"You call it a structure taboo!" Relating consultant experiences to changing dynamics in healthcare

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive reflective perspective on the effects of an intervention in a healthcare organization, as experienced by a consultant. What does a consultant experience when things flounder?

Design/methodology/approach – This paper applies a complex responsive process approach as a research perspective and autoethnography as a method to better understand the tensions of a consultant in interacting with members of a client-system.

Findings – Focusing on the experiences of the first author during his work as a consultant in a healthcare institution. This approach contributes to the literature by providing a witness, rather than an aboutness, perspective on the experiences of a consultant during a completely unexpected event.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is limited by looking at one case in the public sector. It should be considered as exploratory research.

Originality/value – The paper can be of value to consultants who are working as a facilitator, as well as to management scholars and practitioners in the field of change management.

Keywords Organizational change, Organizational autoethnography, Management consultancy, Unexpected developments in change projects

Paper type Research paper

1. Setting the context

"You called it 'a structure taboo', God knows why, but as far as I am concerned, there is no taboo with regard to talking about structure here," exclaimed the male half of the two-headed board of directors directly to me (the first author). He said this during a collaborative large-group session in front of a full room of 40 executive managers, all working in the same Dutch healthcare institution. While confronted with this exclamation, it flashed through my mind: "Yeah, what do I know?" My gut feeling tells me that "structure" was apparently not debatable. Perhaps I picked it up during an earlier session with the preparation group or probably, and more likely, during one of the personal interviews I held with the executives. I know for sure that I shared it on an earlier occasion with my client; the same director who seems to use it now as something he could use against me in front of the group. I was baffled. How should I respond? Is this something that all the executives in the room know and share as "how things are," or was it just something I assumed? It was remarkably silent in the packed room, and I noticed that in reaction to the emotional, somewhat angry and indignant words of the director, a sort of shiver went through the audience. And not just through the audience – his direct way of speaking clearly threw me off balance too. It felt as if everyone was looking at me, thinking, "What will he say? Or was I imagining that?" The silence continued, as everyone was waiting for what would come next.

About six months before this incident happened, I accepted an assignment from the two-headed board of directors. For my assignment, I was told "to help them [...] make

the strategic apex of the institute function more effectively." Approximately 850 employees worked at the healthcare institution during that time, attending to 2,500 clients divided across eight different municipalities and 25 locations.

Together with both directors, the executive managers – consisting of heads of staff, branch managers and location managers – formed the strategic apex. Both the directors and all the executives carried out tactical assignments on top of their regular work. In fact, both directors quickly articulated that they wanted me to help them to enter into a more constructive dialogue with the executive managers about "what the new challenges in their work are" and "why these challenges have not been taken up." According to the two directors, these challenges concern the execution of the tactical assignments.

These tactical tasks were instigated by the directors in order to bridge a vacuum between the strategical and operational level, as a result of a reorganization that was necessary. In their words, it was an act "to clean up the administrative layer of region managers and make the remaining executive managers more responsible for the whole institute."

The session did end happily: not because of what I did but because of my hesitation to act, fundamentally doubting my own assumptions. This is the main theme we will elaborate on in this paper. Initially my assignment for this change project made me enthusiastic. My role was to empower people, helping them break out of what I saw as their "defensive routines." Some months before, I started a dialogue with the whole system through a large group intervention (Van Nistelrooij *et al.*, 2013). According to Letiche (2008, p. xvi), healthcare organizations seem to lack a process both for engaging in dialogue and committing to doing so. Such a dialogue requires that the participants take some time to step out of roles and engage in a reflective process of exchanging impressions of what is occurring, what is perceived to be at stake, and what the context of the moment brings to bear. This was exactly what I tried to realize with the first group intervention with a critical mass of 200 people, which resulted in what I perceived as enthusiasm to do something to break through the collectively felt impasse. Following the first intervention, I conducted 20 interviews with a representative selection of the 40 executives, which were all invited to the aforementioned narrative session. This meeting had a dialogical set-up, in which the results of the interviews were comprehensively discussed. However, at the described moment in the narrative, it did not feel as though a dialogue were taking place, and I experienced a deeply unsettling mixture of conviction and indecisiveness. I felt confronted with the boundaries of my own assumptions, hesitating to step outside my own pattern of behavior. As all these thoughts and emotions rumbled through my head in a split second, I was reluctant to surrender my present self-construct, thinking I would put myself in jeopardy and lose control of what – in my eyes – had to be done.

