

# BETWEEN INNOVATION AND LEGITIMATION – BOUNDARIES AND KNOWLEDGE FLOW IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY

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## ABSTRACT

Management consultancy is seen by many as a key agent in the adoption of new management ideas and practices in organisations. Two contrasting views are dominant – consultants as *innovators*, bringing new knowledge to their clients, or as *legitimizing* client knowledge. Those few studies which examine directly the flow of knowledge through consultancy in projects with clients favour the innovator view and highlight the important analytical and practical value of boundaries – consultants as both knowledge and organisational *outsiders*. Likewise, in the legitimator view, the consultants' role is seen in terms of the primacy of the organisational boundary. By drawing on a wider social science literature on boundaries and studies of inter-organisational knowledge flow and management consultancy more generally, this polarity is seen as problematic, especially at the level of the consulting project. An alternative framework of boundary relations is developed and presented which incorporates their multiplicity, dynamism and situational specificity. This points to a greater complexity and variability in knowledge flow and its potential than is currently recognised. This is significant not only in terms of our understanding of management consultancy and inter-organisational knowledge dynamics and boundaries, but of a critical understanding of the role of management consultancy more generally.

**Key words:** management consultancy, knowledge, innovation, legitimation, boundaries.

## CONSULTANCY AS INNOVATION OR LEGITIMATION?

There is now a substantial managerial literature on the economic importance of knowledge to organisations (Argote et al 2003) much of which emphasises the role of bringing new knowledge into organisations from the outside to instill or help create new practices (Haas, 2006). Management consultants are often placed at the forefront of these activities given the scale of their activities in many economies (Kipping and Engwall, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. This is not only evident in consulting-based literature (Clegg et al, 2004), but also in critical studies of contemporary capitalism. Here, consultants are presented as the shock troops of the new age – the ‘generator and distributor of new knowledge’, as ‘capitalism’s commissars’ (Thrift, 2005:35; 93). Likewise, more popular critical accounts or exposes present consultants as skilled promoters of new management fashions which, when implemented, rationalise away jobs and firms (O’Shea and Madigan, 1998). Both perspectives echo the traditional notion of consultants as outsiders with new knowledge or expertise. As McKenna recently argued:

*‘Whether in computer systems, strategic counsel, organisational design, or corporate acquisitions, management consulting firms have become, and continue to be, a crucial institutional solution to executives’ ongoing need for outside information’ (2006: 78)*

Indeed, McKenna describes consultants as ‘pre-eminent knowledge brokers’ on the basis of their ‘status as outsiders’ and the ‘economies of knowledge’ this brings compared to insiders – they ‘have flourished primarily because they have remained *outside the traditional boundaries of the firm*’ (2006: 12-16, emphasis added). Such a view is founded largely on transaction cost economics (Armbrüster, 2006: 54), but is

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<sup>1</sup> Internal consultants are not considered in this study nor are consultants on secondment, interim managers or specialist contract staff or ‘extras’.

evident more generally. Here, consultants bring from the outside either technical, experiential or process (ie facilitation) expertise or, simply, a fresh 'external' view (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Schien, 1969)<sup>2</sup>. For example, Armbrüster notes how the work of consultants is based 'other types of expertise than (that of) clients' (2006:52). Likewise, Gammelsaeter (2002:222) suggests that:

*'consultants as carriers of knowledge are generally embedded in contexts that are external to the organization, whereas the management they interact with is embedded in internal organization'.*

Here then, consultants are cosmopolitans and part of a broader knowledge industry whereby management ideas are appropriated or developed and then introduced to clients who, to varying degrees, adopt them as new approaches through various isomorphic processes (e.g. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The view of consultants as expert outsiders is even reflected in those studies which are more sceptical of the robustness of consulting knowledge or of its straightforward adoption by clients (Brindle and Stearns, 2001). Here, consultancy is seen more as a system of expert persuasion or rhetoric (Clark, 1995), dealing in new, largely ambiguous knowledge (Alvesson, 2004) which is deployed to appeal to the existential and related anxieties of clients (Sturdy, 1997a). Even if adoption is seen as largely token or 'ceremonial', it still provides clients with a new language or discourse of management (Kostova and Roth 2002; Gronn, 1983).

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<sup>2</sup> Werr and Stjernberg (2003) set out three core types of consultant knowledge of varying levels of tacitness/explicitness and specificity to context which they bring to clients - experience, methods (abstract 'road maps') and cases. Similarly, Kitay and Wright (2003) distinguish 'esoteric' (e.g. strategy) or 'technical' (e.g. surveys, packages) knowledge.

While most studies of consultancy make claims and/or exhibit assumptions about knowledge transfer or, more accurately, translation or flow (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002), there has been very little research which has focused directly on this (Tagliaventi and Mattarelli, 2006: 292). The few studies which do so are largely consistent in reproducing the view of consultants as expert and/or 'objective' outsiders (Semadeni, 2001: 55). This is reflected in a degree of consensus over what is seen as the inherently problematic or double-edged nature of the knowledge flow process – the knowledge and organisational boundary. Firstly, consultants' value is based on their outsider status. For example, Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001) see consultants' 'marginality' as the necessary contribution they bring to organisational learning in terms of new knowledge – the '*strength of weak ties*'. However and secondly, others draw attention to the problems that consultants' outsider status brings. Kipping and Armbrüster (2002) for example, focus on what they describe as the '*burden of otherness*' faced by consultants and the resulting client resistance. Here, it is the contrasting or new knowledge bases – the knowledge boundary - which is seen as 'primary' in explaining the consultants' 'burden' and their failure to communicate meaningfully with clients and effect lasting change. Their knowledge is *too new* (Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002:221; Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002: 108). Likewise, others point to the problem of a lack of a shared frame of reference or common language (Semadeni, 2001:48; Lahti and Beyerlein, 2000; Kieser, 2002).

