Working Version

Transitions of Client Uniformity and Diversity

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the nature of consulting interventions and their impact on producing transitory accounts of identity 'uniformity' and 'diversity' in the client. Despite the growing emphasis in the literature for understanding the different stakeholders comprising the client, little is known about the reasons for which transitions of client identity can exercise impact on the consulting engagement. The paper contributes to this research gap by showing that identity uniformity and diversity remain a transient process regulated by the intensity for achieving a desired state of change. Large transformative projects, like mergers, become an attractive means for introducing uniformity through long-term consulting initiatives. Such initiatives seek to detach the organization's corporate needs from the individual members' interpersonal agendas which might be perceived as obstacle to the making of corporate progress. This paper shows that even though client identity might be temporary subdued by the making of improvement initiatives it is nevertheless not transformed. Instead, clients develop identity clusters that come into direct collision with consulting efforts to produce uniformity. Such outcome is triggered by the client's protectiveness over those social traits which sustain their identity and distinguish them from the organization. The paper advances the literature on client identity and identification by demonstrating how the intensity for change as supported by consulting activity creates a dual predisposition for uniformity but also diversity.

2. Client Identity and Diversity

The study of client identity has been a contested subject of debate in the management consulting literature (Sturdy et al 2009). It is difficult to define the client as a collective entity that is simultaneously comprised by members that can have differing and opposing interests (Sturdy, 1997a). The client is broadly defined as the individual(s) who possess overarching power and decision making role to negotiate the terms of the consulting engagement (Heusinkveld et al., 2011). The client represents the individual(s) who are able to craft the conditions of service and hence determine the consultants' method of intervention as well as accountability for outputs. Such individuals are closely associated with assigned formal authority to exercise control. Client power is situated in the human capacity to make provisions that can shape the method of impact to the organization (Werr and Styhre, 2002).

Despite the decision making role procurement decision makers play, the client is represented by those organizational members who can be indirectly affected by the consultants' decisions but also exercise influence on them (Karreman and Rylander 2008). This client representation encompasses a more collectivist approach not determined by actions from individual members only. In this perspective, the client represents the groups of people who might have the responsibility of working with the consultants but without being involved in the procurement of the service (Sturdy et al., 2009). Such individual are able to disclose sensitive information about the firm's existing performance, the allocation of funding, and can have an active contribution to the implementation of the consulting engagement. Employees represent a key stakeholder group because they can have indirect involvement in the implementation of consulting decisions.

The client members' identification with consulting interventions concern the more nuanced types of associations that members develop at the individual but also collective level (Clark, 1995). Such associations concern instances of support as well as resistance. Clients might remain passive in the course of a consulting engagement. However, such passivity can be of critical influence to the way consultants are able to obtain information as well as communicate their intentions to the organization. Previous studies showed that the consultants' successful as well as failed implementation is often dependent on the clients' involvement and commitment of implementation towards the intended changes (Sturdy et al., 2009; Kipping and Clark,

2012). Clients identify with consultants by means of developing formal as well as informal associations that can foster, as well as, hinder the execution of consulting intensions. Since, not all client members are assigned with an overarching decision making role the innate variation of roles and interests leads to client diversity.

2.2 Consulting interventions as a means to fostering uniformity

Clients use consultants in the quest of introducing improvement initiatives (Schein, 1995) as well as legitimising existing decisions (Sturdy, 2011). Consultants are perceived as a possible resource to mobilise activities that complement internal weaknesses. The conception of organizational problems is a phenomenon rooted within the clients' identification with perceived corporate needs. Consulting initiatives are closely associated with the client's specific operational constrains ((Avakian et al, 2010; Armbrüster, 2006). The consultant is intervening against pre or post identified organizational needs. The study of identity cannot be perceived as a homogenous phenomenon equally consistent across all members. It rather represents a contested area of images and representation that is influenced by those that can exercise power and influence over others (Alvesson et al., 2009). Members often find themselves against a paradox. On the one hand, they are alleged to need to express support against organizational initiatives that seek to advance the firm's interests. On the other hand, improvement initiatives can contribute to sustaining an identity to which they are opposed to because it can bypass deeper and existing organizational differences (Whetten and Godfrey 1998). The relationship between consulting improvement initiatives with the formation and transitions of client identity requires further exploration because it is key area of study for understanding how and why consulting efforts are producing identity transitions.