From an outsider's perspective, this situation may appear to be easily resolved. Yet there is more in this moment than meets the eye. The personal confrontation with my client, directly in front of a packed room of people, is probably the most obvious. In general, situations like this usually do not make me feel uncomfortable. Mostly, I handle them by asking the participants what they think about the – in this case – statement of the manager; however, in this situation, I hesitated to do so. I knew that the words of the director were picked up by the audience as a message that was personally addressed to me – as something that I needed to take care of personally, right at that moment. Yet, the theme of "organization structure" was beyond the formal scope of the assignment that I agreed upon with the director. Furthermore, this subject is not something to be spoken about lightly. Moreover, at that moment it seemed to me that I could not say anything that would make sense whatsoever. But what happened here was completely against my presumed role-identity, underlying assumptions and convictions largely based on the publications of Schein (2009) and Argyris (1991) – and contrary to the assignment to engage in a dialogue about the challenges they face concerning tactical assignments.

With this paper, we aim to investigate and explore a consultant's experience; that is, what he[1] assumes is right, and perceives, feels, responds to, and thinks about (Homan, 2016). We contend that this is only possible when we seriously consider an inner perspective that takes the dynamic interactive connection between individual and social processes of sense making (Patriotta and Spedal, 2009, p. 1228; Stacey and Griffin, 2005, pp. 9-11). We try to make a personal experience meaningful in such a way that readers can stand in the consultants' shoes and vicariously learn about and relate to their own experiences. This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a brief overview of the literature regarding the interrelations between consultation, sense making, and intervening in an interactive setting. This will lead us to an introduction in autoethnography as the method we use for conducting this research in relation to Stacey's "complex responsive processes of relating perspective." The next section presents the background and the follow-up in the narrative. After a hindsight reflection and a discussion, we end this paper with conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. Debates in the consultancy literature

Some scholars see consultants as instruments used by managers, as well as symbolic and rhetorical devices, to legitimize their initiatives for impactful change projects (Bouwmeester and Van Werven, 2011, p. 428). Others see them as "experts" in "managing transition processes" (Goodstein and Burke, 1991, p. 14), by recognizing and accepting the disorganization and momentarily reduced effectiveness that characterizes this transition. Schein (2009, p. 147) sees consultants in a "helping role," based on the general concept of "process consultation." This implies that a consultant should always select whatever intervention will be most helpful at any given moment, given all one knows about the total situation. In this way of looking, great importance is attached to the development of a cooperative relationship with the client, one which is based on mutual trust (Chalutz Ben-Gal and Tzafrir, 2011) and on the mobilization of all stakeholders around the achievement of planned goals (Lalonde and Gilbert, 2016).

At the time of the narrative, I identified myself as someone who helps to design and implement beneficial dialogical interventions, mostly inspired by the way Schein (2009) describes his "process consultation," and Argyris (1991) describes how to help people to engage in learning processes.

Reflecting on this self-conception afterwards, I realize that one of my most emotional experiences during the meeting described in the narrative was that it dawned upon me that my identity and role were completely fluid and undetermined. In the mainstream literature on consultants and consultancy, the role and identity of the consultant are generally clear: consultants are the ones who know how to behave in a pragmatic evidence-based way by rationally applying a universal set of applicable tools and techniques (Kubr, 2002). At that moment of the narrative, this way of thinking didn't help me. I really felt overwhelmed by my feelings, not being able to formulate my ideas in a coherent way, let alone to rationally recall suggestions from academic literature on how to react adequately.