The dominance of this conventional, innovator view of consultants is acknowledged in Armbrüster's recent study. He identifies two broad perspectives – the functionalist and the critical – whereby the former is seen as portraying consultants as 'carriers and transmitters of management knowledge' (2006: 2). He suggests that the 'critical' literature has a much broader view of what consultancy is all about. This is only partly

true for, as we have seen, some critical or sceptical accounts also conform to the conventional view, even if they have a different position on the desirability or coherence of consulting knowledge. Nevertheless, he is correct to point to a smaller set of studies within a more 'micro-political' tradition which reflects an alternative perspective on consultancy and its role in organisational innovation (Jackall, 1986; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995). Here, emphasis is given to the *legitimation* of existing client knowledge rather than bringing new or innovative expertise (Saint-Martin, 2004).

This is a familiar and popular criticism of consultants (O'Shea and Madigan, 1998), but it can also be seen in a more formal sense to lessen client exposure to corporate liability claims (McKenna, 2006:230). More generally however, the legitimating role of consultancy usage (and expenditure) informally helps to ensure change projects are initiated and progressed (Sturdy, 1997a) or serves a signaling function to financial and other stakeholders and their agents (Armbrüster, 2006). Once again, the organisational boundary is crucial. It is consultants' status as *organisational* outsiders, as 'independent' of the organisation which is key here, along with the *perception* of expertise, based on the brand of the firm and status of its clients (Gluckler and Armbruster, 2003). In the legitimator view then, consultants are fundamentally conservative, rather than innovative, in terms of the knowledge they bring to clients.

In practice, things are not quite so polarised or simple. Firstly, consultants may both innovate *and* legitimate - bringing new knowledge which is given legitimacy on the basis of consultants' outsider status. This is illustrated by the problems often experienced by *internal* consultants who struggle to introduce new ideas as a result of their status as organisational insiders (Sturdy and Wright, 2006). Secondly, consulting roles vary between projects (Tisdall, 1982). For example, a recent UK study of consultancy use

showed how 'knowledge transfer' was rarely an explicit or important formal objective for clients (NAO, 2006). This does not mean that knowledge flow does not occur. Indeed, in all but the most extreme cases of legitimisation (where simple approval is sought with minimal client-consultant interaction), one can assume some potential, at least, for knowledge flow between parties, even if only in terms of a new language. But this does not fit with the images of consultants as either innovators or legitimators. Rather, the outcome can be somewhere between innovation and legitimisation. Given such complexities, how can we better conceptualise knowledge flow processes or potential in consultancy projects and what does this mean for a broader analysis of the role of consultants?

In order to address this question, we seek insights from studies of knowledge flow across organisational boundaries more generally and apply these to the specific context of management consultancy by drawing on and developing studies of consulting projects and relations. More specifically, the article is organised in the following way. Firstly, we introduce the concept of boundaries in social science and organisations before examining organisational boundaries and knowledge flow. Here, we outline three basic interrelated boundary types – physical, cultural and political – and associated dynamics and contexts such as the liminal condition of lying in between boundaries. We then explore these phenomena within the dynamic and political contexts of management consultancy projects paying particular attention to a multiplicity of knowledge domains, actors and roles. This analysis is followed by a discussion where a basic framework of the potential for knowledge flow in consultancy projects is set out. This not only incorporates the dominant innovator and legitimator views of consultancy, but also intermediate positions as well as recognising the heterogeneity, complexity and

dynamism which often characterises consultancy. Finally, some broader implications of this analysis for a critical understanding of management consultancy are outlined.

## **COMPLEX BOUNDARIES AND KNOWLEDGE FLOWS**

The two main views of consultancy and knowledge – innovator and legitimator - provide a starting point for developing a conceptual framework of knowledge flow and client-consultant relations in projects. Each view points to the centrality of boundaries in knowledge processes. For innovation, differences in knowledge and formal organisational affiliation are seen as both prerequisites and potential barriers or 'burdens' while for legitimisation, it is organisational distance which is seen as primary in asserting political interests. However, even superficially, there remains considerable scope for developing these conceptions so as to allow for empirical variations and dynamism in boundary relations and for a less unitary or homogeneous view of organisations. Such limitations become even more evident when one considers the considerable and growing literature on boundaries, organisations and inter-organisational knowledge flow.

The concept of boundaries has received renewed attention in recent years particularly in the context of organisational boundaries which, it is sometimes claimed, are becoming increasingly fluid, elusive, shifting and porous with the advent of post-bureaucracy, post-modernity and globalisation for example. However, such epochalism, as Hernes and Paulsen point out, is countered by the fact that boundaries have long 'been elusive and complex phenomena' (2003:8). Instead, such developments might be better seen in terms of our coming to understand things in more processual ways - a world of flux and flow - alongside empirical changes in which boundaries, such as that between home and work are *felt* to be more important or dynamic. In short, a confusion arises from seeing

boundaries simply as things rather than more or less conscious structuring processes - as demarcations of social structure in action - social *structuring* (Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005). This view conforms to that of boundaries as 'part of the classical conceptual toolkit of the social sciences' because the idea 'captures a fundamental social process, that of relationality' (Lamont and Molnar, 2002:167, 169). Boundaries can also have a symbolic quality which emotionally separates, unites or alienates. Thus, they can be seen as a way of expressing the constructions produced through perceiving or experiencing *identity* (what something is, such as an organisation or knowledge), *difference* (from something else) and some *intention* (desire or thought) of reducing or maintaining that difference such that implied by concerns with knowledge flow across organisational boundaries (Wenger, 1998; Becker, 1963).

