promoted by Vikkelsø (2014) presents it as an organizational activity and a particular way of speaking and doing that from within actual organization can be called the core task. From this position the core task can be used as a methodological device to describe the normative infrastructure (Gherardi, 2012) and sociotechnical arrangements that govern the core task as actual organization. This, however, need not to be a singular core task but can be many tasks. For instance, if the ward
manager organizes continuity of care, there are different tasks at play and the organization of the continuity of care is very fragile since many tasks compete. This tension towards the idea of one task that is core or primary was already discussed in the Tavistock tradition many years ago; however it seems that managers in public sector organization are faced with some of the same problems. Hence, this article follows up on du Gay and Vikkelsø’s (2014) suggestion to study if the concerns of classical organization theory were that different from contemporary ‘matters of organizational concern’. Indeed it seems that some of the same issues are troubling practitioners nowadays as well.

**Concluding remarks**

The ambition in this article was to explore the role of a concept, how it enacts organization and to point to the critical moments of translation that happen when a concept starts working. By analyzing the core task as an actant, this article has shown how the core task can be deployed as a concept to enact different versions of organization, and how tension between the ideal and actual organization happened. As a vehicle for developing organization, the core task concept is almost by definition positive and impervious to critique (Argyris, 1997). It is exactly this difficulty of opposing ‘the core task’ or other related concepts such as ‘social capital’ or ‘relational coordination’ that makes it pivotal to analyze such concepts. Not to disqualify concepts but to critically explore the effects of concepts as they travel from the social sciences and into public sector organizations. In the introductory quote Thrift (2006) encourages considering what it means to the practice of social theory that theories and concepts, which partially derive from the social sciences, translate in a cultural circuit into managerial discourse. While the core task is infused with theoretical ideas, both through explicit and implicit relations, it also takes on a life of its own, where the concept is mediated by consultancies and handbooks with an agenda different to social science theory. Even though using the same term, this article illustrates how a practical and a social science version of the core task concept indeed performs very different versions of organization into being.

**Practical implications**

This analysis also has practical implications for consultants and managers. Within the public sector and more specifically within hospitals various managerial concepts is travelling. These concepts keep reappearing and range from more standardized packages, such as lean, towards fluid concepts, such as the core task. While concepts indeed is able to foster productive discussions on organization and
management, it also seems relevant to suggest a critical awareness to the kind of hope, which is inscribed in the concepts. At a general level this mean that practitioners should consider what these concepts actually provide to their practice, they should critically engage with them and dare to challenge the relevance of the concepts. Concerning the core task concept specifically there also seem to be some relevant considerations for practitioners. Through the empirical case, it becomes visible how the core task definition becomes an aspirational practice. Another way of engaging with the core task is to recall the old saying from Tavisstock and ask oneself; ‘this enterprise is behaving as if their primary task were…’ By raising this question, practitioners might become aware of a tension between the aspirational core task and the current tasks in the organization, which potentially foster productive conversations concerning how to handle this tension. A final implication relates to the question of whether it is actually possible to speak of a singular core task. It seems contestable whether this is actually possible, particularly in temporal work or work practices with many diverse tasks that change on an ongoing basis. Practitioners hence should consider whether one singular core task is a helpful definition to their work practice or they rather need to discuss the purpose of their work as balancing various (core) tasks.

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CHAPTER 6
MAKING CONSULTING VALUABLE: A MATTER OF ASSESSMENT?

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Abstract: In this paper, we analyse the performative effects of assessment tools used for measuring the learning effects of a consultant-led leadership development program. We argue that how leadership is assessed in practice is of crucial importance to what count as learning and impact of a development effort. The paper is based on an empirical study of a consultant-led leadership development programme, ‘Start to Lead’, in a global organization, where we explore how the program was assessed by help of an assessment tool provided by a management consultancy. Through our empirical analysis we infer two modes of ordering, which illustrate how the assessment tool produced diverse performative effects across different practices. Our findings indicate a gap between the participants’ interview-based descriptions of what they learned from the programme and the assessment tool’s operationalisation of ‘the right’ leadership knowledge. We also found that managers seemed to distinguish between assessment important to the managers themselves and their daily work, which they were highly motivated to do well, and assessment important to ‘the organizational system’, which mostly resulted in quickly ‘ticking boxes’. These findings suggest that assessment tools work as demarcations defining good leadership, legitimate learning and value. These demarcations risk being disconnected from the everyday practice of leadership and hence risk decoupling the assessment tool and the participants’ everyday leadership practice. We end the paper by discussing the theoretical implications of this analysis.

Keywords: consulting, leadership development, assessment tools, social science methods, identification, performativity, practice

73 The paper is an adapted version of a co-authored paper entitled ‘Learning good leadership: A matter of assessment?’ The paper is currently under review in Human Resource Development International
Introduction

Is it possible to learn leadership? If yes, how do practitioners then assess and account for this? These questions has emerged as an effect of the great effort and resources that is put into consultant-led leadership development in many organizations (Carroll and Levy, 2010, Nicholson and Carroll, 2013, Tomlinson et al., 2013, Day, 2001, Smolovic et al., 2015, Yawson, 2012). Whereas some literature has aimed to assess and question in different ways learning and the organizational impact of leadership development (Lumby, 2014, Hawkins and Edwards, 2013, Patel and Hamlin, 2012, Yukl, 2012, Blume et al., 2010, Mintzberg, 2009;), other contributions have tempted to answer the question of organizational impact by emphasizing the scarcity of research on this topic (Day et al., 2014, Clarke, 2013, Hannum and Craig, 2010).

Attempts to settle on this issue are constantly performed. For instance, recently a large survey conducted at a Danish University in collaboration with a large interest organization (again) tried to answer if development of leadership actually pays off. Based on a statistical analysis of answers from 1650 managers they concluded that a strategic focus on leadership and leadership development does improve leadership performance (Eriksson, 2015). The study was presented as a response to a lack of evidence on the relation between ‘good leadership’ and ‘good performance’, and was quickly taken up by different organizations and consultancies in Denmark as evidence for their activities (e.g. Management, 2015). This example illustrates how leadership development, if it is assessed as effective, very well turn in to a tool for further political or legitimating relevance e.g. in arguing for further consultant-led leadership development and further institutionalization hereof. In general there is a great interest from various perspectives in documenting the effects of leadership development and consultancy work (Sturdy et al., 2009). The uncertainty with regard to the impact of leadership development activities spurs academic discussions, engages leadership development practitioners and spawns an expanding market of assessment tools for measuring effects of leadership development74.

Judging by the resources spent on leadership development, most private and public organizations seem to presume that consultant-led leadership development initiatives ‘pay off’. In a study of leadership development in the UK, a group of researchers found that more than 80 per cent of surveyed organizations reported using some kind of leadership development initiative (Ford et al.,

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74 The interest in assessing leadership development is also fed by large consultancies such as McKinsey & Co (Cermak and McGurk 2010; Gurdjan and Halbeisen 2014) and Bersin by Deloitte (Johnson et al. 2015), who stress the ‘need’ for measuring effects and learning from leadership development programs.
2008). Since then researchers and consultancies have argued that an increasing amount is spent on leadership development (DeRue and Myers, 2014). It has been estimated that corporations spent over $15 billion in 2013 on leadership development in the U.S. alone (Morris and Laipple 2015, O’Leonard and Krider, 2014). Indeed, leadership development has become institutionalized as a legitimate activity to reward, retain and improve managers and leadership in contemporary enterprises (Luo, 2007).

While much literature has called for tools and studies that are able to describe the impact of leadership development, many studies have at the same time tried to assess the learning impact by means of an extensive amount of assessment tools (Alliger and Janak, 1989, Boverie et al., 1994, Nielsen, et al., 2010). Accordingly, extant literature indicates that assessment tools are important in different ways to consultant-led leadership development. However, studies that ‘demonstrate the application’ of assessment tools in such development endeavours is scarce (Hannum and Craig, 2010: 581) and little research interest has been paid to how the assessment tools themselves order and effect reality. Instead of providing new methods for assessment, or assessing the impact of leadership development initiatives in a conventional sense, we want in this paper to explore the modes of ordering, which appeared as performative effects of engaging with the assessment tools for measuring the learning impact of a leadership development programme. Thereby we contribute to recent discussions of leadership development. It is our contention that the way leadership development interventions are assessed is an important constituent in the construction of leadership and learning representations from such programs. What we aim for is to study how assessment tools become demarcations of learning, effectiveness and good leadership, and thus we raise the following research question: ‘what are the performative effects of assessment tools in measuring learning from consultant-led development work?’

When we focus on the performativity of assessment tools, our orientation shifts from evaluating whether a leadership development intervention is successful or not – a conventional interpretation of effects, towards how different assessment tools (e.g. surveys and questionnaires) become co-constituents in assessing the effects of a consultant-led leadership development activity. Through a qualitative inquiry we examine the assessment tools deployed in a leadership development programme named ‘Start to Lead’ (S2L) in a global organization (Fluidtech). The ‘S2L’ programme is an interesting case for studying the performativity of assessment tools, because an extensive battery of three different forms of assessment guided the programme and the participants. We investigate
what can be learned about the effects of leadership development by studying how it is assessed. The approach taken is a rather different perspective on learning compared to most previous studies, which study how effects can be assessed (e.g. Hannum and Craig, 2010).