In our joint reflections on what happened in the narrative, we realized that mainstream literature on consulting seems to assume a "reflective" practitioner; one who is able to look at his experiences in an emotionally detached way and rationally make decisions on how to move forward, whilst selecting and using academic literature as a guide. Yet, when combing the literature about the possibility of reflecting in action, we came across Griffin and Stacey (p. 62), who state that in the process of distancing ourselves from our actual experience, we rationally make invisible what we actually experience. Moreover, as we went through other publications of these authors, who assume a so-called complex responsive process perspective on organizations (Stacey, 2001), it became clear to us that the mainstream literature on consultancy seems to promote an "outward" perspective, focusing solely on

thinking about the client situation, helping the client and reflecting on the local dynamics at hand and not on an "inwards" perspective.

As we recognized many elements of what happened in the narrative in Stacey *et al.*'s complex responsive process perspective, we decided to take up that perspective to get a deeper understanding of what happened in the narrative. Central in this complex responsive process perspective is, as Stacey (2007) puts it, the necessity to take our everyday experience seriously and to move away from detached thinking. From experience, Stacey (2007, p. 298) means "the actual experience of interaction in which we express hatred, aggression, greed as well as love, compassion and care." Not only focusing on what consultants and leaders should do or ought to be doing, but also on what they are doing and experiencing in the here and now. Once involved in a local interaction, it is impossible to analytically step out of it to rationally observe and diagnose what is going on. Building on Mead (1934), in the complex responsive process perspective, thoughts, emotions and bodily reactions are regarded as being co-constituted in interaction dynamics, making the stance of the distanced, objective observer impossible, as one is completely involved in the local interaction: "thrownness." Taking experience of what one is actually doing in local interactions seriously, and subsequently reflecting upon it, gives room for different views of what was happening at that specific moment (Van Nistelrooij and Sminia, 2010). In this view, self-consciousness, self-image and our assumptions about how to react within a role we presume to have, are all regarded as emerging in the concrete local interaction, where at the same time we continuously "take the attitude of the other" (Mead, 1934, p. 134) when trying to make sense of what is going on.

In contrast to the conventional framing of consultants, where consultants are understood as coherent entities with a more or less fixed set of competencies and skills, the complex responsive process perspective takes up Meads' descriptive concept of the "I-Me"-dialectic (see also Inghilleri, 1999, p. 26) to understand the rumbling of thoughts and emotions as described in the narrative. Mead assumes that we understand ourselves by looking at the reactions of others to our gestures and utterances. In countless interactions during our life, we see how others react to our deeds. We internalize and represent these reactions in ourselves as "Me's." For instance: "as people usually react to me in this way, this is who I am as a child; as a consultant." In many different experiences and situations, different kinds of "Me's develop." Furthermore – according to Mead – we develop a "generalized other": a summarization of who we think we are (our self-construct), based on our own generalizations of others' reactions to our actions. Once involved in actual interactions, "Me's" pop up in our mind as voices, advising us what to do. Typically, more than one "Me" is evoked in any interaction. When buying a car, for instance, two "Me's" can emerge. One boyishly saying: "wow, with this car the girls will look at you!"; the other warning: "this car is way too expensive." Thus, "Me's" pop up in actual conversations as accumulated past voices of others re-emerging in the now.

Next to the Me's there is also an "I" partaking in this dynamic. The "I" is that what listens to the discussion of the Me's. Furthermore the "I" is the one who acts; it is our spontaneous and creative part, that sometimes follows the commandments of the Me's and sometimes acts completely unexpectedly (Inghilleri, 1999).

As stated before, the implication of this perspective on the self is that a consultant is not a fixed entity with a predictable identity and a stable set of characteristics; who the consultant is and who he thinks he is intrinsically linked to the concrete interaction in which he is involved. Each specific interaction calls forth different "Me's"; leading to different "I-Me" dialectics. While interacting with an individual – the consultant – continuously "takes the attitude of the other." In considering what to do next, he represents the expected reactions of the others in himself. This enables him to more or less predict how others will react to his intended utterances. Hefty emotions can occur when the others do not react in

line with his predictions, particularly when these reactions seem to refute the generalized other (the self-construct). In the narrative, this concerns the actual role and identity of the consultant. As these dynamics occur in everybody participating in the interaction, the actual interaction-process can be understood as a responsive process which is influenced by everyone yet controlled by no one. Mead's conceptualizations also have implications for the "materiality" of taken for granted management concepts like "structure" and "administrative layers," which are used in the conversation described in the narrative. Mead's radical focus on interaction (Johannessen, 2013) implies that these higher order concepts are nothing more than constructs and themes that arise in a local interaction (Homan, 2016). Their meaning cannot thus be generalized to other interactions.