Sociological conceptions of boundaries tend to emphasise the structural multiplicity, complexity and dynamism of social contexts (Heracleous, 2004) which gives rise to a variety of shifting identities and insider/outsider boundary relations. This has a long tradition. For example, Merton argued that:

*'individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives. .... they typically confront one another **simultaneously as Insiders and Outsiders.**'* (1972: 22, emphasis added)

The implication of this heterogeneity for Merton was that boundaries are relatively permeable and that some form of knowledge flow or, in his terms, 'intellectual exchange' is therefore an inevitable outcome of interaction (ibid: 37). Many more recent observers have described work organisations as similarly heterogeneous and permeable,



particularly with regard to identities and roles (Whittington, 1992; Parker, 1995) and shifting relations between paid work and everyday life (Hochschild, 1997). However, in organisation studies the tendency to portray organisations as homogenous, isolated and rational-legal actors would see employees as simply agents of organisational objectives (Marchington and Vincent, 2004). Indeed, a similar criticism can be made of the accounts of knowledge flow in consultancy relations discussed above where the *organisational* form of the insider-outsider relation is central and the consultant's *organisational* outsider status is seen as the basis of his/her expertise and legitimation potential in relation to the client organisation.

By contrast, organisational research which focuses specifically on boundaries tends to set out typologies of various physical, cultural and political boundaries. Santos and Eisenhardt for example, outline additional organisational boundaries of competence (or knowledge), identity (cognition/emotion) and power or influence (2005). Similarly, Hernes (2004) sets out: 'physical' boundaries such as electronic communications; 'social' boundaries of identity and belonging; and 'mental' boundaries in the sense of ideas important to particular groups. Such typologies are useful but require a recognition of the interrelatedness of boundary forms. For example, the physical is also social and 'mental' (Lefebvre, 1991) in that work spaces are typically of human design and can be experienced very differently. Similarly, power is inherent in all forms of boundary, not simply in terms of influence, but broader dependencies. Simply drawing boundaries is political in that it includes and excludes actors or 'valorizes some point of view and silences another' (Bowker and Star, 1999: 5). However, in order to avoid overly deterministic analysis, our approach follows that of Hernes (2004) and others (e.g. Nippert-Eng, 2003) in their attention to the enabling and constraining consequences of boundaries. In keeping with Merton's view above, diversity and complexity are key

features (Orlikowski, 2002). Boundaries thus become composite (ie multiple sets of varying strength, substance and form) and 'are constantly subject to construction and reconstruction... (but this) does not prevent some boundaries from being relatively stable' in a given historical or situational context (Hernes, 2004:10), the employment relationship or consulting projects for example.

### **Boundaries and knowledge flow**

Following Merton (1972) above, boundaries represent a *necessary condition for knowledge flow*. Even at the commonsense level, where else would *new* knowledge come from? But this is only part of the story. The notion of knowledge as socially embedded – how it is either rooted in specific contexts or constituted by those contexts - suggests that boundaries between contexts are integral to understanding knowledge flow. In the first, more structural and static view, the embedded nature of knowledge, its 'stickiness', makes it difficult to tease out and travel to new contexts, but it can be done (Szulanski, 2003). In the second, more action-oriented and dynamic view (Orlikowski, 2002), knowledge is not *in* context but made by the context so knowledge *cannot* be transferred or moved. Rather, new contexts (and knowledge) are constructed through interaction or practice and knowledge is translated or, in a metaphorical sense, it *flows*. If that practice is structured by boundaries, then they become both a condition and/or barrier to, learning *according to context/s*. They serve to represent the shifting contours of embeddedness.

These issues and perspectives lie at the heart of what has become a key area of study - inter-organisational learning or knowledge 'transfer'. In setting out what are considered important boundaries and issues in the field, we now briefly explore this literature (e.g. Nooteboom, 2004; Szulanski, 2003; Orlikowski, 2002; Carlile, 2004). Drawing on the

boundary dimensions and typologies discussed above, we develop a classification of *physical*, *cultural* and *political* boundaries in relation to knowledge flow. At the same time, we point to some of the interrelationships between these boundary classifications and, importantly, to the notion of shades of grey, varying strength and temporality through the concepts of cognitive distance and liminality.

### ***Physical boundaries***

Knowledge flow is enabled or constrained by physical/technological arrangements which allow or present a barrier to interaction, communication (Szulanski, 2003) or basic information ‘transfer’ (Carlile, 2004). This includes architecture and various boundary objects including human agents which shape the traditional socio-metric dimensions of the frequency, duration, stability and direction of interactions (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). As with all boundaries, attention should be given to power. This is evident in a number of respects, such as the design of technology and space, but also, more crudely in terms of dis/empowering through physical ex/inclusion from interaction (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Furthermore, the social nature of space means that ‘operational proximity’, in a co-located project team for example, by no means guarantees knowledge flow, but it can help generate socio-emotional identification and dis-identification, to which we now turn.

### ***Cultural (cognitive/emotional) boundaries***

Cultural boundaries are complex phenomena. In the context of knowledge flow however, two key interrelated dimensions are evident – cognitive and emotional. This is illustrated through the notions of *cognitive distance* (Nooteboom et al, 2007) or differences in knowledge, and what Wenger (1998) describes as ‘*economies of meaning*’ – the sense of ownership or identity individuals attach to knowledge.

### *Cognitive distance and 'redundant knowledge'*

Despite the label, Nooteboom et al's (2007) notion of *cognitive* distance between parties is inherently social, akin to what Carlile (2004) describes as different meanings, knowledge domains or 'semantic boundaries'. Here, wholly shared knowledge bases (too little cognitive distance) implies that there is no boundary or potential for knowledge flow, while too great a distance presents a barrier to shared understanding. In other words, in contrast to the claims of the consultancy literature, it is not simply a zero-sum question of knowledge differences being simultaneously a strength and burden. Rather, some 'otherness' is essential for learning, *but not too much* (also Simmel, 1950). This gradation, or in more functional terms, *optimum*, can be compared to Szulanski's 'absorptive capacity' in the sense of having a 'stock of *prior-related* knowledge' as a prerequisite for using 'outside sources of knowledge' (2003:29). However, others point to variations in this balance in cultural boundaries consistent with the *exploration* or development of new knowledge or the *exploitation* of existing knowledge (March, 1991; Holmqvist, 2003).