We develop a performative disposition towards assessment tools in leadership development by taking a practice-oriented perspective on knowledge and learning (Corradi et al., 2010, Tanggaard 2007a; Fuller and Unwin, 2009). This perspective underlines that assessment practices are continuously embedded in a specific historic-relational context, which is always partly actualised in the interactions that actors engage in, as interaction and context are co-produced (e.g. Lave and Chaiklin, 1993). In a kind of dialectical or looping relationship, new assessment tools arise from learning how to improve the measurement of, for example, the effects of leadership development and training. But these tools in themselves also simultaneously constitute and stipulate new forms of practices; hence, they have performative effects. Indeed, this paper argues that disclosing the performative effects of engaging with assessment tools in leadership development and the way learning is assembled in practice provides interesting terrain for discussing how leadership can be learned. It also enables us to discuss from a pragmatic perspective what assessment tools actually produce and enable, and whether or not this is desirable. We advance a performative disposition on assessment within leadership development, an aspect that is largely under-theorised.

**Theoretical framework: A performative approach towards assessment within leadership development.**

Recently an increasing number of researchers has adopted the notion of performativity in management and organization studies (Cabantous et al., 2014). Approaches inspired by practice-oriented studies (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Schatzki et al., 2001, Nicolini, 2013, Gherardi, 2012) and work within science and technology studies (STS) (Gad and Jensen, 2014, Muniesa, 2014, Ruppert et al., 2013, Callon, 2010) advance a performative disposition with regard to knowledge, learning and leadership in organizations (Fenwick and Edwards, 2013, Ferraro et al., 2005, Carroll and Levy, 2010, D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014). In different ways those writings offer a view of knowledge and learning as accomplishments situated in practice where individuals co-emerge with words and things e.g. assessment tools (Keever and Treleaven, 2011). Inspired by Callon (1998b, 2) ‘performativity’, to us, describes how an assessment tool in a broad sense ‘performs, shapes and formats’ representations of legitimate learning and leadership, ‘rather than observing how it [learning and
leadership] functions’. As such, a performative approach towards assessment shifts focus from the learning subject’s acquisition to social practice as distributed, material and emergent (Fenwick, 2009).

**A practice-based view on knowledge and learning**

A practice-based view on learning and knowledge differs from, for instance, cognitive functionalistic approaches, which see learning as a matter of change in mental representations (Tanggaard and Elmholdt, 2008). The latter discusses the ability to transfer knowledge from a teaching context to an applied context, whereas the practice-based approach sees learning and knowledge as situated in practice, meaning that it is not transferable without mediation (Tanggaard, 2007a). A practice-based view on learning and knowledge differs from, for instance, cognitive functionalistic approaches, which engage with learning as a matter of rather abstract structural changes in mental representations (Tanggaard, 2007a, Lave and Wenger, 1991). Through this approach, knowledge becomes situated and related to participation in social practices and occupational communities (Bechky, 2003, Knorr-Cetina, 1999, Lave and Wenger, 1991). Hence, learning is related to participation in various learning trajectories, also forming the identification of the practitioner and the way they ascribe meaning to phenomena. An example of this is Julian Orr’s study on copy machine service technicians (Orr, 1996). Orr shows how the practitioners participating in shared practices develop a certain practice-based knowledge with shared meanings and stories. As a result, practice rests on a normative infrastructure that regulates the work done (Gherardi, 2012). In this way participation in particular work practices influences the practitioner and sets limits for new enactments (Bechky, 2003). This practice-based orientation helps us understand how responses to an assessment are informed by the participants’ activities in other practices. In this sense, an assessment is not just a neutral object; it also provides intervention from one practice to another. For instance, an assessment presents a vision of leadership enacted in a certain practice whereas respondents have to relate this to their everyday practice. Subsequently, assessment also becomes a matter of what counts as the right answers across diverse practices. This point can be recalled in earlier practice-oriented studies such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, Nicolini, 2013) which argue that practice has an internal ‘accountability’ that produces particular versions of, for example, good leadership. Questions about whether it is possible to learn leadership and what good leadership is become entwined with what is considered good leadership in a given practice (Barker, 1997, Blakeley and Higgs, 2014).
Performativity and assessment

Assessment literature traditionally distinguishes between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is described as “proactive” while the summarising form is regarded as more “reactive” (Nevo and Shohamy, 1986). Formative assessment is conducted primarily to improve learning and to develop an activity, whereas summarising assessment mainly appraises the results of a given effort (Tanggaard and Elmholdt, 2008). In other words, summative assessment encourages us to draw conclusions whereas formative assessment encourages us to take the (per)formativity of the assessment seriously. Nonetheless, summarising forms of assessment still contain formative aspects, for instance by influencing managers’ behaviour and motivation to achieve a good evaluation. This performative perspective implies that the assessment tool itself becomes part of questioning the organizational effects of leadership development, and contributes to the way learning assembles in social practice. In order to account for learning effects of leadership development from this perspective, it is crucial to be able to identify and align the content of a programme and an assessment to the everyday practice of the participants (Tanggaard, 2007a). This formative approach to assessment leads us to another stream of literature that has recently advanced theorising on performativity.

In recent ‘social studies’ of methods (Law and Ruppert, 2013) and finance (Callon, 2007, 2010, Muniesa, 2014, MacKenzie et al., 2007), the performative effects of theories and methods has been advanced (Ruppert et al., 2013, Law and Ruppert, 2013, Asdal and Marres, 2014). It is argued that methods help bring forth reality, as Law and Urry (2004: 393) argue ‘[…] [methods] have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover’. Accordingly, methods (including assessment tools) are not to be considered as mere techniques but as practices that not only describe parts of social reality but also enact them into being (Law, 2009). In a complementary line of research, Callon (2010, 2007) describes from a pragmatic perspective how methods, models and theories of finance make certain realities happen. He builds on the suggestion from Austin’s (1975) speech act theory that ‘words do things’ (e.g. often cited examples are ‘I promise you’ or ‘I baptise you’). Callon extends the idea that the function of language is not representation. Callon argues that a discourse acts on its object and contributes to make it happen – it intervenes (Mol, 2013). However, making things happen is not solely an act of discourse, Callon expand the idea of performativity from speech acts towards for instance, finance and other practices. Callon argues that if one says ‘this thread breaks’ (2007: 319), it is not the statement that makes it happen, it is the action that happens (if the thread actually breaks) that ends up determining
whether the statement is true – if it is performative. What this example illustrates is how performative effects always emerge through practices. In other words, an assessment or a social science method do not discover reality, as Law (2009) notice, they need to engage with informants who has to enact it. Through the example of a survey, Law (2009) argue, that the survey only enact a certain versions of the world, which indeed are real ‘but only in the context of its own interviews’ (Law, 2009: 245). This mean that what methods or assessment practices discover or bring into being is only a part of reality, which not necessarily link well to other practices. Hence, methods, theories and assessments in general produce misfire in the sense that other parts of social reality not ordered by the assessment overflow the boundaries of the model (Callon, 2010: 164).

This focus on performativity insists on stretching our research awareness towards how objects do things (MacKenzie et al., 2007). For instance, a questionnaire used for assessment mediates the identity of the respondent since it positions the informant in between diverse practices (Law, 2009). Suddenly managers might be positioned such that they have to consider whether they are leaders or professionals, because the assessment tool forces a ‘both-and’ subject position. Thus, an assessment may enact one mode of ordering reality, which usually exists among other modes of ordering (Law, 1994). As Law and Lien (2012: 2) argue: ‘Ordering becomes a relational and performative effect of practices, and since the latter vary, this also means that ordering varies too’. This might work out very well but can easily create tension (Callon, 2007). As an assessment may be a demarcation, it very likely also puts the identity of respondents to the test (Ibid), as they have to span diverse practices. In sum, the practice-based and performative orientation has great implications for accounting for the learning of leadership. Those perspectives situate legitimate accounts of learning within practice with close connections to identity constitution and sensemaking. By extending the formative assessment argument towards performativity, we are able to elaborate further on what assessment tools perform and order, for instance, when used in HRD departments or consultancies (Phillips and Phillips, 2007, Phillips et al., 2012).

**Methodology**

The theoretical and methodological approaches to studying effects of leadership development have expanded into a plethora of different perspectives often inspired by Kirkpatrick’s (1967) seminal work on training impact (c.f. Nielsen et al., 2010, Kaufman and Keller, 1994). Set against this body of literature other studies have argued that effects of leadership development rather is a matter of
identity work, which rarely is related to assessment tools as such (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013, Carden and Callahan, 2007). Although recognising these different efforts, our study differentiates by doing a qualitative inquiry into the use of quantitative measures to assess the subjective learning and organizational impact from leadership development programs. We have traced how assessment is performed among participants in the ‘S2L’ programme, the planners of the programme (in Fluidtech) and the external consultancy (here called ‘EVALconsult75’), who is specialised in measuring learning from competence-development programs. Our research approach is spurred by controversies and empirical breakdowns, which often produce interesting settings for inquiry (Alvesson, 2011, Latour, 2000, 2005). Specifically, the fact that all our interviewed participants said that they had used a number of aspects from the programme, while the assessment showed an unsatisfying amount of learning. This finding in particular spurred our interest in the performativity of such assessment tools. We draw on the methodological manoeuvre, which allows our object of study to object, and we tested our findings on our respondents (Gorli et al., 2015, Latour, 2005). Although surprised at some parts they recognized the story.