3. A complex responsive process perspective on research

Taking on the complex responsive process perspective implies that we ground our approach in the philosophical practice of first person inquiry (Marshall, 2004), paying attention to how we experience ourselves in interactions; a research practice that Reason and Torbert (2001) refer to as "upstream inquiry" It involves curiosity – through inner and outer arcs of attention – about what is happening and what part one is playing in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction, and nonaction. Narratives are used as "vehicles" to translate these actual experiences to the reader in such a way that the reader (virtually) can stand in the shoes of (here) the consultant. This function of narratives relates to their quality criteria, as formulated by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and, for example, to the autoethnographic research approach of Ellis *et al.* (2011, p. 4). In this line of research, the topic of investigation is the researcher's own experience as part of a local interaction dynamic which can also be compared with Denzin's "thick descriptions" (2001, pp. 99-103), or, to be more precise, "thick inscriptions," as narratives are the researcher's own selections and impressions highlighting aspects of the situation deemed relevant by him. In this way, narratives function as a specific "window" to certain subjective experiences rather than an "objective" representation of organizational reality (Bate, 1997, p. 1163). As a method, autoethnography is a useful approach to understanding an (auto-)biographical case as a personal narrative (Ellis *et al.*, 2011) as we present here from an insider perspective – a lens that is often neglected in today's management literature (Stewart and Aldrich, 2015), especially within consultancy practice literature. However, such a first-person account requires self-questioning and confronting things that are likely less than flattering about oneself. This is probably why, despite its potential, building on personal experiences as a source of data, "has been criticized for being self- indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized" (Wall, 2006, p. 155). In response to this criticism, Stacey's complex responsive process perspective encourages researchers not only to take their daily experiences seriously (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 35), but also to use narratives as raw material, to be reflected upon by the researcher together with a group of fellow researchers.

In line with this reasoning, the development of the narrative and the argument in this paper was part of a broader project of seven Dutch senior consultants (Ooijen *et al.*, 2017). The project started with the consultants writing a narrative about what they considered as an episode of "imperfection" in their work, preferably an interactive moment with a client or client system. After writing the narratives, a new round started in which these narratives were reflected upon (the second author was one of the participants here). This round took place over ten interactive meetings, in which all narratives were reflected upon by all present and all reflections were recorded. In these reflective conversations, we emphasized: the identification of important, central themes ("what is this narrative about?," "what is the central plot?"); and an extensive and critical literature review of these themes ("what is known about these themes?" And "does this theory/concept/model explain what is going on in the narrative?"). In line with the complex responsive process assumptions (Homan, 2016),

this reflective process is not a solo-activity conducted by the first-author, but a collective process of theorizing and reflecting with relevant others. In this case, the second author brought in his expertise to accurately interpret the first- author's experiences from a complex responsive perspective. The regular meetings in which both authors participated can be compared with Pierces' "communities of inquiry" (Seixas, 1993). The results of our deliberations are not constituted as "The Truth"; rather as our community's current best opinions. The truth that emerged is provisional, but, "in high wind and shoal water, even a light anchor is vastly superior to none at all" (Seixas, 1993, p. 308). Moreover, this whole research process of (re-)writing, literature review, reflection and new experiences can be seen as a process of increased objectivation where the researchers become more detached, while at the same time allowing them to immerse themselves deeply in their experience (Mowles, in Homan, 2016, p. 497).