Here, the weak ties and alien knowledge associated with the 'consultant as outsider' view potentially facilitate innovation or 'exploration' (as well as allowing the basic exchange of explicit or simple knowledge). But, this does not simply bring a simultaneous dilemma or 'burden'. Rather, the limitations are more specific in that they hinder the exchange of more embedded/tacit/complex knowledge and exploiting existing knowledge. For these purposes, it is argued that less cognitive distance (ie more cultural closeness) is needed (Sorenson et al, 2006). Thus, we now have a more complex view of knowledge flow potential, moving away from the simple tension of the simultaneous strength and burden of otherness towards the notion of an intermediate level of cognitive

distance which varies depending on the type of knowledge/process involved (see Table 1).

COGNITIVE DISTANCE (‘OTHERNESS’)	KNOWLEDGE RELATIONSHIP POTENTIAL
Relatively high	Exploration (and exchange of explicit or simple knowledge)
Relatively low	Exploitation (and exchange of both explicit and embedded/tacit knowledge)

Table 1 Cognitive Distance and Knowledge Processes (adapted from Holmqvist, 2003; Nooteboom, 2004; Hansen, 1999)

In addition, shared understandings in one knowledge domain may serve as a resource or learning bridge in other knowledge domains by virtue of helping to establish an emotional connection or ‘intimacy’ in personal relationships (Szulanski, 2003). The bridging effect claimed for this ‘redundant’ knowledge (Nonaka, 1994) can be complemented by social similarities between actors, derived from common social and cultural backgrounds - ‘characteristic-based’ trust (Zucker, 1986). In the context of consultancy, this translates directly to the importance of actively fostering through recruitment and ‘relationship management’ shared social characteristics, personal relationships and, as noted earlier, a domain of common language (Gluckler and Armbruster, 2003; Semadeni, 2001).

#### *Economies of meaning - the repulsion and attraction of outsider knowledge*

The potential for shared social characteristics and understandings to facilitate the flow of (not too) new knowledge is clearly more than a purely cognitive issue. Following long traditions in social identity theory, it relates to the emotions of belonging and in/out group identification. Crudely speaking, the value and knowledge of the in-group are elevated while those of the out-group/s are denigrated and blocked (Paulsen, 2003) - the ‘not invented here’ (NIH) syndrome (Katz and Allen, 1982). Some caution is needed here

however, for knowledge is sometimes valued highly, precisely because it is not associated with internal competitors, in the case of legitimation for example. Menon and Pfeffer (2003) also point out that internal knowledge is relatively accessible and therefore also assessable for flaws and, like fine art, does not have the same scarcity or uniqueness value of outsider knowledge. Overall then, and contrary to the dominant view of outsider knowledge being attractive for its newness (but difficult to adopt for the same reason), we find that not only are varying levels of cognitive distance necessary for different forms of knowledge flow, but in certain contexts at least, the attractiveness of outsider knowledge is based on its relative political legitimacy within internal boundaries and the relative scarcity and un-testability of its economic value. This brings us to the importance of political boundaries for knowledge flow and highlights the interrelationships between our three conceptual boundary types.

### ***Political Boundaries – Beyond ‘Knowledge at Stake’***

Communication or contact, knowledge differences, close personal relations and shared characteristics by no means guarantee knowledge flow. Political relations and associated boundaries are crucial. This is much more than what Carlile (2004) refers to as overcoming the interests actors may have in retaining an identification with their existing or prior knowledge which is ‘at stake’ in comparison to the new knowledge. Not only is it possible to maintain an attachment to contradictory ideas (Whittle, 2005), but, as other studies of boundaries and knowledge flow have shown, a broader, more material notion of power and interests is needed (eg Orlikowski, 2002). This includes a consideration of structural differences and dependency relations within and between organisations. For example, new practices (and their associated knowledge bases) may effectively be imposed on subordinate units such as subsidiaries of multinationals, organisational departments or, more generally, employees (Kostova and Roth, 2002).

Likewise, in the context of consultancy, dependency relations vary, favouring the client or consulting firm (Fincham, 1999) or individual actors. Thus, knowledge flow is not necessarily a question of establishing shared interests or meanings as some suggest (e.g. Inkpen and Tsang, 2005), at least not with all parties concerned. Rather, the form of adoption is shaped by power relations, varying between commitment and, in the most dependent/subordinate cases, behavioural compliance (Child and Rodrigues, 1996). In this way, internal and external organisational boundaries are revealed as being as much political as legal-rational (Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005).

### ***Boundary contexts – Liminality and Projects***

Having set out a framework of physical, cultural and political boundaries which have been shown in the literature to enable and constrain (inter-)organisational knowledge flow, it is important to restate the importance of contextual specificity and the varying stability of boundaries (Hernes, 2004). The former ensures that generic prescriptions for managing or 'spanning' boundaries for knowledge flow (e.g. Anand et al, 2002; Lahti and Beyerlein, 2000; Hargadon, 1998) are destined to be, at best, of limited managerial value. For example, Orlikowski points to a range of unintended consequences of commonly recommended practices such as sharing identity, interacting face to face and aligning effort (2002: 257). This is not to say that such prescriptive accounts have no analytical or pragmatic value, for many tend to be based on similar broad (e.g. western, 'knowledge-intensive', employment) contexts. Given such relative stability, we shall now briefly discuss two contexts of particular empirical relevance to consultancy work – *liminality* and *project* working.

Liminality is a space that is between boundaries, often in a dynamic sense of being in transition such as that between childhood and adulthood (Turner, 1977). Thus, liminality

highlights how boundaries are not always clear cut but can be graduated and dynamic in the sense of moving between seemingly bounded states of, say, organisational insider and outsider. Liminality is of particular relevance for its claimed creative/learning potential in that relatively settled identities, routines and rules – boundaries - disappear or are suspended. In organisational contexts, this is particularly evident in project working where staff work together physically and/or organisationally outside of traditional organisational and functional structures (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Indeed, studies of project-based learning have found that, aside from their liminal status, projects aid learning, by bringing together people with different experience or new knowledge (Sydow et al., 2004). However, counter arguments are also evident such as the creation of a new boundary around the project team (Tempest and Starkey, 2004), and the primacy given by members to task completion over reflection and learning (Scarbrough et al, 2004). Thus, knowledge flow in project contexts is seen to be complex and contingent.