**Research setting**

Empirically our research focus was on the assessment tools used in the ‘S2L’ programme, a leadership development programme for new managers. The programme was conducted in Fluidtech, a global organization in the water pump industry employing more than 18,000 people. We negotiated access to the programme through the HR department and the leader of the ‘S2L’ programme, who was a Learning & Development (L&D) consultant situated in the ‘HRD consultancy unit’ in the HR department. Fluidtech is undergoing changes at present with replacements in the board of directors, cost cuts, and in 2015, a new strategy was launched. The new strategy has introduced a focus on *behaviour* as a ‘must-win battle’ explicitly to make accountability, customer centricity and collaboration focal points for accomplishing future business goals. In addition, employee motivation has been added as a KPI, i.e. measured as an increase in a quantitative assessment of employee motivation. Fluidtech was chosen as an apposite case as it has well-established and comprehensive leadership development assessment practices based on social scientific quantitative methods (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Among other things, Fluidtech has won two American practitioner awards for their attempt to assess and document learning and return on investment in previous leadership development programs. For more than a decade, the organization has collaborated closely with external

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75 For the purpose of this article the consultancy and all names except Grundfos has been changed.
consultancies on assessment and recently a new attempt to account for the effects of the ‘S2L’ programme was initiated. This collaboration with external consultancies led us from the assessment tools to the external consultancy - EVALconsult, who had designed and provided the assessment tool.

**The S2L programme and assessment tools**

The sample of assessed participants in the ‘S2L’ programme includes 212 Fluidtech managers from all parts of the organisation, for instance, research and technology, business development or production. The duration of the programme is three months and consists of online sessions, face-time interventions and self-study lessons. Fluidtech contracted with external consultants from a global consultancy to design the program and to do the face-time interventions. The programme was oriented towards coaching, dialogue, empowerment, building trust and conflict resolution and focused on developing ‘people leaders’:

> We do this programme to make managers “people leaders” more than “professional leaders” – to be more balanced […] we believe that if they are able to do this, they will be better at motivating their employees and so on. There is a causal relation, we believe, between those elements. (Interview, S2L program manager)

It was emphasised how becoming a people leader is a matter of transition, which includes both learning and unlearning certain behaviour, routines and habits. According to the program manager, the managers in the organization had to become better ‘at producing reflection through dialogue’ among their employees.

The ability to assess and thereby account for the impact of the programme in the organization was of great interest to the HR department and the HRD consultancy unit. Prior to the assessment, the HRD consultancy unit had felt rather certain that the program provided a strong impact. Through dialogues and a few explorative interviews with the leaders on their programs, they had gained great feedback, which they now wanted to document in a more formal sense. The assessment appeared as a way to turn an intangible outcome into a tangible representation, which could illuminate the value of their services. This in turn could afford a representation, which would potentially ascribe further legitimacy to their services. As the Learning and Development (L&D) manager describe, is measurements used as a legitimate representational tool to communicate in the organization, he says:
The measurements are used internally to develop our quality. This is an ongoing process […] in various situations we use the measurements in relation to top management and different sponsors […] we have to make annual reports, where we typically use those measures together with financial goals as information. Here we have different benchmarks; it could be satisfaction beyond a score of 4.1 or an improvement of knowledge of more than 30 points […] (Interview L&D manager Fluidtech).

Three different assessment tools were used to measure the effects of the ‘S2L’ program: firstly, a formal learning effect assessment provided by EVALconsult, which consisted of a formal questionnaire. This was administrated online to the participants three times – prior to the programme, right after the programme and three months after completion. Secondly, a formal ‘satisfaction questionnaire’ was sent out through the same online platform immediately after completion of the program. Thirdly, a formal employee motivation survey (EMS) was conducted as an organizational measurement to assess whether managers’ participation in the ‘S2L’ programme had affected their employees’ motivation. According to the programme leader, the assessment tools, provided by EVALconsult, were used to ‘ensure to measure something which is meaningful to measure’ (interview). In other words, the assessment tool was infused with great representational abilities.

The first two assessments were inspired by Kirkpatrick’s (1998) evaluation model, which aimed to measure participants’ pre-training knowledge and their post-training, reaction, knowledge, attitude and behaviour. Learning is represented as the difference between the number of right answers prior to and after training. The conclusion was a generally low degree of learning from the ‘S2L’ programme. The third assessment tool, the EMS survey, was supposed to be a bi-annual activity that was sent out to all employees measuring their motivation and satisfaction. Assisted by an external consultancy, the HRD consultancy unit compared the scores of employees in the group of managers who had participated in the programme and a control group of employees of managers who had not participated. Against expectations, it was concluded that the group of managers participating in the ‘S2L’ programme had a slightly lower motivation score compared to the control group.

Judged on the results of the various assessment tools, the programme did not provoke much subjective learning or organizational impact. Though participants in general voiced acceptable satisfaction with the course, neither the EMS nor the learning questionnaires proved that there was either a significant subjective learning outcome or organizational impact. This led the L&D manager to question whether ‘it is leadership we train and if it is leadership we measure?’ (Interview, manager). He continued by
emphasising ‘[…] we cannot just turn our backs on the numbers’. These statements accentuated some of the difficulties related to the use of assessment tools in leadership development, which we explore further here.

**Methods and data analysis**

Our empirical material covers various data sources; e.g. qualitative interviews, meetings, document studies and telephone calls. Overall, we aimed at monitoring the impact of assessment tools across diverse practices. Thus the unfolding and translation of the assessment tools in the practices of stakeholders and participants in the ‘S2L’ programme became the object of study (Latour, 2005).

**Table 1: Overview of empirical material**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of material</th>
<th>Form of material</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Two interviews with the manager of Learning &amp; Development in Fluidtech</td>
<td>12 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Four interviews with L&amp;D consultant in Fluidtech</td>
<td>Transcribed and rewritten and coded using NVivo</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Five interviews with five managers who participated in the program</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- One interview with the CEO of EVALconsult</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Documents:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Internal documents describing the program</td>
<td>In total approx. 400 pages</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Email exchanges</td>
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<tr>
<td>- PowerPoints from the HR department regarding the evaluation of the program</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Questionnaires from the evaluation of the program</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Employee motivation surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Reports from consultancies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Webpages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Telephone calls</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Meetings</td>
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**Interviews and document studies**

The 12 interviews, as specified in table 1, lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. We monitored the use of the assessment tool among the various actors involved (EVALconsult, HRD consultancy unit, participating managers). The interviewees were strategically selected based on the principle of representing the perspective of different stakeholders in the programme and different scores in the learning impact questionnaires (Jacobsen et al., 2010). Both participants who represented a high and low learning impact from the S2L programme were selected. As part of our critical interest in the demarcation of learning impacts, we decided to inquire further into Fluidtech’ way of ordering the effects of the programme. Our interview data did not show any difference between the high- and low-learning impact interviews. The interview followed a semi-structured guide as well as the idea of active interviewing (Tanggaard, 2007b; Gubrium and Holstein 2003, Holstein and Gubrium, 2004) in which our inquiry and questions guided and were performative in the production of our research puzzle and in solving it (Brinkmann, 2014). A range of documents were analysed and coded thematically (Lynggaard, 2010). We used documents such as statistics, industry reports and archival data primarily to specify and refine the interview questions, and subsequently to refine our interpretations of interviews and meetings. The first part was done by reviewing the assessment tools, reading and coding questions asked, and studying the results of the assessment. In the second part, we used the new strategy, PowerPoint shows related to the program and leadership principles to refine our interview data.

**Data analysis**

An abductive reasoning as outlined by Brinkmann (2014) inspired our data analysis. Brinkmann argues that abductive reasoning follows analysis after coding. In other words, our analysis was done through an iterative process; after each interview, the material would be sent to the co-authors and we would discuss emerging themes in the material. This process followed what Kvåle and Brinkmann (2009) call ‘condensing and categorising’, hence different themes emerged and a range of assessment tools were discerned. Thus, compared to inductive reasoning, our approach recognises the performativity of our own data (Czarniawska, 2014, Flyvbjerg, 2010). Through our analysis of the empirical material, we ended up with two categories (Ruppert, 2012) of performative effects that constitute different uses (or non-uses) of the assessment tool. Inspired by Law (1994) we engaged with those two categories as different modes of ordering. By analysing the material as different modes of ordering, we want to underscore how different orderings emerged as performative effects from
studying assessment practices in a consultancy and Fluidtech. Ordering further imply an awareness towards how order always purify, which emphasize how order always is limited and more or less elusive (Law, 1994: 4). We ended up generating two ordering categories, firstly a mode of ordering by ‘construction’ (mode of construction) where representations of learning are ordered as a performative effect. This mode was enabled by an IT-based online assessment software and was particularly accentuated in the consultancy company that provided the assessment tool. Secondly, a mode of ordering by ‘decoupling’ (mode of decoupling) was identified. Decoupling was particularly visible in the interviews with the participants who engaged with the assessment tool but this engagement, did not really represent their experience of learning leadership. Hence, ordering by decoupling appeared as another performative effect of the engagement with the assessment tool.