4. The follow-up of the narrative and the resulting emerging themes
In this section, we will share what happened next in the large group session. After that, some of the emerging themes from our reflection-group discussions are presented, through which it became painfully clear for the first author that he was not embodying the organizational change that he was seeking and the importance of not doing so:

> Because I (the first author) did not immediately react, the statement of the director hang heavily in the air, which gave a feeling of discomfort. After all, the board hired me to help them, right? However, at the same time, I also believed that my ineffectiveness to team up with my client at that particular moment had much to do with how I interpreted the situation. I found it difficult to parry in public, or even to deflect the question back to the audience. The question was posed directly at me. Moreover, the man who was also my client had said it in a way that clearly did not tolerate opposition. It would also be useless to react on the content; in that case, it would remain between us, which would make the rest of the audience (passive) spectators. Yet, that definitely was not my intent – in fact, the opposite was true. In consultation with both directors, the aim of this session was to enter into dialogue with them and the executives. However, while all of this flashed through my mind, the female member of the board of directors reacted, trying to save the situation and perhaps compensating her colleague-director. She suggested that the interviews I had done had apparently invoked this idea. A meaningful silence followed her reaction. I directly asked those present if there was anyone who could confirm this. Thankfully, that was the case, but it was clear that there was an (allegorical) elephant in the room – which no one dared to point out.

During the Dutch consultants' group discussions, two themes quickly emerged.

4.1 Theme 1: the structure taboo
The word "taboo" presupposed that within the organization there was a fear for talking about the "organization structure." This became evident from statements like, "We just had a structural reorganization with a lot of hurdles; we have to move forward instead of looking back continuously."

Taboos relate to emotions by placing things in an intimate context. Therefore, in hindsight, it seems paradoxical to connect the word "taboo" to the word "structure." Structure and taboo are two concepts that instinctively do not match, and the application of taboo – as a suffix to structure – makes it more difficult to discuss it. This appears to be illustrated by the fact that the director fairly but paradoxically states that he does not want to discuss "structure," albeit by saying that it is not a taboo. It seems to block everything. How great would it have been if the director (or I) had said at that particular moment in time, "we/you have just been through an entire structural reorganization yet, apparently, issues relating to structure remain, and it would be great if we could discuss them."

4.2 Theme 2: self-sealing defensive routines

At the moment of the narrative, there seemed a practice of fairly capable leaders and executives who, as a whole, maintained an ineffective situation. Instead of dealing with this, reference is made to a "structure taboo." In other words, a grateful excuse was given because everyone is in this slump and everyone agrees with this explanation for the apparent collective failing; this is remarkably similar to what Argyris (1991, p. 100) describes as a situation dominated by "self-sealing defensive routines." These types of behavior-entrenched habits, as Argyris (1991, p. 100) argues, "protect ourselves from the embarrassment and threats that come with exposing our thinking." Defensive routines form a protective shell around our deepest assumptions, defending us against pain but also keeping us from learning about the causes of such pain. As Argyris continues, executives who take on the burden of having to know the answers become highly skillful in defensive routines that preserve their aura as capable decision makers by not revealing the thinking behind their decisions. This defensiveness becomes an accepted part of organizational culture and blocks the flow of energy and meaning in an organization, preventing its members from collective learning. Moreover, these defensive routines are "self-sealing;" thus, they obscure their own existence. This makes them overwhelmingly effective because it is very difficult to acknowledge them, even if we know that we are being defensive. In fact, no one viewed the defensiveness as a problem and thus the urgency needed to tackle it collectively was missing. The problem however is that the health institute as a whole is inert and fails to function properly; it was even at risk of losing its position in the region.

Themes 1 and 2 above were the first to emerge during our reflective discussions. In subsequent conversations, we began to see that these themes still had a high "aboutness" character. Rational ideas and explanations surfaced about what was going on in the narrative. At that moment, new questions emerged like: who is looking here? For example, "Me" as a researcher, an external consultant, a participant, or a stakeholder? And is this "Me" a constant, or is it changing each time we talk about this?