## **COMPLEXITY AND DYNAMISM IN CONSULTING BOUNDARIES**

We have seen how the innovator view of consultants as organisational and knowledge outsiders is evident both generally as well as in those few studies which focus on knowledge flow in consultancy. The alternative - legitimator - view is based on consultants' organisational outsider status being used to support a client-led organisational reform for example. From our conceptual account of boundaries both in general and in the contexts of (inter-)organisational knowledge flow both views can be seen as unduly simplistic in i) considering a limited range of boundaries (organisational and/or knowledge) and monolithic or unitary conceptions of them ii) adopting a dualistic and static, rather than multiple, graduated and dynamic, notion of 'simultaneous' insiders and outsiders and iii) neglecting the possibility of consultants enabling both legitimisation



and innovation or something in between. In order to reveal this complexity, we need to explore the specific contexts of consultancy. While not generally departing from the dominant views of knowledge flow, the consultancy literature reveals variations and trends which provide the basis for a more differentiated approach to knowledge flow potential in client-consultancy relationships.

### **Knowledge Domains, Physical Space and Personal Relations**

The innovator view is not only contradicted by the specific case of legitimization, but also by some more conventional or, at least, two-sided innovation projects. Here, clients may effectively act as 'partial employees' rather than customers of consulting firms in terms of their joint participation in 'product' development for them (Mills and Morris, 1986; Hansen, 1999). Indeed, a situated view of knowledge would present its co-production as a more general observation (Christensen and Klyver, 2006). Even within more traditional views, where consultants are seen to bring new knowledge to the client setting, there is a strong possibility and arguably, increasing likelihood, that clients and consultants will share a range of other forms of knowledge or knowledge domains – they are both knowledge insiders and outsiders. For example, given that most consulting work (circa 60-70%) is based on repeat business with the same organisations (Karantinou and Hogg, 2001) and that personal client-consultant relations continue to be common (Jones, 2003), it is reasonable to assume some consultant knowledge of the client organisation and/or individual clients. Likewise, sector knowledge is often shared, not least because many consulting firms recruit on the basis of experience in particular client industrial sectors and/or structure their activities in this way to help develop sector expertise (Kennedy Information, 2004). The same is true with regard to management specialisms where clients and consultants from similar functional backgrounds may work alongside each other in project teams.

The extent to which clients and consultants share knowledge domains also reflects an increasing sophistication and scepticism among many clients and consulting firms' responses to this (Sturdy, 1997a; Hislop, 2002). In recent years, the traditional view of consultants as carriers of unfamiliar knowledge to clients has become even less tenable. For example, very many more managers have been exposed to management tools and frameworks (eg organisational change, strategy and project management models) either through formal (eg MBA) education (Czerniawska and May, 2004; Kitay and Wright, 2004), the wider media (Furusten, 1999), internal change programmes or even the use of external consultants, which has become almost habitual in some sectors. Similarly, consultancy users are less likely to have spent all their careers in one organisation (Webb, 2004) and there is evidence of career cross-overs whereby former consultants assume senior positions in client firms (Sturdy and Wright, 2006). Such developments, combined with the cases where consultants have acquired an intimate knowledge of the client organisation and sector, may also undermine the second dimension of their knowledge outsider status - offering an external perspective regardless of any particular technical expertise – in that they may 'go native', identifying more strongly with the client organisation and its knowledge domains (Nooteboom, 2004).

The importance of drawing attention to knowledge domains above and beyond that which are the focus of explicit legitimisation or innovation processes (e.g. organisational, personal, sector and functional knowledge) is not simply because this challenges the image of consultants as cosmopolitans in comparison to their clients. Where such domains are shared they can also constitute 'redundant' knowledge which may form the basis of a bridge, spanning other knowledge boundaries or softening the 'burden of otherness'. This is also evident in relation to physical boundaries, attention to which can

serve to challenge the primacy or exclusivity given to the (rational-legal form of) organisational boundary in both innovator and legitimator views of consultancy. Implicit in these dominant perspectives is perhaps, an image of the consultant promoting or pitching a new approach to prospective clients or providing a report of recommendations after analysis has been conducted at a distance from the client site. While such activities do occur and there may be considerable variation in the extent to which physical boundaries are maintained (De Jong and van Eekelen, 1999), consulting projects are also often organised in teams where both clients and consultants are located outside of their respective organisational contexts in joint activity, working alongside each other or in constant (email or telephone) contact, often in a segregated space - in operational proximity (Clegg et al, 2004).

In this liminal space, a new boundary is introduced such that the participants may become *neither insider nor outsider* in the traditional (ie organisational) sense, but in between or in transition. As we noted in relation to project-based learning debates, in terms of physical space and shared practices, they might both be seen as (project) insiders and temporarily come to identify emotionally with the project team, structures and activity in addition to, or even more than, their respective organisation, occupation or role (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). Of course, the new set of boundaries does not necessarily undermine completely organisational or employer-defined roles (Sturdy et al, 2006) and identifying with the project can impede knowledge flow processes as well as enhance them. As Christensen and Klyver (2006: 311) note from their study of consulting in small firms:

*'...(the client is) highly focused on the specific (project) output that may be anticipated. .... On the other hand, the consultants are highly focused on the budgets available and*

*thus the time limits set. This may hamper time for joint reflection and situational as well as contextual translation processes'*

However, even the contractual nature of the organisational boundary can be subject to variation and change. Werr and Styhre (2003) point to recently emerging 'partnership' contracts and discourses of the client-consultant relationship – somewhere between contractor and colleague. Here, greater attention is given to consultants' implementation responsibilities and their long term relations with clients, such as through a 'preferred supplier' status or as part of a retainer contract (also Czerniawska and May, 2004). Werr and Styhre cite the case of a 'house consultant', contracted on an almost permanent basis with a client and, despite the consultant's formal employment status, seemingly more of an organisational insider than many client staff (2003: 62). This has parallels with studies of temporary workers or interim managers (e.g. Garsten, 2003), but in this case, the formal role remains that of consultancy.