<table>
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<th>Table 2: Overview of ’modes’</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mode of construction</td>
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<td>Mode of decoupling</td>
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assumption of this mode of ordering seems captured by Lord Kelvin’s dictum that ‘if you cannot measure your knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory’ (Zuiderent-Jerak et al., 2009). We divided the mode of construction into three forms: constructing representations through an online assessment tool; constructing representations by advanced (enough) content; and constructing representations through inclusion and exclusion.

**Setting the scene**
Peter is partner and CEO of EVALconsult. He is in his office when the researcher (the first author) arrives. Peter quickly shows the researcher to a meeting room and asks whether he would like some coffee. The meeting room has a bookshelf with writings on ‘Return on Investment’ and ‘Evaluation’, which seems in line with the company profile. Having picked up a cup of coffee, the conversation starts. Originally, Peter was trained as a psychologist and following a position at a university, he has spent the last 22 years of his career refining and advancing the IT-based assessment software, which is now the backbone of EVALconsult. As one element of investigating the learning impact of the ‘S2L program’, Fluidtech contracted with EVALconsult – a specialist in measuring learning. Peter explains that the software-based assessment tool offered by the consultancy company is used globally and they have conducted more than 30 million measurements worldwide through the tool. Their work has earned the company international recognition and prizes for their products.

**Constructing representations through an online assessment tool**
The assessment tool offered by EVALconsult makes learning tangible by constructing representations of learning. By transforming a series of questions into numbers and visualizations it makes it possible to infer the learning objectives, learning score, transfer and satisfaction of each participant in the S2L programme. The system delivers guidelines for questioning in the assessment and asks users to describe the purpose and goal of their development effort. To describe the system, Peter uses a PowerPoint to show how the system guides users through the process of assessment. He explains:

> […] the system is configured through particular programming that makes it possible to produce a credible outcome without having to be a statistician or evaluator. (Interview, CEO, EVALconsult)

Besides offering this configuring guidance, EVALconsult is able to provide standards for acceptable learning benchmarks. These benchmarks are used in the S2L programme. As the L&D manager argued: ‘in our transfer test three months after the development activity, participants are only allowed
to drop by five points […] these are standard measurements from their large database at EVALconsult’ (interview, manager).

EVALconsult are not experts on learning or on what to put into leadership development programs; their expertise is measurement of learning. The CEO argues: ‘our methods are generic, we do not distinguish between leadership development and technical educations […] we only know about how to measure learning.’ While the distinction between knowing about how to measure learning and knowing about learning seems puzzling, it becomes clearer as the CEO elaborates on their methods.

[…] When we measure, we take another perspective. We say, right now at this moment, to what extent have the goals we have argued to be important been reached. As we will measure at a later date we can assume this is an expression of learning, we can decide this is learning when it develops into attitude and behaviour in our assessment […] (Interview, CEO EVALconsult)

When Peter speaks of learning, the mode of constructing a representation of learning becomes evident, for instance, when he says ‘we can decide this is learning’. Learning is not something given, but it is something constructed through the questions asked through the software system. Not to say that it is independent of the participant bodies, but the system literally produces representations of learning as an effect. Peter explains that they have changed the description of EVALconsult services. He says:

 […] Our system provides feedback […] we have abandoned ‘measuring effect’ replacing it with ‘ensuring effect’ […] we want the act of measurement to change something […] we provide feedback to those who have been measured to give them the opportunity to commit, change and improve themselves. (Interview, CEO EVALconsult)

This system feedback is given as a general overview to the participants and to the management visualising the learning impact (see picture 1 and 2).
Visualisations of participant scores provide a third-person view on the participants’ learning, which Peter emphasises as an opportunity for the participants to improve their learning by making it visible. Likewise, the L&D manager accentuated the importance of this visual report of participant scores. In an interview, he argued that the report would show ‘whether the participant is doing well and where he misses the target’ and it would make recommendations for what to do next and how to improve. Although central to the HRD consultancy unit and EVALconsult, none of the participating managers emphasised this visual feedback of their scores as being important. Rather, they were troubled with the questions asked.

**Constructing representations by advanced (enough) content**

The assessment procedure worked by asking questions prior to the development activity and then asking the same questions at a later time (immediately after training and again three months later). Peter emphasised the need to ask ‘good questions’, which can be validated. One way of making questions able for validation required advanced enough content, as the program manager for ‘S2L’ at Fluidtech explained:

[…] if we look at our knowledge assessment, it is a general issue if we begin with participants above average knowledge level […] We need to start at a level below 30 on a 100-point scale, or to put it more simply, participants must not be able to answer more than 30 questions out of 100 prior to the development activity […] (Interview)

Another way of making the questions capable of validation in the S2L program was to arrange the questions in a multiple-choice design. This approach defines a best practice in any situation, e.g. a
best practice of delegation. As an example, the participants were asked the following question as an attempt to assess their learning: ‘In order to delegate a task successfully to an employee, the following must be in place’:

1. Scope, training, instruction, and follow-up
2. Goal, instruction, qualification and close monitoring
3. Scope, training, close monitoring and incentive
4. Goal, scope, qualification and follow-up [right answer]
5. Don’t know

This question is illustrative; it requires the manager to know what ‘best practice’ in any given situation is. While this question might be capable of validation, it also produced difficulty for the participating managers. Most managers argued that such a question was rather confusing to answer, not due to lack of knowledge but because of the situated character of their leadership practice. To cite one of the managers: ‘it [answering the question] would really depend […] some of my employees I need to treat differently […]’. Hence, compiling an adequately advanced questionnaire was essential to constructing a representation of learning. However, the questions asked and the defined best practice inscribed in this representation produced demarcations of what would count and not count as legitimate learning.

**Constructing representations through inclusion and exclusion**

As the assessment tool guides the user to question the exact aim of the programme, it also provides an ability to challenge ‘fluffy’ ideas of leadership development. Only leadership development that can be measured through specifically defined questions can be included as learning. Peter mentioned practices such as Mindfulness as an example of ‘fluffy’ practices whose success criteria must be defined in order to construct a proper representation of learning outcomes. According to Peter, this focus on exact measures is a great feature of their method. By deploying the assessment tool, the user will be required to set up specific success criteria, which can be measured and validated:

 […] we want organizations to offer the right development activities […] we believe our product is able to do something at a societal level, at the level of corporations and at the individual level. It is an efficiency improvement universe we are trying to make people use.
It is about finding out that development is not a miracle cure in itself; our dictum is ‘if you do not measure it, you cannot manage it. (Interview, CEO EVALconsult)

According to Peter the assessment tool not only offers the ability to construct representations of learning effects, it offers a way of including or excluding what rates as a legitimate account of learning in a leadership development programme. In sum, this ‘mode of construction’ performs a particular ordering of leadership development, which becomes a matter of constructing learning through numbers. These numbers, which indicate participant learning percentages, are important since, as Verran (2012) argues, numbers not only create order, they also impose value on this order. In the words of Alain Badiou, ‘What counts – in the sense of what is valued – is that which is counted’ (Badiou, 2008: 2). As such, the assessment tools can be said to represent an approach to leadership development where learning and value is defined as what is measured. This stance to what counts as legitimate learning, however, evoked certain troublesome managerial subject positions for the managers participating in the S2L programme. It produced tensions in connecting to everyday practice and illustrated a ‘mode of decoupling’ from the assessment tool.

**Mode of decoupling**

All our interviews with participants in the programme related to issues of decoupling between the assessment tools and their everyday leadership practice. Three interviewees were particularly outspoken about how the assessment tools decoupled their everyday leadership practice. The interviewees were (1) Carsten, who is a manager in research and development, (2) Ann, who is a manager in HR, and (3) Mark, who is a manager within a research technology department. Below we elaborate on three separate but overlapping forms of decoupling. We differentiate between three separate but overlapping forms of ordering by decoupling: decoupling by (dis)identification, decoupling by relevance and decoupling by conflicting demands and messiness.