2.3 Client Diversity and Organizational Constraints

In the current literature the study of client's identity is examined in light of structural similarities and differences between firms on basis of size, sector, products, services, etc (Alvesson et al., 2009). Client homogeneity and diversity have not been explored in light of interpersonal differences within the client firm itself. Alvesson et al (2009) write that "clients are typically presented as relatively unitary, organisational entities with attention given to diversity between firms and projects rather than client diversity

within them" (p.254). Interpersonal differences within the client remain significant as they can determine the invested commitment to supporting a consulting initiative. The study of client identity can help unravel deeper structural but also social tensions that have important relevance for understanding the consultants' work. Types of identity can foster the development of organisational constraints that remain implicit and hidden but yet powerful and influential. Even though the generation of constraints remains difficult to document it is nevertheless clear that the exercise of opposition or resistance can be detrimental to the produced outcomes (Heusinkveld et al 2011; Karreman and Rylander 2009; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brown, 2006).

2.4 Organizational Identity and Identification

The study of identity remains part of the wider discourse on organisational identification (Voss et al., 2006). Identity is understood as the collection of the social attributes that make up a social unit (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Hsu and Hannan (2005) suggest "...organizational identity consists of social codes, or sets of rules, specifying the features that an organisation is expected to possess. These codes represent default expectations held by audiences about organizational properties and constraints over properties" (p.475). This definition underlines the explicit and implicit expectations individuals create under a collective sense of purpose. By referring to 'codes' authors underline the repeated behaviour and norms that complement such behaviour. The development of organisational identity emerges out of the given but also developing conditions of the social environment and cannot be created *a priory*. Hence, the study of the social conditions remains significant for understanding how identity is produced. According to Humphreys and Brown (2002), Scott and Lane (2000) the driving force behind identity development is *intention* (see also Gioia et al., 2010). Intention refers to drives and motives that create purpose and meaning in the activities between individuals that contribute to developing the initial pattern (Fiol, 2002). According to Alvesson, et al (2009) client identity remains subjected to inherent differences within the client system. For example, the different job roles people possess, the different interests and responsibilities that they carry, encompass an inevitable force towards constructing the client's identity. What is not explored in the paper concerns the implications of client identity and diversity (Sturdy et al., 2009). Accounts of identity are maintained as long as the norms, values and interpretations

that sustain that repeated behaviour are maintained. Whereas identity is concerned with the study of a behavioural pattern, diversity is the study of the relationship between similar or different behavioural patterns (Glynn, 2000). Hence, organisations can comprise different identities maintained across and between different individuals (Trevion 1985; Hardy et al., 2005).

3. Methodology

The study of identity requires the need to deploy a social constructionist methodological approach because perceptions of identity are formed in the course of experiencing transitions and change (Alvesson et al., 2009). Identity is subjected to interpretations of roles that help create uniformity but also exclusion within a group. The study of organisational identity requires an appreciation of the social context in which perceptions are developed. According to Hatch and Schultz (2002) "identity is a relational construct formed in interaction with others" (p.992). Gioia et al. (2010) note that "...identity involves members' negotiation of shared meanings about 'what we are as an organization' and places the focus of attention on the shared interpretive schemes that members collectively construct to provide meaning to their organizational experiences" (p.5).The study of language but also the interaction between the people and the social units that they represent contribute to forming organisational identity. Conversation help enact the organisational reality and can be best understood by obtaining real-time access to the participants.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

 We obtained longitudinal access to a recently formed organisation based in the UK which resulted from the merger of three different higher education colleges. In order to protect the identity of the institution we refer to it with the pseudonym 'Central College' (CC). The merger took place in 2006 and as a result of a series of economic pressures that mainly stemmed from the reduction of government funding. The UK government led the initiative of higher education colleges merging as a way of reducing the duplication of resources and expenditure. The merger occurred in 2006. However, a series of consulting initiatives were followed after the merger. Such initiatives were aimed at responding to auditing and evaluation conditions administered by the *Office for Standards in Education* (Ofsted). The college engaged

in four major consulting projects in an effort to create greater consistency over its teaching and learning practices and across the different colleges. Prior to the merger the three higher educational colleges operated autonomously and with possessing their own government structure but also organizational culture. The merger created a series of important pressures for staff with directly affecting their work output.