While new types of formal relations are apparent (Kennedy Information, 2004), some caution is required with respect to claiming that boundaries have been wholly transformed. Werr and Styhre themselves note how partnership is primarily a discourse of consultants while clients appear to be more transactional in their behaviour (2003). Although variable between consulting assignments, what is far less contentious is the continued salience and, even, centrality of personal relationships and shared social characteristics in developing trust relations or bridges between clients and consultants and their formal organisational boundaries (Sturdy et al, 2006). Kitay and Wright (2003) for example, show how consultants can be seen as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' according to the presence/absence of personal and social ties, beyond a market

transaction. Once again, this suggests that the purely formal organisational dimension of the insider-outsider relationship cannot be taken for granted and that other boundary dimensions, in this case cultural (emotional) boundaries, need to be made explicit.

### **Boundary Complexity – Interests, Roles and Phases**

In pointing to the possibility and even likelihood of shared ('redundant') knowledge domains and the importance of other, non-organisational boundaries as well as variations in the formal organisational relationship, the above discussion not only challenges the dominant views of consultancy, but undermines their universality. In short, it highlights the variability which exists *between* consulting projects as well as calling for attention to greater diversity and precision in terms of boundary bases or continua of client-consultant relations – insider/outsider with respect to *what?* However, beyond distinguishing the project team from its members' organisations, our account has not yet considered diversity *within* projects in terms of political interests and functional roles - the question of insider/outsider with respect to *whom?*

Unlike the innovation perspective, the legitimisation view implies varied political interests inside the client organisation. Here, consultants are the allies of those who commission them - management and/or the owners of organisations. They are *political* as well as knowledge insiders with respect to particular clients (Sturdy, 1997b). This is reinforced in accounts of resistance to consultants from other client organisation groups such as middle-management and others whose identities and material interests may be threatened (Moore, 1984). In other words, it is not simply consultants' new knowledge – 'the burden of otherness' - which explains client-consultant conflict, for this suggests a unitary view of organisational interests. Political dynamics are a core aspect of consulting practice. In 'power mapping' for example, consultants seek to establish,

monitor and influence (eg include/exclude) the interests of key individuals or groups in the client organisation in terms of their likely support for effecting change and/or generating future income (Hagan and Smail, 1997). In this way, even in cases where consultants have appeared simply to legitimate client-based ideas, this may, in part reflect sophisticated idea selling techniques by the consultants. Here, consultants seek, not always successfully, to persuade clients that they, and not the consultants, were the originator of the consultant-led idea or method (Sturdy, 1997a; Craig, 2005).

A recognition of political insider-outsider relations as a counter to the preoccupation with formal organisational boundaries in the innovation view of consultancy draws attention to the diversity of actors and roles in and around consulting projects (Kipping and Armbruster, 2002). For example, Arnaud suggests that 'the word client only rarely designates a single unique person' (1998:470) and Schein (1997:202) categorises clients from the main 'contact' client and 'primary' owner of the problem to 'intermediate' clients who work in the project team and 'unwitting'/'indirect' clients who are unaware/aware of the affects of the consultancy alongside 'ultimate' clients such as customers. To this we might add those who are actively excluded from the consulting or change process as part of political maneuvering (Sturdy et al, 2006) as what we might term 'proscribed' clients.

On the consulting side too there is often similar or parallel complexity. For example, one can distinguish between the roles of 'finders' or 'hunters' who develop and maintain client relations (relationship managers, directors or partners), 'minders' who manage projects and, the more junior consultant, 'grinders', who carry out the specific service (*Fortune Magazine*, 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1996). One can also consider the diversity of consulting roles or styles outlined in prescriptive accounts (eg coach, facilitator, reflector)

which may vary within as well as between projects, performed by the same or different consultants (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Ottaway, 1983).

Such a diversity of actors and roles, combined with the various types of boundaries we have discussed, presents a range of possible insider-outsider relations, comparable to Merton's notion of multiple status sets. Of particular importance however, is that recognition of such a diversity of actors poses a challenge to both the dominant views of consultancy. In short, *what is legitimation for some is innovation for others*. For example, given the relative sophistication of some clients in terms of their familiarity with various forms of management knowledge, what external consultants bring can be seen as legitimation or confirmation of existing ideas. This might particularly be the case for client project team members, selected for their specialist knowledge. For other employees in the client organisation, those less well versed in management discourse, the arrival of consultants and the formation of a project team are more likely to signal the introduction of innovative or new ideas and practices. Such distinctions are implicit in some recent reports. A UK survey conducted for the Management Consultancies Association reported that the key areas of learning claimed by clients in consulting project teams were around managing projects and managing consultants rather than the explicit 'innovative' knowledge domain of the particular project (*People Management*, 2005). This conforms to a practice-based view of learning and points to more mundane knowledge flows which lie between innovation and legitimation.

Finally, the multiplicity of boundary relations and the varying forms of knowledge flow associated with them need to be considered in a dynamic context - the shifting contours of embeddedness or the 'when?' question. Some reference has been made to claimed trends in client-consultant relationships, towards greater client sophistication for

example. Similarly, it was noted how repeat business might lead to the reduced salience of personal and organisational knowledge differences. However, little attention has been given to changes *within* consulting projects. Here, again, the prescriptive literature is of some albeit limited help. It recognises project dynamism, but largely in terms of linear and rational phases (Markham, 1997) with an additional recognition of the early need to establish the client relationship (and contract) effectively (Cockman et al, 1999).