**Decoupling by (dis)identification**

One goal of the ‘S2L’ programme was to develop more ‘balanced managers’, hence taking managers, who on paper mainly possessed professional competences, priorities and values and turning them into managers with leadership competences, priorities and identities. A shift in identification from professional competencies and identity towards leadership competencies and identity was promoted. As the programme leader explained ‘[…] if you only love your profession, that is not enough […] you have to learn to love leadership’.
While this ideal of transition was outspoken in the S2L programme, the participants seemed to struggle a bit with the unilateral leadership orientation. When we asked the managers to describe their everyday managerial practice, they said that much of their work actually consisted of being highly knowledgeable about their subjects. The following excerpt from Carsten illustrates this:

[…] An important part of my work is to be responsible for the delivery of our products. I need to be up-to-date with what is going on. This takes much time. [...] I'm probably like a player-manager [...] Further, I am also involved in various kinds of troubleshooting. (Interview, Carsten)

By describing himself as a trouble-shooter and a playing manager, Carsten did not voice the particular leadership identity promoted in the ‘S2L’ programme. While the assessment tools tried to derive particular ‘pure’ leadership behaviour and learning from the S2L programme, the everyday practice demanded a much more entangled endeavour concerning professional and leadership knowledge. In other words, it was difficult to infer a leadership behaviour, which was not entwined with aspects of ‘troubleshooting’ or professional knowledge as in the example of Carsten. Carsten valued the tools provided in the course; however, largely he identified with his professional engineer competence and not with a leadership competence.

**Decoupling by lack of relevance**

Another reason for decoupling the assessment was due to a more pragmatic concern. The managers received a huge number of questionnaires in their work, and they were not all considered equally important. As Ann described it:

To be honest, they tend to be postponed. I did not spend that much time on it; actually, I think they should be supportive of reflection. (Interview, Ann)

Decoupling by lack of relevance was not only a matter of lacking motivation to answer questionnaires but also a matter of frustration from lack of meaningfulness. In general the participants expressed that the assessment might be important to the system but not to their local practice. The following quote represents this issue:

[…] For example, questions like, do I remember the leadership vision by heart – no, I do not, so I probably looked it up […] You would be a rather poor leader if you replied no to the question “do you use the Fluidtech vision”. But I think they should make it much more
qualitative, say coaching for instance, I have used that, but when they ask about the last five meetings, then I’m not sure […] (Interview, Ann)

According to Ann the assessment did not capture the difficulty and messiness of her everyday practice and thus did not spur her reflection. Whereas the assessment suggested the ability to state the vision as important, the participants in general found it difficult to see the value of this ability in their everyday practice. In contrast, the participants accentuated the ability to translate the vision into something tangible for their employees to enable them to make sense out of it. In general, the interviewed managers were sceptical of the ability of the assessment tools to capture the effects of the programme. Several interviewees voiced this point, for instance, in the following quote: ‘To me, it seems like this assessment is more a kind of ‘brushing up on things’ than actually investigating the effects […]’ (Interview, Mark).

While many of the participants had suggestions on how to improve the design of the assessment, their qualitative descriptions of learning outcomes also illustrated the difficulty of capturing their experiences in questionnaire items. Ann described how she was inspired by a model presented in the programme, which she afterwards drew on a post-it and stuck on her computer. Every time she had a status meeting, she looked at it to make sure the model was at the top of her mind. This example illustrates the assessment tools’ difficulty in capturing the managers’ everyday leadership practice in a meaningful way. This lack of relevance made the managers less motivated to answer the questionnaire.

**Decoupling by conflicting demands and messiness**

Several of the managers also described how they experienced competing demands in the organization, which challenged the effects of the ‘S2L’ program:

> New requirements pop up all the time. I spend a lot of time on documentation, and this is the oscillation between management and leadership. In Fluidtech, they really want us to do leadership, which is great. However, as I am in a leadership position now, I am overwhelmed by management. We have to document on projects all the time; it started with three times, now it’s six times. (Interview, Mark)

This excerpt is illustrative: it shows how some participants voiced being positioned in a clash between an ideal of ‘leadership’ in the assessment and an everyday practice, which required much time spent on ‘management’ in relation to budgets and documentation. Hence, Mark concluded: ‘the world for
a manager is not black and white, it is shades of grey’. Although the assessment, so to speak, constructed leadership as something beyond management or administration, the managers also voiced how these aspects entwined in practice:

Administration is a necessity; if we do not do the administrative stuff, we have no proper data to lead from […] administration […] supports staff leadership. If we do not register our working hours, it will be difficult to manage, so it [proper data] must be used to support staff leadership. (Interview, Ann)

While the assessment of the S2L programme produced tensions with regard to leadership and everyday practice, a recent turn in the company strategy providing new KPIs and ‘must-win battles’ accentuated this tension. In general, the interviewees voiced and stressed the new KPIs, which included ‘behaviour’, as being supportive to becoming a ‘people leader’:

Now behaviour has become part of our must-win battles […] it has three dimensions: accountability, customer centricity and collaboration. Suddenly it is very much about our culture and our employees […] employee satisfaction has become a KPI […] the people part has moved up […] it [behaviour] is a must-win battle we have to focus on. (Interview, Ann)

The interviews showed how the managers’ everyday practice was mediated by not only multiple and often-competing performance demands but also different versions of leadership. The questions in the assessment did not capture this messiness and did not really make it possible for the managers to discern leadership. According to the participants, the assessment was not able to capture their actual everyday use of the content in the ‘S2L’ programme. Moreover, participants were unable to identify exclusively with the elements of leadership, which the assessment tools pinpointed as the essence of their managerial practice. Thus according to the interviewed managers, the assessment tools had neither been able to provoke reflection nor capture what they considered as the most important impact or learning from the programme.

In summary, our analysis describes how representations of learning can be constructed by the use of particular assessment tools. However, our analysis also illustrates how this representation of learning is contested. The ‘purified’ nature of the assessment indicated an orientation towards representation of learning that did not connect very well with the participants’ everyday practice. Hence, the learning indicated by the assessment was not really able to capture the messiness of the
everyday social practice that the participants were part of. These diverse modes of ordering subsist alongside each other producing ambiguous effects, which we will discuss in the following paragraph.

**Discussion**

This article shows an example of how assessment tools work and produce very different effects across diverse practices. We have built upon a performative approach towards assessment tools in leadership development and analysed how the assessment was enacted across diverse practices. We have argued that an ‘ordering by construction mode of construction’ and a ‘ordering by decoupling mode of decoupling’ could be inferred from our empirical material. This analysis advances discussions of the role of assessment tools in learning leadership. More specifically, it displaces the view of assessment as representational, moving towards assessment as performative and enacting a certain legitimate version of learning and leadership practice. Through our modes of ordering analysis, it becomes visible how forms of decoupling emerge as performative effects of the assessment. In the following, we will discuss the contributions that emanate from our empirical analysis concerning the use of assessment tools in consultant-led leadership development. The discussion section is divided into three parts. Firstly, we relate to the scarce amount of studies of assessment tools in leadership development (Hannum and Craig, 2010: 581), secondly, our analysis is related to discussions of identification

*Assessment tools and learning: Constructions and misfire*

The first contribution relates to studies focusing on how to assess consultant-led leadership development. These studies has led to a range of suggestions for methods to make a summative assessment and ‘represent’ the effects of leadership development. For instance, 360-degree evaluation (Tyson and Ward, 2004), quantitative frameworks (Black and Earnest, 2009, Militello and Benham, 2010, Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010) or coaching and self-assessment (Orvis and Ratwani, 2010). Using social science methods, most of these studies aim to discuss and represent the actual effects of leadership development (c.f. Hannum and Craig, 2010). Those studies rely on a correspondence theory of social reality where it is actually possible to capture the “real” effects or non-effects of consultant-led leadership development. In contrast, from a performative approach to assessment tools these not just represent their phenomena but always mediate and enact these phenomena into being, thereby intervening in them (Law, 2009, Hacking, 1983, 1995). The performative approach is a way of abandoning a correspondence theory to methods, which according to Law (1994: 26), also changes
the focus to what kinds of legitimate representations there exists within practice. In the case, we see this in the tension between the different modes of ordering. In Fluidtech the assessment had represented an unsatisfactory amount of learning from the program. The L&D manager took this very serious and argued that they could not turn their back to numbers. As Law (2009: 242) points out, is it fairly ‘easy and cheap to doubt unsubstantiated hypotheses. This happens routinely in conversation.’ In contrast, to question stronger constructions such as the assessment tool provided in the case is a much more difficult task. We see through the mode of construction how EVALconsult is very aware of this matter, when Peter present the system he describe rigorously how several elements are important to be able to account for learning. For instance, the ability to structure advanced enough content and the ability to present the questions in the right way. Obviously, this also comes with several costs to make such a representation. For instance, all the participant practices are treated as equal when they are given an equal multiple-choice question, which makes it more difficult to link to the leaders’ everyday practice. While the assessment tool constructs a learning representation into being (through its format), it is unable to convince the involved participants that this is actually a legitimate representation of their learning. To the interviewed managers the assessment enacts an ideal version of leadership, which is merely a matter of participating in an aspired leadership ‘community of discourse’ (Wenger 1998). Our analysis confirms an old argument made by Callon (1998a) that methodological framings, like an assessment, are likely to misfire as they produce overflow. This overflow produces participant decoupling in our case and hence becomes an important aspect of the issues of assessment worth interrogating.