Data for this project has been collected through three primary sources, namely, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and reports produced by the college's senior management team and the consultants. Semi-structured interviews represent an appropriate qualitative method for collecting data for this project. This is because the researchers are able to enquire on how the organizational members perceive their relationship to the college prior, during and after the consulting programmes. Thirty semi-structured interviews have been scheduled out of which eighteen have already been carried out. The interviewees were selected from all three colleges. Table 1 provides a sample of the interviews that participated in the project to date.

Table 1: Interviewees and their positions in the college

Interviewees	Position
1	Senior Lecturer (*Interviewee A*), Network Services (*Interviewee B*)
1	Deputy Facilities Manager (*Interviewee C*)
1	Learning Support Officer *(Interviewee D)*
3	Curriculum Managers (*Interviewees E, F, G*)
1	College Principle (*Interviewee H*)
1	Deputy Principle (*Interviewee I*)
2	Course Leader IT (*Interviewee J*)
3	Curriculum Leader (*Interviewees K, L, M*)
2	Higher Education and Skills Manager (*Interviewees N, O*)
1	Head of Quality (*Interviewee P*)
1	Head of Human Resources (*Interviewee R*)
1	Adult Work and Learning Manager (*Interviewee S*)

Source: The author

As Table 2 shows we collected data from reports produced by the consulting providers but also from the college's senior management team. Such documentation contains information about the design and structure of the consulting arrangements in terms of the organizational area requiring improvement. Such documentation helped the authors access the senior management teams' thinking of how to foster integration by communicating a message for change and growth. In this documentation evaluation reports concerns Ofsted's recommendations regarding improving student retention by embedding greater leadership skills onto teaching staff but also the curriculum management team. The authors were also able to collect data through participant observation over a consulting training programme regarding the management of the learners' experience. The programme is perceived as particularly crucial for securing

the ongoing providence of funding by the UK government and for ensuring that CC continues to have access to resources.

Table 2: Reports

Source	Content	Issues
Consulting reports	220 Pages	The restructuring scope Educational outputs Teaching and learning
Government assessment and evaluation reports	78 Pages	Reports on quality assessment and teaching
Senior management report	49 Pages	Internal evaluation of the consulting programmes Internal communication strategy for training and development

4. Current Findings

Our research findings indicate that identity transitions within mergers are strongly driven by two drives. The first drive is fuelled by the consultants' involvement in creating an organizational representation in which change becomes a necessary precondition to sustainability. Consulting initiatives help detach prior existing associations, clients produced, with the result of aiding the importance of uniformity. Such uniformity is based on cognitive associations centred on the organization's *future-becoming* and thus ensuring survival. An identity *for* uniformity is largely embedded on how employees perceive their association with the organization. Such identity remains influential because it creates purpose and meaning for action where interpersonal differences can be considered as a possible threat when they jeopardise the merger. The second drive that fuels transition concerns the importance of disassociation and dissonance across members. We identify that following the

consulting programmes traces of identity-ambiguity are swiftly developing across members. Such ambiguity is associated with the perceived impasse that is strongly attached to already existing identity ties. Clients exercise resistance because of their inability to translate existing identity clusters onto the organization's future identity-position. The diversity of the identity clusters becomes the principle cause of tension that leads to identity variation. This paper shows that in large change transformation projects identity transitions move between two levels. The first is the normative state which is advocated by the need for continuity. Achieving a degree of detachment between the immediate members and organization's survival-needs/interests is necessary for creating consensus. The findings show that even though clients might express consensus they trigger opposition. Such opposition results because of perceived identity vacuums between their present and future desired identity state.