Notwithstanding the fact that relationships are of ongoing importance and that projects do not typically follow linear phases neatly (Gluckler and Armbrüster, 2003), such models are useful as a starting point for assessing the ways in which boundaries may change over time. In keeping with the transitional (temporary) nature of liminality, those physical boundaries between the project team and its members' organisations are likely to be greater both before and after joint problem solving and shared implementation work. Likewise, in terms of knowledge boundaries, consultants' knowledge of the client organisation is likely to increase during a project, as is the clients' level of understanding of any consulting tools in use, thus reducing boundaries and producing specific forms of insider/outsider relations and reduced cognitive distance. In terms of political interests, these may well diverge as project objectives are seen as having been addressed and consultants begin to focus more on generating future business. However, we also need to differentiate between different client/consultant actors or roles. For example, we might see more junior consultants disengage from personal client relationships as projects come to a conclusion. Similarly, functional knowledge boundaries are likely to intensify as consultants engage in an expert role and lessen during more facilitative or process oriented periods. Such possibilities begin to highlight the potential analytical value of combining project dynamics with different bases for boundary relations and the various actors and roles involved in consultancy.



## **DISCUSSION**

In this article we have examined two dominant images of the role of consultancy in the adoption of management ideas. In the innovator view, consultants play a crucial role in many western capitalist economies in introducing new ideas, terms and/or practices to organisations. This view was shown to be evident both in general accounts of consultancy as well as specific studies, including those which are sceptical of the robustness and value of consulting knowledge and those few studies which focus directly on knowledge flow through consultancy. In the latter case, the consultants' status as organisational and knowledge outsiders is seen as key and as representing both a strength and burden to innovative potential. The second, less conventional, image counters that of consultancy as innovative, pointing to its role in the legitimisation or confirmation of client ideas and practices. Here, no new knowledge or language flows. Rather, it is only consultants' organisational outsider status which is crucial.

Both views reflect important aspects of the role of consultancy and help constitute our understanding of it. They also draw attention to the analytical value of boundaries in understanding both relationality and knowledge flow processes and potentials. However, given the importance attributed to management consultancy in organisations and society, such generalized and polarised views are surprising in the light of broader studies of boundaries, inter-organisational knowledge flow and client-consultant relations. We therefore turned to these literatures in an attempt to develop further a framework of knowledge flow potential through management consultancy, at the level of the consulting project. Attention was drawn to the heterogeneity and simultaneity of insider-outsider relations in organisations, of multiple and shifting status or identity-sets whereby physical, cultural and political boundaries are negotiated and experienced and actors and ideas are included and excluded - structuring in action. In terms of knowledge

flow therefore, a concern solely with the strength and burden of being an organisational outsider with new knowledge is revealed as partial. Rather, various overlapping boundary relations serve as contours of embeddedness. Here knowledge flow potential can be seen through: varying cognitive distances for particular knowledge processes and types; bridges of 'redundant knowledge'; personal relationships; and relations of material as well as existential dependence. In addition, the concept of liminality was drawn upon to reinforce the idea of boundaries as gradations or distances, but also to highlight intermediate and dynamic boundary conditions – neither insider nor outsider, but moving in between – such as in the case of temporary project work and organisational boundaries.

Given the importance of context to understanding boundaries and knowledge, we then turned our attention to the conditions of management consultancy. Although the innovator view prevails with respect to knowledge flow, various studies and observed developments reveal considerable complexity, variation and dynamism both within and between consulting projects. In particular, it was argued that by considering the various ways of working together across multiple knowledge domains, one cannot assume, as the innovator view does, that consultants are best characterised as organisation and knowledge outsiders with respect to their clients nor that they simply reinforce or legitimate client knowledge. Co-production of knowledge and bridging through redundant knowledge, joint working and personal relations can also be assumed in many cases and even, increasingly. In addition to highlighting the need to be more specific in considering boundary relations – insider/outsider with respect to what? – we revealed a diversity of client and consultant actors, roles and political interests within consulting projects – insider/outsider with respect to whom? Here, the organisation-centric nature of both the core views of consultancy and knowledge flow is revealed as most problematic.

In particular, one person's legitimisation is another's innovation, with much scope for intermediate positions which may vary over time and with roles. Varying political interests and patterns of dependency and in/exclusion give a lie to the innovator view whereby resistance is seen primarily as a question of knowledge clash or 'knowledge at stake'.

By drawing on studies of boundaries and knowledge flow and of consultancy project relations and dynamics, we are now in a better position to frame what are likely to be important issues for understanding knowledge flow processes and potential through consultancy (see Table 2 for a summary). This is a matter of giving greater attention to context, in particular to the nature and dynamics of boundaries and actors – insider/outsider with respect to *what, whom and when* - rather than assume apriori a single, legal form of organisational boundary and a single domain of knowledge.

Table 2 – Boundaries, dynamism and contexts in consultancy projects

<b>DYNAMISM</b> - Boundary interplay as enabling and constraining - Project phases and non-linear changes (e.g. from repeat business and liminal transitions)		
<b>BOUNDARY TYPES</b>	<b>KNOWLEDGE AND BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>CONSULTING PROJECTS</b>
<b>Physical</b>	Operational proximity; technologies; architecture; (boundary) objects; sociometrics	Space/activity (eg liminality of joint working and communication)
<b>Cultural (cognitive/emotional)</b>	Multiple knowledge domains and identity sets; optimum cognitive distance for knowledge types/processes; 'redundant knowledge' and personal characteristics; belonging (NIH) v outsider attraction	Personal/social ties. Shared/contrasting knowledge domains (eg personal, general management, functional, organisational and sector knowledge)
<b>Political</b>	'Knowledge at stake'; structured interests (eg contractual/dependency relations); in/exclusion	Political Interests (eg project objectives, sell on, job loss and legitimisation etc.)
<b>ACTORS</b> <b>Generic relations</b> – e.g. identity sets in gradations of insider/outsider relations, including liminality. <b>Specific actors</b> – e.g. organisation, project team, individuals and/or roles (e.g. client types, consulting roles and hierarchical levels).		