**Performatve struggles and identification**

In continuation of the following section, our second focus relates to discussions of identification in leadership development. Researching leadership as a situated and social practice (Carroll and Levy, 2010, Mintzberg, 2009), offers another way of understanding what the assessment tool does. From this perspective identity, meaning and what counts as a legitimate definition of learning or leadership differs across practices. The assessment tool performs one legitimate account of learning, which requires a certain learning construction capable of validation, whereas the managers enact another account of legitimate learning. When the assessment tools in the ‘S2L’ programme tend to focus on leadership as a ‘purely’ human endeavour pushing materials, specialized knowledge, budgets and technology into the background it becomes hard to connect with for the participants. Echoing Fenwick (2009: 230); ‘the argument here is that our predominant conceptions guiding learning assessment
often fail to recognise aspects of practice and knowing that clearly are distributed, emergent, and rooted in material as well as social connections’.

Related to this line of thought it has been argued that leadership development is a matter of doing and undoing identity by letting go of an old identification, for instance as a professional, and constructing new identification, as a leader (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013, Carden and Callahan, 2007, Warhurst, 2012, Petriglieri, 2011). While this resonates very well with the whole intention of the S2L programme, our analysis makes us hesitate to argue that the participants actually undid that much of their identification or that it could be captured by the assessment. While the assessment indeed intentionally is shaping a certain leadership ideal, the interviewed managers displayed a tendency to decouple from this ideal. According to the interviewed participants, this was not only a matter of the content of the program, but they struggled to link their everyday practice to the assessment and the general questions asked. The everyday practice, which our participants found themselves embedded in, made it difficult to connect to the idealised picture presented in the assessment. As in the study of Nicholson and Carroll (2013), we observed struggles with identification; however, we also saw that the everyday practice of the managers proved as ‘stronger’ than the actual development programme, which resulted in a decoupling. The distributed social and material demands of everyday practice could not be captured by the assessment tool; neither could the new KPIs or must-win battles, which were formatively informing the everyday practice to a strong degree. Hence, the ideal version of leadership and learning performed by the assessment produced performative struggles, as it did not connect smoothly to the situated leadership practice. According to the assessment results, learning was lacking and according to the participants learning was happening — although not captured in the assessment questions. The attempt to engineer culture or regulate identity was challenged (Kunda, 2009, Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The participants were able to decouple their identification and indicate learning in one practice while not in another (Tanggaard, 2007a). An important aspect here is that this does not make the assessment, within the mode of construction, it still indicates a description of what the participants actually learned, which although proved to be less satisfactory. In contrast, had the assessment described a very successful learning it might still not generate a reality that link well to the participants’ practice (Law, 2009). The ability to relate the assessment with everyday practice requires a ‘fit’ or alignment between the practices (Law, 2009). Our case shows how the participants decouple by lack of fit across the practices. This makes it difficult to compare what was considered as a legitimate representation or account of learning to the participants and to the assessment tool. This accentuates the point that learning is not only a cognitive matter but also a
matter of acquiring identifications, which enable and constrain the learning impact. We do not stress this point to settle what genuine learning is, but to illustrate the troublesome performative effects that emerge from the tension between different forms of legitimate learning across practices.

**Assessment tools: good leadership or functional stupidity?**

Finally, our findings relate to recent discussions of a ‘stupidity-based-theory of organizations’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). What Alvesson and Spicer (2012: 1207) suggest is that organizations rely on ‘functional stupidity’, meaning an absence of deliberation, in order to function. The design of assessment tools could be argued to express an amount of functional stupidity. In our case, we see how the assessment is functional in the sense that it provides the HRD consultancy unit with documentation that defines a standard of best practice leadership. However, the assessment primarily makes the participants conform to the ideal of leadership while not encouraging much reflection and deliberation. The managers treated the assessment as important to ‘the organizational system’ in the sense of the HR department and program providers, which made the response mostly a matter of ‘ticking boxes’. The S2L assessments were not necessarily seen as important to the everyday work and careers of the managers as many other assessments or evaluations standards like KPIs or must-win-battles. Although the managers were critical towards the assessment, it was fulfilled as a way to accommodate the interest of the HR department and the HRD consultancy unit. We might question the need of such standardised forms of assessment. Tanggaard and Elmholdt (2008: 101) argue that they belong to ‘a normative evaluative paradigm’ that is characterised by control ‘based on objective assessment’. Accordingly, the assessment tools we have discussed in this article primarily work for higher-management to document managers’ learning outcomes. While this performative effect might be functional from a managerial administration and control point of view, we might ask if the ‘stupidity’ black boxed in these assessment tools is also functional for learning good leadership.

While we find the polemic ‘stupidity-based theory of organizations’ an interesting idea of organising, we are also sceptical towards this conclusion since it seems to assume the managers are devoid of ability to assert a critical attitude. The managers in our case expressed a concern that the assessment tools were not able to account for learning in the ‘S2L’ programme. Thus, a critical attitude was discernible as the managers decoupled the assessment. This finding relates to an already-repeated point about what counts as legitimate learning in a particular practice. As Nicolini (2013) illustrates, what is of importance is how practitioners assess something as learning or not learning. The same goes for good leadership: to describe if the S2L programme actually helped good leadership
underway becomes a matter of whether the practitioners assess the programme as producing a legitimate version of good leadership. While some of the practitioners did indeed describe this as the case, the assessment tool was unable to capture this messy accomplishment. Hence, our empirical study also shows how learning good leadership becomes a complex and entangled accomplishment entwined with definitions, practice and, indeed, assessment.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we set out to answer the question ‘what are the performative effects of assessment tools in measuring learning from consultant-led development work?’ Through our empirical analysis, we discerned two different modes of ordering as performative effects of assessment practice. The mode of ‘construction’ offered a view on learning leadership that resembled a cognitive-functionalist version and assembled learning by literally constructing it as a representation of numbers and graphs. Set against this mode of construction we analysed a mode of ‘decoupling’ among the participating managers, who displaced the positioning struggles evoked by the assessment tool by decoupling. Through this analysis, we are able to contribute to the scarcity of studies that ‘demonstrate the application’ of assessment tools (Hannum and Craig, 2010: 581). However, instead of advancing the repertoire of methods and assessment tools for capturing effects of consultant-led leadership development programs we have aimed at exploring what such tools actually perform in practice. By advancing a performative approach towards assessment and learning leadership, we are able to conclude on our initial question by describing how ordering by constructing representations of learning and ordering by ‘decoupling emerged as different performative effects of the assessment tool.

**Making consulting and leadership valueable by constructing representations of learning**

By raising a set of questions before and after the programme, the assessment tool was able to enact learning in numbers from the programme. The development effort indeed became ‘value-able’, so to speak, through the assessment. However, it is a particular representation of learning, which the assessment constructs. Learning becomes equivalent to what is measurable, and as such what is measurable demarcates what counts as effects of leadership development. By constructing a visual report with numbers and graphs representing learning the assessment benefits from the tendency to set store by what is written in text (Latour, 1986) and numbers (Verran, 2012). As we pointed out several times throughout the paper, assessment tools are potentially useful devices for legitimating or
debunking a leadership development programme. However, in this particular case, the visualised representations were not able to produce an overall convincing account; thus, the HRD consultancy unit started wondering about the potential overflow of the assessment with regard to managers’ learning. In the end, the assessment tool produced a controversy over whether the assessment tool was right or the S2L programme was right. It is exactly this controversy, which spurred this paper. We do not believe this to be only an idiosyncratic finding; rather we consider it an example of different versions of what count as legitimate versions of learning and in the end a legitimate argument. We argue breaching such controversies illustrates aspects of practical concern and theoretical interests to the question of how to learn leadership and even what leadership means.

**Ordering by decoupling**

The second performative effect primarily relates to the identity trials and struggles we observed in our analysis. We saw how the tension between the assessment tool and everyday practice resulted in participants decoupling the assessment and treated it merely as a ‘ticking box’ process, important to ‘the organizational system’ but ‘not important to me’. Our empirical case shows how the assessment performs an aspirational and ideal image of leadership, which the participants struggle to connect with. The managers do not perceive the assessment to be aligned with their situated leadership practice; hence, they neither consider it able to capture their actual learnings. Through the interviews the participants described how the S2L programme had afforded new learnings, but also how they not only struggled to make it work in their everyday practice but also to relate it to the assessment. This element underscores that methods do not produce equal performative effects in diverse practices. Rather what counts as learning through the assessment tool was not an accountable definition of learning from the program to the participants. While representations of learning and decoupling illustrate different performative effects of the assessment, we might also ask if studying assessment tools teaches us anything about how good leadership is learned. Indeed, an assessment tool is infused with normativity, which demarcates what counts as a legitimate definition of ‘good leadership’ and learning. Learning good leadership thus also becomes deeply entwined with how it is assessed and whether this is measured in numbers or qualitative descriptions. Learning good leadership hence becomes partially a matter of assessment in the sense that the assessment encapsulates a particular version of good leadership through its questioning. This version is, however, contestable and what counts as a legitimate definition of good leadership across different occupational communities is negotiable and likely to differ. We see this in the empirical case where the assessment promotes one
version and the managers consider another version of good leadership and learning, which did result in a mode of decoupling. In short, to account for learning leadership one has to settle on what count as learning and leadership in the first place.