4.1 Identity uniformity through detachment

Consulting interventions allow for the development of new identity-associations that seek to transform existing ties. The consultants' discourse is underpinned by strong expressions of rationalisation for the achieving the benefits stemming from the improvement initiatives. The client organization is treated as an entity which requires transformational changes in order to be able to survive against institutional pressures (i.e. changes in government regulation and funding). The rationalisation of improvement initiatives focuses on the need towards reconciling internal agendas between different stakeholder groups with the result of promoting the organization's own self-interests. Such endeavour is creating a paradox. On the one hand, the organization needs to remain separate from the employees' disagreements/conflicts. On the other hand, a call for unity is triggering deeper considerations in employees for how the self and group conflicting interests can become threatening to the organizations' survival, continuity and positive performance. The creation of a 'uniformed identity' is promoted as able to overcome internal differences. This idea is well captured from the following excerpts where the interviewees reiterate the importance of a common front. Unless staff are able to integrate, the possibility of a growing fragmentation could have immediate repercussions to the quality of teaching and learning delivered to students. Such development would have long-term implications for the running of the college which extends to getting access to public

funding. The notion of 'oneness' is repetitively uttered by the consultants' programmes and also echoed through the interviewees. It becomes a necessary precondition for accepting any possibility for achieving viable progress. In doing so, it challenges already existing implicit differences members already share. The consultants' need for creating conviction for members adhering to 'one direction' remains a crucial argumentative tactic that seeks to reinforce a single identity.

> Well, for me, I just felt that it was great to have some investment in my development and my identity with understand what college expected of me (*Interviewee S)*
>
> Yes. Yes, becoming a single college (*Interviewee R*)
>
> Harmonisation. This is a few years ago now but my memory was that the focus was on supporting our harmonisation (*Interviewee O*)

The organization becomes an entity whose survival dependents on meeting certain conditions. The objectification of the organization as a neutral entity that requires support and changes creates a metaphorical space for negotiation. Visualising the merged organizations into a single entity becomes a creative imaginative exercise where members need to cognitively visualise potential scenarios and their implications for their work and welfare. By distinguishing the 'current' from a 'future' state the consulting programs forces members to reconsider their positions but also input to the organization. Such discourse creates a series of adverse reactions regarding the members' interpretation and accommodation of 'oneness'. It forces members to think for how they detach themselves from deeper associations and interests so that they can achieve a new state of identity-transition. Concerns are bypassed on the basis of the organization's needed survival with the result of pushing members to associate with the 'new identity'.

> In terms of management, the first management consultancy and actually big leadership management push where we're all one college, we're all supposed to be working together, we're all supposed to be pushing in the same direction, and we want our leaders and managers to embrace certain qualities and abilities. I think that the concerns that they were trying to address was the consistency, making clear what people's responsibilities were, and making clear what the expectations of being a leader or a manager within [the institution] mean. And giving people a

chance to examine themselves, their own strengths and weaknesses. Examine their practice, talk to other people about shared ideas, shared good practice. And all of that really smacks to me of trying to get some sort of consistent approach. (*Interviewee F*).

The timing at which the clients consider the positive or/and negative implications of a united culture is influenced by the consultants' timing of intervention. As the following interviewee denotes, the senior management team's systematic endeavours of training delivery comprised of a series of consulting initiatives (i.e. programmes) which were run at different intervals. Such programmes were seeking to bring everyone together under one homogenous message. However 'getting the same message' has not been a merely linguistic exercise. Rather, it has been an effort towards promoting social embededdness against an idealised view the firm's function and performance. This is a key variation to the development of a 'new identity'. People are invited to reconsider how they need to accommodate a new or/and different understanding that can advance the organization's interests. Moreover, the client members need to consider how they fit into the organization in a way that can make such integration possible. Such observation demonstrates that the client members' association with the change initiative remained an ongoing process where people felt fluctuating degrees of 'attachment' as well as 'detachment' with the organization. The following excerpt captures the different level of rational and emotional associations members were encouraged to make. The interviewee expresses surprise for whether such change-programme was able to have any permanent effect on peoples' behaviour. This paper seeks to highlight that clients reach a new level of *intensity* for considering their integration. The timing of such intensity remains significant for appreciating how and why members become attached to the consultants' improvement discourse. The below interviewee suggests that, at one level, there is clear reference to how the programmes encourage a greater need for association and hence attachment. However, at another level, this state of the members' perceived agreement is also questioned. The interviewee implies that there are different competing feelings and people are endeavouring to sense-make the direction that they need to follow. This is the reasons for which the interviewee states that such agreement could remain superfluous "whether that's reality I don't know".