For example, taking the concept of cognitive distance, combined with an understanding of how consultants can, in some respects and contexts, be seen as more insiders than outsiders with respect to their clients, the 'innovator' view both underestimates and overestimates the potential for knowledge flow:

- in relation to cultural boundaries, it *overestimates* the possible novelty of the knowledge consultants bring to clients (and vice versa) and thus the potential for innovation/exploration.

- it therefore also *underestimates* the possibility of cultural closeness which might better enable the flow and development of tacit knowledge as well as facilitate knowledge exploitation.
- it *overestimates* the cultural distance between many clients and consultants by presenting them as being embedded in wholly different contexts
- and therefore *underestimates* the possibility of shared ('redundant') knowledge and social characteristics and personal ties bridging other knowledge flows between actors.

The implications of this analysis are not that potential barriers to knowledge flow are greater or less than those implied by the innovator view. Rather, it is that they are contingent on the type of consulting project and in relation to various and graduated boundaries and different actors and dynamics in particular contexts. In short, there are a whole range of knowledge flow possibilities, with that of the conventional innovator view being only one. Indeed, if one assumes that in many project teams, there are likely to be significant areas of shared knowledge between client and consultant members, then the innovator view is misleading more generally. More mundane and practice-based knowledge flows associated with project work and client/consultant management are more likely.

In terms of political boundaries, the unitary and organisation-centric nature of the innovator view is also misleading. In particular, it:

- *underestimates* the possibilities for shared interests or alliances between particular client/consultant actors and roles at particular times such as those of project team members when working together or between the 'primary' client and consulting partner.

- *overestimates* the likelihood that the interests of such actors will be shared with the others within the client and consultant 'systems' – the 'indirect', 'ultimate' or 'proscribed' clients for example. This does not mean that knowledge will not flow, but will be mediated through power relations rather than simply knowledge incompatibility.

There is a greater recognition of organisational politics (within client organisations at least) in the legitimisation view of consultancy and knowledge flow. However, similar limitations are evident in that it underestimates the potential for knowledge flow from consultants to clients (and vice versa) by presenting the parties as having *only* shared knowledge and, once again, neglecting different actors and interests. In other words, legitimisation does not preclude flows in other knowledge domains nor to other actors, especially those outside the project team where 'legitimation' may be experienced as innovation. This view also neglects boundary dynamics and negotiation such as in the case of a particular form of consulting rhetoric whereby the innovator role (knowledge outsider) is played down by consultants to achieve the appearance of legitimisation and that of the political insider.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our analysis suggests that knowledge flow through projects is likely to be far more contingent and less polarised than core images of consultancy suggest. This does not just have implications for an understanding of knowledge flow and its potential. It suggests a need to re-think and re-evaluate the image and role of management consultancy more generally. Perhaps the core images reflect more the social processes of idolisation or stigmatisation and scapegoating – capitalism's commissars or corporate puppets - than the day to day practice of consulting with clients in projects. This issue is

noticeably absent in organisational research on consultancy. However, it does feature in some studies with a broader policy or political focus. For example, questions have been raised about the impact of consultancy usage on the role of organisational management (ie 'make or buy'[-in] management). Related to this is the question of accountability for decisions and actions (Mickhail and Ostrovsky, 2007). In particular, familiar criticisms of consultants rationalising human processes without accountability, responsibility or local knowledge are located within the context of short term financialisation, change at any cost and a broader growth of 'social distance' and 'divorce between command and accountability' in organisations (Sennett, 2006: 57, 70; Froud et al, 2000).

Such concerns may seem far removed from those of boundaries and knowledge flow, but there is a parallel in terms of concerns with inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, the study of the outsiders in consultancy relations presents the potential for a new form of analysis of the politics of consultancy. To date, this question has largely been about those who exert influence through the rhetorical, market and tactical power of consultants, clients and their organisations (Fincham, 1999; Gluckler and Armbrüster, 2003). However, little attention is given to the concomitant exclusion or silencing of others such as those we described as '*proscribed*' clients. These might include particular management, employee or social (e.g. class, ethnicity and gender) groups or, in public sector contexts, the bypassing of politicians and civil servants in favour of consultant advisers – 'consultocracy' (Saint-Martin, 2004:20; Hanlon, 2004; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Such considerations are evident in some studies of learning and social capital (Ebers and Grandori, 1997) but have not been explored in consultancy. This is surprising given the claims made for consultants in terms of their influence and participation – their insider status - in the development and dissemination of management knowledge. But once again, it is important not to assume a generalised

view, especially one which presents consultants as the purveyors of expert knowledge, but instead to specify more precisely the bases and dynamics of knowledge boundaries and their in/exclusionary effects.

Limitations to our analysis prompt some questions about the scope for new research directions. Firstly, our consideration of boundaries was by no means exhaustive and could have been developed through considerations of reliability/trust (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005) and an institutional level of analysis such as sector norms for example (Marchington and Vincent, 2004). Secondly, the multifarious bases for identifying consultants as insiders or outsiders reflect a concern with *structural* characteristics ascribed to the various actors and phases of a relationship. In short, boundaries constitute 'attribute' more than relational or processual data (Scott, 2000). Likewise, the insider/outsider concept has been treated mostly as, in Gouldner's (1957) terms, a 'latent' identity rather than one which is necessarily 'manifest', experienced, pursued and/or resisted as a socio-political tactic. On the basis of studies of innovation relationship dynamics, we might expect a more iterative than linear dynamic where successful negotiation cannot be assumed (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). We have seen something of this in relation to consulting rhetoric where consultants may seek to present themselves both as both outsiders *and* insiders. However, we still do not have a good understanding of what consultants and clients do (Mintzberg, 1973), especially what they do jointly. While there are some exceptions, Engwall and Kipping's assessment that 'the interaction process between consultants and their clients is still poorly understood' (2002: 8) remains valid. What seems clear however, is that boundaries and knowledge flows are more complex and dynamic than the popular and persistent images of consulting, as innovation and legitimation, suggest.



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