These concluding remarks also relate to the limitations of our study. While our focus has been on a single case, one could argue that this is idiosyncratic, but as case study researchers have argued, issues of concern to many are often hidden in the small (Flyvbjerg, 2006, Quattrone, 2006). We consider our choice of case as relevant and the quantitative representational logic, which is visible in our case, seems to resemble a lingua franca in late economic life where impact often is to be accounted for in numbers. Further, we argue that studies at a micro-level are needed to reveal significant and even useful vocabularies with regard to how assessment tools or practices matter. We claim that our selection of materials is a condensation of some aspects of assessment, which goes beyond our single case. That said, we also acknowledge our study to be an effect of what appears to us in the study and we encourage further critical investigation of the role of assessment tools in leadership development. Hence, taking our study further, we imagine future studies could illustrate other aspects of how development efforts are assessed in practice, particularly with regard to how qualitative issues are turned into quantitative measures. Indeed, as Law (2009) argue, methods and assessment practices perform realities into being, and by asking what our methods do and how they are used we are also able to start questioning whether this is desirable or not. In other words, take into account how an assessment is (per)formative and examine how the assessment practice connect with the everyday practice of organization and management.

**Practical implications of the study**

Our empirical analysis also has implications for practitioners such as consultants and managers. While practitioners like researchers are calling for new ways of assessing and evaluating the effects of leadership development, many seem to neglect the performativity of the assessment tool. As our case shows, an assessment tool does not just measure learning, it literally constructs a certain version of good leadership and learning into being through its way of working and questioning. Accounting for learning effects becomes a matter of being aware of how goals and questions are aligned with the content and goal of the leadership development program and the participants’ everyday practice. A lack of alignment with everyday practice potentially spurs problems with identification to the assessed participants. In continuation of this, it seems relevant to consider whether assessing leadership
development is to promote legitimacy to the program providers, to support subjective learning or is used primarily as a management tool or something completely different. That said, a practical implication become how to relate to those kinds of measurements. Managers could critically consider how they choose to measure their HR activities and whether their ways providing evidence for their services support their development efforts.

On a more positive note, we see in our empirical analysis how an assessment tool literally constructs learning, which offers the opportunity to discipline or guide the development effort. Within the mode of construction, it appears essential to be aware of how one sets up goals and consider the consequences of the goals. In continuation of this, we have argued throughout the paper that assessment tools are not innocent since they enact realities into being by intervening. An assessment or evaluation tool take part in shaping reality and guide the informant towards what is of importance. Hence, it seems vital as a practitioner to consider whether these assessments are supporting an aspired behavior and learning. Besides these tentative practical implications, I will end this discussion with asking a few more questions worth considering as a practitioner. Quantitative measures or evaluations usually rely on the premise that ‘what count can be counted’, however, what if ‘not everything that counts can be counted’ where does it place us? By raising the questions, the point is not to stop making assessments or evaluations, indeed, we engage in assessment practices every day. The point is rather to start considering what kinds of practical realities we focus on by the use of certain assessment tools.

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CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The “great” process consultant?
To engage, one must be capable of enthusiasm. Furthermore, given that the project is a complex, uncertain process, which cannot be confined within the limits of invariably incomplete contracts, one must know how to trust those with whom connections are formed – connections that are destined to develop as the project develops […] Far from being attached to an occupation or clinging to a qualification, the great man proves adaptable and flexible, able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and versatile, capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered into with others or with objects […] Plans and strategies would diminish their capacity for local action. But they know how to take full advantage of each situation in its uniqueness. For the same reasons they appear spontaneous, in contrast to strategists, whose maneuvers are overly conspicuous, and frighten people […] the great man is a 'plunderer of ideas' (Serieyx, 1993). For that, he must possess intuition and talent (in the sense in which we speak of an artist's talent) […] He knows how to listen, to give answers that are to the point, to echo people, to ask good questions […] Basically, they [good men] have 'a good manner with people […] [But] they are not only those who know how to engage, but also those who are able to engage others, to offer involvement, to make it desirable to follow them, because they inspire trust, they are charismatic, their vision generates enthusiasm […] They are not (hierarchical) bosses, but integrators, facilitators, an inspiration, unifiers of energies, enhancers of life, meaning and autonomy. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, 112-115).

During my observations at the hospital a range of things troubled my empirical work. One of the programs that I was following (chapter 3) broke down, another was postponed and a new program emerged (chapter 4). At one of my meetings in the HR consultancy unit at the hospital, we discussed all these changes and how nothing was going like we thought at the outset, here is what one of the consultants said: […] I believe all these changes, tells one important thing about consulting, one is required constant flexibility, we have to be able to accommodate changing needs and new agendas, which happens all the time mostly unexpected […] (field notes, meeting HR consultancy unit, November, 2013). This description along the introductory quote of Boltanski and Chiapello (1999)
of ‘the great man’ in the ‘connectionist world’, to some extend resemble what I believe this dissertation is showing regarding requirements of legitimate consulting performance. Through each chapter I have shown aspects of what kind of tools, concepts and practical maneuvers the consultants mobilize to interest their clients and accomplish a legitimate performance.

The inquiry into the consultant-client nexus is now at a concluding stage and it is time to revisit the research questions I raised in the introduction. The questions I raised were ‘how does process consulting becomes legitimate in practice?’ And, ‘what is the role of tools and concepts in accomplishing this kind of work and in connecting to the client practice’? By raising those two questions I have engaged with questions, which are central to critical consulting studies, namely questions of legitimacy and the role of process consulting. To describe my contributions through these questions the rest of the chapter proceeds as follows. After a summary of the contributions from the individual papers, I will bring it all together in a general discussion of the theoretical contributions of the dissertation. It then follows how the dissertation contributes to practitioners and professionals alike. The chapter ends with a discussion of limitations and directions for future research.

Contributions from chapters

In the following I provide a summary of the main contributions from each chapter to the research questions raised. The papers also provide specific theoretical contributions beyond the overall research questions, which I will shortly notice as well.

**Chapter 3 (first paper)**

The paper empirically explored how the group of internal consultants at the hospital mobilized the leadership development program at a medical department. I proposed a legitimacy inversion in the paper, thus I studied legitimacy as a result of the enrollment of allies to the leadership program and as a matter of being able the handle requirements from principals, while needing to address more specific client concerns. Although the process ended with only limited anticipated outcomes, the process provided an illustration of how legitimacy gradually changed during the process. Hence, the leadership development program was gradually overtaken by the client, which in the end excluded the consultants from the process. By suggesting analyzing legitimacy as a performative accomplishment, and by illustrating how a knowledge fit made it difficult for the consultants to accomplish their work, the paper adds to the existing literature on the role of legitimacy in consultancy
work (Wylie et al. 2014, Czarniawska, 2001, Sturdy et al., 2009, Wright, 2009). Subsequently, the paper adds to recent discussions of a bottom-up perspective on legitimacy (Bitektine & Haack, 2014; Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Reay et al., 2006) by illustrating how legitimacy constantly is translated and cannot only be understood through ideal logical types. Finally, as the paper is situated in a health care and public sector context, the paper illustrates the tensions of intervening in a professional and managerial field. It illustrates how the consultants were attached to an agenda of professionalization of management, which became problematic to them.

**Chapter 4 (second paper)**

This paper investigated how a simulation tool was deployed in the work of the consultants. The paper showed a close-up study of how the tool and the physical configuration of the room, worked as a ‘human technology’ that bracketed reality into something amenable for change. The main theoretical implications of the paper relates to discussions of the politics of process consulting interventions (Smolovic Jones et al. 2015, Sturdy, 2009, Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). While Smolovic Jones et al. (2015) illustrate how consultants shape practice through language; we add with a study on how tools help them do so. We approach the place of the intervention through a Lewin and Gibson inspired concept of atmospheric affordances. Compared to previous studies, we argue that the physical configuration of the room, the tools and discursive interventions of the consultant enable a literal atmospheric framing of the intervention. This framing is political, we argue, since it enacts a certain version of development and learning, which the consultant is able to partially control. Through the concept of atmospheric affordances, the paper adds to discussions of the liminal character of consultancy interventions (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003).

**Chapter 5 (third paper)**

The third paper relates to the previous as it focuses on the widespread use of theories and concepts in public sector organizations often promoted through consultancies (Ferlie et al. 2015). Through the example of the concept of ‘the core task’, the paper illustrates how a concept worked as a legitimating vehicle in the consulting process. The main theoretical contributions of this paper relates to recent discussions of the role of theories and concepts in developing public sector organization (Ratner, 2012, 2013). Subsequently it adds to discussions of singular conceptualizations of value(s) (West & Davis, 2011, p. 227) and task(s) in public sector organization (Hoggett, 2006; Vikkelsø, 2014). I argue in the paper that the core task concept could be considered as both an affectual and perceptual device,
which provokes tensions between actual and ideal organization. This challenges previous description of consultancy work, as it obscure the distinction between a ‘logic of representation’ and a ‘logic of practice’ (Czarniawska, 2001, Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012).