I think it is, but mainly because of the way that those programmes bring everyone together on an equal basis and everyone's getting the same message. And so therefore there's a feeling that everyone should be carrying out what is deemed appropriate from the top. Whether that's reality, I don't know. But there's a feeling, by going through those processes together, there's a feeling that at least there's a chance that everyone's operating in the same way. And I could have the same expectation of the manager next to me. (*Interviewee, K*)

The same view is also expressed by the following interviewee who makes direct reference to the experienced *resistance* that was made evident by the clients that participated in the consulting programmes. Such resistance encompasses a wider reaction to becoming part of a new organization that has a new scope and identity. The clients' deeper resentment is rooted in the members' beliefs that such initiative remains unnecessary but also irrelevant. The clients' lack integration is intertwined with

I remember about that was that to start with there was quite a lot of resistance. A, to being forced to do it, and because of the time commitments, because a lot of the curriculum managers when we went down to curriculum leader and support staff supervisor level as well, so it went down to the next tier of management. And obviously some people felt that it was a waste of time and that sort of thing. And weren't in agreement with what we were trying to achieve. *(Interviewee, M)*.

Our findings has shown that consulting interventions can intensify the perceived need for complying with transformational change initiatives. By promoting reasons that can help justify the need for becoming a 'single' organization consultants are able to help the client members detach the organization from their personal and collective agendas. However, this is creating an identity-gap for how existing identity ties can be translated into the new and envisaged organizational state.

4.2 Identity disassociation and dissonance

The making of consulting efforts for fostering uniformity in the organization are triggering deeper reactions across client members. Such reactions are not evident during the running of the consulting programmes. They become difficult to document as can comprise of feelings and interpretations which are not often made explicit to the researcher. However, there is evidence of the clients wanting to disassociate from

the organization and move against this message of unity. Even though such behaviour appears to be emerging as a direct reaction to the consulting programme, it is suggested that it remains the outcome of the growing perceived ambiguity for managing existing identity ties. Hence, resistance is triggered by two particular factors. The first is the intensity with which the envisaged future identity is seeking to replace the existing one. The second, is the lack of consideration for addressing the produced vacuum members experience for simultaneously reconciling future *and* existing identity ties. This tension is in agreement with the observation made by Clark et al (2010) who note that the initiative to introduce transformational change goes much deeper than incremental efforts to change whose implications of restructuring might not be radical. "Such identity change is both profound, because it calls into question basic assumptions about organizational identity, and highly complex, because it requires coordination and integration across organizations" (p.398). The initiative for achieving a transformative identity change requires the altering of core beliefs about purpose and existence (Livengood and Reger, 2010). In light of the logic of this argument we seek to differentiate between temporary feelings of resistance/support with demonstrations of a permanent behaviour. Even though members can be reluctant to embrace a new state of change the making of the peoples' transitions remains crucial for appreciating the reasons for accepting or rejecting an identity transition. The following excerpt discusses the interviewee's experience in recounting the felt implications of the consulting initiative. The interviewee discusses the questionable lasting degree of change as this was perceived by the various members. The interviewee alludes to 'other stuff changes around you' with the intention of highlighting the fluid and changing state of the transition. This observation highlight the transitory nature of the consulting intervention which is creating deeper reactions of 'identity-belonging'. People can change their felt association with the 'idealised' but also 'actual' state of identity with the result of supporting or resisting to the identity transition.

> I don't know whether it took everyone with it, whether we took everyone with us. And then afterwards, I think I've tried to explain that I think it kind of lasts for a while but other stuff changes around you and so therefore it's hard to tell after a while, what impact it's having (*Interviewee J*)

This view is more strongly supported by the following interviewee who makes direct reference to the members' difficulty to 'let go'. However, this is not a generic reference to accepting a change initiative only. The consulting initiative had triggered deeper reactions to the members' sense of belonging that had an enduring and permanent felt presence. Members of the different organizations want to sustain their old positions because they do not want to lose their already existing identity. This is the reasons for which explicit reference is made to having "a distinct identity of their own and there was clearly reluctance to let go". This state of identity transitions is well captured by the work by Ravasi and Schultz, (2006) where they explore how transitions of identity can be threatened when there is absence of a sense-making platform that creates meaning and order. This paper shows that consultants reinforce an idealised image of a becoming organization which is triggering impressions about identity abandonment which cannot be easily replaced. This point of transition creates a vacuum where the client members' individual reactions are leading to the formation of different micro-identities of people that share similarities but also differences between them. This is clearly captured in the interviewee and when making reference to 'each college establishing their own culture, their own sense of being'.