4.3 Theme 3: I spy with my little eye

What was going on in the mind and body of the first author at the moment of the incident can be described as an "I-Me"-dialectic. In fact, even the term "dialectic" is too "tidy"; it felt as though a tremendously loud cacophony of voices were all frantically shouting for attention. Voices like: "to what extent is it useful to share my analysis with the stakeholders, particularly when I have the sense that the participants in the room are reluctant to take ownership of the problem?" Moreover, "how far can I, as a consultant, go when I am not part of the stakeholder's constructed reality?" And: "Is this whole set up not my own creation, and are the participants playing more than just a mere role in this construction as perceived by me?" Furthermore, the intense emotions can be understood as the experience of the generalized other, the consultants' self-construct of a "warm Scheinerian helping consultant," going down the drain. This very experience called forth more "Me's," giving all kinds of additional suggestions and ideas about what was going on and how to ideally react. Apparently, this melee of cognitions and emotions was so overwhelming that eventually the "I" became paralyzed. Unequivocal answers to questions like "who am I as a consultant?"; "what is my role here?" and "what evidence-based dialogical interventions can I do to help these people to empower themselves?" went out of the window.

In an ideal situation, one of the "Me's" would have swiftly taken control, making it clear what to do next. Hand in hand with this ideal "Me," a unique set of assumptions regarding "what is real," "what seems to be true," "how things work," and "how to intervene" would also present itself. Yet, building on Meads' insights, this set of assumptions is not regarded as an individualistic "possession" or "competence" of the consultant. First of all, it was the actual interaction that locally brought forth this "Me." Second, this "Me" is not something

invented by the consultant, but is rather the result of many years of experiences being internalized by the consultant. This amounts to the conclusion that the "knowledge," "competencies," and "facilitating styles" of the consultant are not individually fixed but deeply social. It is this specific set of "Me's," triggered in this specific situation, where the "Me's are subjective inner mirrors of countless earlier social experiences. Worse still: as described, the 'battle' between all the 'Me's'" (and their respective assumptions) which popped up at the large group intervention was so fierce and evoked so many emotions that it became impossible to react.

When attempting to understand the experiences described in the narrative in this way, new questions emerge about what a consultant is and does. "When will I know things for sure?" And "what does 'sure' mean, when I understand it as one of the 'Me's' who has become dominant in my 'I-Me'- dialectic?" "How do I get to know that 'my' assumptions are solid for a sound and effective intervention when there are several 'Me's' in me vying for their own definition of 'sound'? Bearing in mind that apparently these 'Me's' were evoked in this situation." What does the concept of "diagnosis" mean? Is a consultant someone who unilaterally determines the imperfect way in which the client system works and starts to communicate this as a reality to which all have to comply? Or is the "diagnosis" something that does not reside "between the ears" of the consultant, but "between the noses" of those interacting, reflecting the power relations which develop amongst them? The challenge, as we saw in hindsight, is that a consultant has to be aware not just of this unilateralism alone but also of the themes which emerge in the interaction during the intervention. Yet, in our reflections even this last conclusion seemed to be too "aboutness." Is it by all means possible to think, feel, experience, and reflect whilst simultaneously interacting with others? Moreover, aren't we yet again rationalizing away our daily experience of thrownness?

4.4 An epistemological tangle
The understandings of what was going on in the narrative, using Meads' concepts, trigger all kinds of epistemological questions, like: "How [does] the interventionist [come] to know about another system's knowing" (Keeney, 1983, p. 21). And: "How can we be certain of our interventions' effectiveness?" Such questions lead to what Keeney (1983, p. 28) calls an "epistemological tangle." Furthermore, we learned from this personal inquiry and interactive reflections that as every consultant will operate on the basis of some set of assumptions (one or more dominant "Me's"), the key is to learn to operate with freedom at the level of one's own assumptions. As O' Hanlon and Wilk (1987, p. x-xi) put it more crudely, "have you got a theory or has the theory got you? And if you're stuck with a theory, doesn't your client get stuck with it too?" What we also came to see is that I (the first author), when conceiving and facilitating the collaborative large group session and thinking about change, was focused more on the behavior of the executives and directors than on my own interventions. I had asked them to reflect upon the presented outcomes of the interviews as I analyzed them, and I challenged the participants to stimulate self-reflection and reflexivity. I acted as if I was an outside observer of what was unfolding between us; thus I did not think about myself as a subject of the change and interaction dynamics.