**Chapter 6 (fourth paper)**

This paper relates to paper 2, however, it engages with another aspect of tools in consultancy work, namely assessment tools. It illustrates an attempt from an internal HR consultancy unit in a large private corporation to assess the learning from a leadership development program led by an external international management consultancy. The assessment was conducted by yet another external management consultancy, which we, in the paper primarily focus on. The main theoretical contribution of the paper relates to recent discussions of the impact of consultant-led leadership development (Blume et al., 2010; Hannum & Craig, 2010). By drawing on social studies of the performativity methods we contribute to this kind of literature, by illustrating how methods draw demarcations of what count as ‘good leadership’, ‘learning’ and hence the impact of consultancy work. This contributes to discussions of the politics of management learning (Sturdy, 2009), and also with an example of how development work is made (i)relevant or (il)legitimate in contemporary organizations.

Those individual and specific theoretical contributions from each paper add to the general contribution of the dissertation, which relates the articles specifically to the overall research questions.

**General contributions of the dissertation**

By questioning ‘how process consulting becomes legitimate in practice’ and, ‘what the role of tools and concepts are in accomplishing this kind of work and connecting to the client practice’, I have attempted to address current omissions in the critical academic literature. The general contribution is threefold. Firstly I will relate the findings to current discussions in critical consulting studies and/or critical management studies (CMS), secondly to politics of researching and consulting processes, and finally I will address the general contribution to discussions of performativity in organization studies.
Critical consulting studies

Through my empirical engagement, this dissertation has addressed two aspects of the critical consulting literature, which has been largely omitted, namely practice based studies and interrogations of process consulting (e.g. Sturdy, 2011, 2012, Nikolova et al. 2013). By referring Clegg et al. (2007) and Butler (2010), Sturdy (2011: 524) argues, that ‘process consultancy appears to be redefining itself as explicitly distinct from management consultancy, as ‘business coaching’. This argument seems to be partially confirmed in my study, although ‘business coaching’ also tends to be related more to one-to-one sessions (e.g. Nikolova et al. 2013). As my review indicated (chapter 1) the process consultants I followed could also be related to other “marginal” and under researched consulting positions such as consulting inspired by social constructionism (e.g. Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012) and systemic consulting (Seidl and Mohe, 2009, 2011). As Schein (1988, 12) argues process consulting is working from the ‘assumption that all organizational problems are fundamentally problems involving human interactions and processes’. As already argued in chapter 1 Schein (1988, 2008) emphasizes the importance of communication and the psycho-dynamics of the consultant-client relationship in order to address organizational problems. Although questions of legitimacy, effects and the value of consulting have been essential to critical consulting studies (Salaman, 2001, Fincham, 1999), these are largely omitted from the work of Schein. Contrary, as already mentioned several times, the critical literature often includes institutional variables, when it explains how consultants achieve legitimacy. This difference and omission spurred the research questions.

By being positioned in the nexus of consultant and client practices, I have aimed to address the overall research questions, not solely from a consultant position, but allowed myself to ‘follow the actors’ at different sites. I argue that in order to understand, how a legitimate process consulting performance is accomplished we have to take various actors into account. This has been exemplified through the enrollment of a range of organizational actors (chapter 3), tools (chapter 4) concepts and theories (chapter 5) and evaluations (chapter 6). My ambition was inspired by the suggestions from Salaman (2001) to investigate the apparatus, which make the consultant legitimate. This practice based understanding of legitimacy, allowed me to describe legitimacy as an ‘ongoing accomplishment’. I believe Dewey, once again, can be used with a nice analogy in his description of values as embedded in practice:
Calling the thing a value is like calling a ball struck in baseball, a hit or a foul. Verbally the usage may save a long explanation. But while in discussing baseball a sense of the concrete context will save one from making independent entities out of hits and fouls, discussion of the theory of values and goods, whether moral or esthetic, manifests a tendency to forget the concrete things to which the value-quality is attached (Dewey, 1923: 617, see also Muniesa, 2011:25).

This way of conceptualizing value as embedded in concrete practices is closely related to how I suggest grasping legitimacy in consultancy work. It spurs empirical sensitivity towards observing legitimacy as embedded in mundane objects, flip-overs, management figures, human technologies, concepts, language etc., which produces atmospheres of development, hope and provokes and brackets organization into something amenable for intervention. In other words instead of suggesting legitimacy to be derived either from unmediated exogenous actors or the ‘pure’ consultant-client relationship I would argue that it is a constant enactment. Legitimacy is in other words always an effect of a translation or ‘appropriation’ of an object (Latour, 1986).

Illustrating how process consultancy not only relies on dialogic or emotional abilities, opens up new opportunities for inquiry, since it adds empirical studies of ‘things’, ‘concepts’, ‘tools’ and ‘technologies’ to the existing literature. Further, the practice-based view also allows an interest in how these aspects are considered in consultancy practice, which leads to the next contribution.

**The politics of researching and consulting practice**

It simultaneously has a high moral tone, if only because it is a normative literature stating what should be the case, not what is the case. Consequently, we may legitimately pose the question of the realism of this literature, and hence how believable it is when it comes to what ‘really’ happens in firms. And it is true that, although they are usually packed with numerous examples and based on case studies, management texts cannot replace survey materials, whether monographs on firms or statistical surveys. They make no claim to be exhaustive. Their orientation is not constative, but prescriptive. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 58)

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From a more psychological position, my orientation would follow many contemporary cultural and social psychologists, who like Latour (2013: 193) and Dewey argues that the distinction between interior and exterior should be broken down.
The quote of Boltanski and Chiapello, illustrate a concern with how management texts, and consultancy work I would add, address real problems or if just hopeful prescriptive rhetoric. Process consulting often claims an ambition of client learning as the end product, thus being able to signal that learning becomes an important aspect of process consulting. This is visible in paper 4, where the internal consultancy unit attempts to assess the learning impact by numbers, and hence be able to signal some valuable effects. It is indeed also visible in paper 2, where the consultant also emphasizes learning as an important aspect of the consultant process. This ambition is also visible in the literature on process consulting. For instance, Lambrechts et al. (2009: 56) argue: ‘There is, in present-day organizations, a high need for relational work internally with collaborating units and externally with a variety of stakeholders. A relational practice perspective may open new possibilities to connect consulting interventions with a turbulent and complex organizational context’. Lambrechts et al. (2009) present a social- or ‘relational constructionist’ view, which reflects an inter-subjective reality construction as an alternative to more cognitively and emotionally oriented approaches in PC. This statement is obviously hard to be against, and neither should it be an ambition to be against things, to do research. Nevertheless it gives rise to a few questions, particularly following Sturdy’s (2009, 461) encouragement ‘to develop new political research agendas’. Since what are the politics of process consulting? Process consulting is part of defining what help and learning mean and also what count as learning. I believe such questions, can be closely related to how process consulting become legitimate, but also to what it means to research this kind of consultancy work.

When Dewey introduced the term ‘transaction’ (Dewey and Bentley, 1960: 131), he contrasted it with interaction. It is a rather specific term, but illustrates how an object changes as one is intervening in it, the object neither exists apart from observation nor ‘in a man’s head’. Schön (1983) deployed this term in his studies that developed his theory of reflection-in-action, which among other things also involved consulting and management. He uses the concept to emphasize how a situation is shaped by a model, which is also shaped in return by the situation. This nuances the argument of Schein, who also suggest s every act is an intervention, but what does this mean to process consulting and to researching process consulting? Even though the felicity conditions for a successful consulting practice is rather different than the felicity condition within the mode of scientific practice (see Latour, 2013), I believe also the processes entwine in the research process. STS scholar Casper Bruun Jensen (2007) provides a helpful description, when he speaks of ‘sorting attachments’. He argues: ‘Sorting attachments, thus, refers to the processes through which researchers, by affinity or implication, become tethered to institutional and political ‘machines’, which may be quite different from their own
but nevertheless shape their research questions, methods and conclusions in multiple ways’. The idea of being ‘attached’ and ‘tethered to institutional or political’ machines, indeed is also part of both researching process consulting and conducting consulting, since this practice as well has a range of practical attachments. These might become visible through certain activities or descriptions. By representing practice, which as well is done by the researcher as the consultant, one becomes involved in doing politics of practice. As Mol argue […] the term politics works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested’ (Mol, 1999: 75). I believe thinking in politics in this performative approach, provides interesting territory for further description.

Apart from the theoretical contributions addressed above, my dissertation has implications for consultancy practice as well. First of all as touched upon in chapter 1 there has been a tendency to approach process consultancy inclusive other soft consultant technologies rather un-critically. In other words it is hard to be against something that is articulated as having as its most important aim to help other people. However, as raised above such a practice also gets involved in politics as all kinds of consultancy, the question might be, what are the politics of process consulting? How come is this kind of consulting particularly able to provoke learning? Such questions, I believe would be of relevance to organizations and consulting professionals alike. Finally, has the concrete empirical descriptions also provided insight into the practice of consulting, which can be off relevance to students at business schools and management departments. The practice based approach to consulting could be expanded elsewhere, as indeed is the agenda of the turn to practice.

References