> There was a feel of separateness in a number of instances. You were very conscious particularly of [A] who were... there were signs, different times in conversations or at meetings, you were very aware that [B] felt they had a distinct identify of their own and there was clearly a reluctance to let go of that. I think each of the colleges had established their own culture, their own sense of being, a certain camaraderie I think between individual teams that worked closed together, and you could feel that, and bringing it together with people working cross college. It's a slow process and I think there's always a sense that those that have been here the longest perhaps will find the changes harder than people arriving more newly. (*Interviewee, O*)

The data shows that following the consulting initiatives clients are hovering over emotions and reflections which are deeply rooted to perceptions about 'gains' and 'losses'. The interviewees discuss the experienced transition and how members continue to grabble with the new associations and how they might overcome previous relationships. The members' development of disassociations take time to realise and comprise of deeply subjective associations which can remain well. The following interviewee alludes to the existing traces of the 'old organization' which includes the retention of its name. The physical layout of the buildings and their operations as

distinct units remains part of the original structure. The interviewee is explicit for how the 'old identity' remains present by suggesting that "it still exists as a brand". Such reference goes beyond the physical recognition of the building's title. Instead, it seeks to reinforce the idea that the earlier felt separation continues to dominate. The consulting initiative has triggered deeper reactions which happen to produce the opposite outcome of that which was initiated. The fact that no consideration was paid to tangible characteristics (e.g. the physical layout of the buildings, labelling, staff, etc) shows that little attention was paid to such underlying layers of identity-attachment.

> Yes, of course. There's nothing more complex than an organisation when it's in mid change in harmonisation. I know that's... so, yes, indeed the whole organisation absolutely was called CC then, but there was very much still of [X] we still have the separate branding. It still exists as a brand and I personally think that could be why an element of that culture occasionally raises itself because the labelling is still there and it ties in even to the buildings, where they were, and where the staff are in place who will have been in post, some of them for so many years, going back prior to harmonisation. (*Interviewee E*)

The following excerpt alludes to the sense-making process by which client members are seeking to adapt to the new organizational environment and its expectations. The interviewee's view of how it is still not "a single engine" affirms the earlier made observations of how the transformation programme experienced a reluctant commitment. Identity clusters comprise of the more individual/collective networks people develop that sustains their associations and thus creates meaning and purpose. Clinging onto "things familiar" underlines the ongoing identity concerns about purpose and direction. The interviewee's reference to the remnants of the physical artefact (e.g. the building) remains an interesting observation. It highlights the physical presence and how it continues to reinforce earlier associations. The building as well as the names used on them become symbolic vehicles for continuing to carry representations. We seek to underline how such representations can be seen to exercise a more powerful effect when seen against the consultants' urgency for developing unity. Despite the fact that the merger has taken place the concerned members do not want to integrate because they find difficult to translate how their existing identity ties can be replaced by a new identity. The interviewee's inability to explain this

ambiguous identity transition affirms the complexities associated with explaining the socio-emotional reasons that lead to a behavioural pattern.

> Sometimes they take their time for people to work through and to adjust to new cultures, a more shared environment and a blend. I think in many aspects of life that can take a while. There seems to be an inherent reluctance for much of humanity to adopt change. We seem to cling onto things familiar, whether it's an old sweater or a building, don't we? I'm not sure I completely feel we're a single engine yet and yet if you ask me to express why, I couldn't give you an example (*Interviewee G*)

Clients engage in various interpretations for sense-making their transition to the desired identity state. The data demonstrates that the depth and scale of transformational change is creating an important identity-vacuum in which members are seeking to complement through their existing identity ties. As a result, clients develop identity-clusters which are reinforced by implicit but also explicit elements. The members' grabbling experience is intensified by the consultants' contributions for unity.

5. Findings, Implications and Conclusion

This paper argues that consulting interventions for introducing transformative efforts towards a change of identity in organisation experience a twofold behavioural pattern. The first pattern is the timely nature of the consulting interventions which help stimulate rational propositions of unity. At this point, consultants help construct an important imagery of 'organizational becoming' (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) where the existing identity is pushed towards a *desired* stage of transformation. Even through such consulting initiatives are positively welcomed by members, such acceptance is grounded on the possible detachment between two patterns. The first pattern is the members' rational perceptions of the organization as a system, which requires considerable and ongoing transformative changes that can sustain its survival in its industry. The second pattern is the adverse reactions that a uniform message is triggering to the clients members' already attached associations to their own identity. Client members strive towards maintaining their existing identity because it reinforces current properties of their identity structure and which extends their locus of control.