5. Discussion
As Eriksen (2008, p. 633) argues, organizational policies can change; however, it is only through a fundamental change in who organizational members are in relation to one another that an organization can meaningfully change. Meaningful organizational transformation does not occur without a corresponding self-transformation, most importantly of the individual leading or facilitating the change. This self-transformation is not conceived as a soloistic activity within the consultant, but as a dynamic and emerging responsive process going on in the ("inner" and "outer") conversations of everyone involved in the change-interactions.

This is also the fundamental assumption of the complex responsive process perspective, which we utilized in this paper to get a deeper understanding of the experiences in the narrative. As we would like to demonstrate with our contributions, reflections, and analysis, unpredictable developments and direct attacks on the (power) position and the role of the consultant do not always fit into the self-perceived role of a consultant (his generalized other), nor in the occasionally heroic images of consultants presented in the mainstream literature. In the conventional literature, these developments are regarded as noise or, at best, as exceptions to the rules and as deviations of predictions, which are to be expected and framed as "resistance to change." Once framed in this way, the consultant is, yet again, usually in familiar territory, where he or she can use additional diagnostic tools, theoretical models and an evidence-based repertoire of interventions to "overcome" this resistance.

In line with the complex responsive process perspective used in this paper, we content that, as with every other person, a consultant's language, position, identity and behavior are a reflection of his or her underlying "personal" assumptions: the "Me's" which are triggered in a specific interaction situation and the emerging dialectic processes between the "Me's" and the "I." The combination of being "thrown" into local interactions, together with the physical impossibility of overseeing all possible interactions, implies that no one is able to have a complete, distanced and objective overview. Understanding experiences described in the narrative from a complex responsive process – perspective implies that the classical notion that "a consultant should always select whatever intervention will be most helpful at any given moment, given all he knows about the total situation" becomes an illusion. Any understanding of the "total situation" is nothing more than a local theme emerging in a specific interaction, reflecting the "dance of I's and Me's" going on in the minds of the consultant and of all the other interlocuters. Yet, sometimes consultants have the tendency to myopically see their truth as "The Truth." This opens the possibility that they are sometimes surprised and dumbfounded once they are confronted by completely different sense makings about existing situations and the role and identity they possess.

6. Conclusion
The intense experiences of one of the authors are difficult to explain and understand using only mainstream consulting literature. Having used several concepts and ideas from the complex responsive process perspective on organizations, we contend that this perspective can shed complementary light on the realities of the work of consultants. Interaction processes can have a non-linear quality, where even the smallest gestures can provoke major changes in the emergent meanings and power balances. Furthermore, sense making, understanding, and theorizing are not seen as a disembodied rational process, but as embodied interaction dynamics, where personal power positions, emotions, fears and identities are at stake. The complex responsive process perspective is able to give a central stage to developments and processes that, in mainstream literature on consulting, are regarded as noise, deviations and distractions. This implicates that the broadly accepted image of the "flawless" consultant becomes an almost unattainable idealistic and normative image, which has little explanatory power for understanding the daily experiences of consultants in practice. Furthermore, a consultant is not only understood anymore as the heroic one who knows, oversees, and acts purposefully, but as a human whose thoughts, emotions, actions and identity emerge in local interactions hand-in-hand with the development of local power balances. Trying to think rationally is only one of the dynamics going on; one "Me" who thinks that he is right. Furthermore, going through intense emotions, being completely surprised, and not knowing what to do next are all regarded as integral parts of the daily practice of consultants. Even the meaning of the concept "consultant" and the role of the consultants can only be understood from a local, contextual, and historical perspective.

With these inferences, we suggest that additional research that takes up a complex responsive process perspective on consulting can assist in obtaining a richer and more practical understanding of the praxis of consulting (see, e.g. Billing, 2007). Furthermore, we suggest that collective theorizing about and reflecting on consulting experiences, using narratives as raw material, can be a fruitful method for deepening our understanding of the praxis of consultants. Deemphasizing the ideal image of the modern consultant opens a new window for the consultant as someone who only understands what he is once engaged in local interactions with people of the client organization; not an actor who is the primum movens but just one of the *agents* partaking in local interactions and relational networks, where understandings of identity emerge and develop each conversation at the time.

Note

1. For "he" also "she" can be read.

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