The fear of abandoning their existing identity is rooted in the absence of transitory framework that demonstrates how the desired/new identity can allow for such continuity. As a result, clients find themselves in a tension between accepting the rational soundness of the proposed identity, whilst developing resentment for the identity that they are leaving behind. This study found that the nature of the consulting improvement programmes are favouring a rationalistic interpretation of organizational change. This is because cognitive reason is the principle driving force for creating justification for the change initiatives and their added-value of the. This view is also supported by the work of Ravasi and Schultz (2006) who write that: "External occurrences that challenge an organization's claims are likely to trigger responses aimed at countering identity threatening events and preserving personal and external representations of what the organization is or stands for" (p.435). This view underlines that transformational identity transitions can be perceived as threatening. Hence, defending an existing identity becomes a coping mechanism by members for ensuring a sense of continuity and that their perceived interests are maintained.

The findings of this paper have clear theoretical implications for understanding the triggering mechanism between the reasons for which attachment and detachment to identity-projections are occurring. The consultants' work acts as an auxiliary resource that fostering a perceived intensity for change and the making of organizational improvements. The consultants' presence adds to the advocacy for a course of change. The consultants' activity in the client carries symbolic connotations and underpin deeper intentions as these are maintained by senior client members who commission the consulting programme. Client reactions to existing identity associations take place over time and in the course of the client members who exercise a sense-making activity between a) their current state and b) the desired/normative state. Client members follow different directions in the way they decide to support or resist identity projects because of their already existing attachments and associated rooted to fundamental beliefs and values.

The consulting literature has been limited in exploring how identity representations are deeply embedded in emotional states across members. This is especially so for when senior client members seek to reinforce a particular meaning or/and interpretation for a desired behavioural pattern. Moreover, there is a distinct absence in the literature for conceptualising between explicit identity manifestations, as these are supported openly by management consultants, with how deeper and more

nuanced reactions are generated by clients over time; and which might implicitly challenge such identity propositions. This paper shows that there is a direct relationship between the triggering of a transformative organizational identity transition with causing deeper reactions that produce a counteractive effect from that which is initially anticipated.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this paper show that consulting programmes can be used as a long-term strategic tool by clients for introducing a transformational change programme. Transformative change comprises of challenging fundamental beliefs and assumptions members developed with the organization over time. Our findings show that even though consulting programs can be instrumental for justifying a normative position regarding where the organization needs to be, nevertheless, it can create important new identity gaps. The consulting programs are triggering new reactions of association to members with the result of creating a state of 'identity-ambiguity'. Supporting or rejecting change initiatives come to be intertwined with perceived identity associations. Clients may cognitively accept the rational basis of supporting a transformative change programme. However, they find difficult to overcome their own identity ties with the result of experiencing an important impasse. Even though clients that initiate consulting programmes can associate the success or failure with the quality of the consulting initiative, this study shows that such interpretation bypasses important considerations about the power of existing identities ties members carry in the organization. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) rightly note that "research on social cognition in organizations has shown how ambiguity regarding issues or events requires members to engage in constructing or reconstructing shared interpretations, allowing coordinated collective action (Gioia, 1986; Weick, 1979, 1995" (p. 446) The paper's theoretical implications concerns the advancement of understanding the more nuanced relationships between consulting interventions and the reactions produced at the cognitive but also socio-emotional level. Consulting interventions are seeking to foster an idealised corporate identity that seeks to detach organizational concerns from internal barriers that can help generate progress. However, this paper identifies that such relationship does not remains feasible. The making of cognitive projections but also the making of rational representations about the future becoming across

members carries significant concerns deeply embedded into the specific social context. The trigger of personalised concerns about identity remain crucial for how and why the organizational members are able to achieve a state of transition. An organization is not able to proceed a desired state of transforming its identity unless it is able to achieving an ongoing sense-making mechanism that is able to address the members' concerns.

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