

Manifestations of Moral Legitimacy in the Client Consultant Relationship

WORKING VERSION

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Management Consultancy: Exploring the Boundaries and Alternatives

Abstract

This paper offers new insights for understanding the exercise of moral legitimation in the consultant client relationship. The paper argues that the consultants' objectivity and independence help generate moral legitimacy in the client because of specific power and competitive challenges that client managers face in decision making roles. By making use of the theory of 'moral seduction' and 'strategic issue cycling' the paper demonstrates that clients seek to legitimise their intentions for using consultants because of the perceived benefits that can be achieved by generating changes. The paper identifies that moral legitimacy happens because of specific outputs that clients want to accomplish in the organisation as well as procedures where externality and independence helps alleviate internal tensions. Organisational outputs concern the implications and consequences of decisions with regards to the wider common good. Organisational procedures concern the processes and operations with which transparency and accountability are displayed in making decisions. By making use of extensive empirical data from consultants and clients the paper demonstrates the severity of the internal political challenges and the indirect solutions consultants seem to provide because through their externality and independence.

Introduction

In the client-consultant relationship the moral dimension has mainly been discussed in the context of business interests consultants often pursue at the expense of the clients' needs (Poulsen, 1997). Academics and practitioners have widely discussed the type of professional code of conduct that needs to govern the relationship (Loeb, 1984; Newton, 1982; Peacock and Pelfrey, 1991). The establishment of institutions are believed to regulate the consultants' practices but only help fulfil a superficial role and without preventing the consultants' manipulation of clients (Greenwood et. al., 1996; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Other authors have also argued for how the increased scrutiny and positive intervention of such professional bodies help regulate the consultants' practices and protect the vulnerability of potential clients (Barker and Curnow, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Woodward and Williams, 2003; Exton, 1982).

The aim of this paper is to examine how moral legitimation takes place in the consultant client relationship. We are interested in deconstructing how normative values are created and collectively shared between members. We make use of Suchman's (1995) typology and concentrate on two broad areas of discussion drawn out of his four dimensions: a) evaluation of outputs and consequences, b) evaluation of techniques and procedures, c) evaluation of categories and structure and d) evaluation of leaders and representatives.

In the first part of the paper we discuss how moral legitimacy is performed in relation to outputs and consequences clients pursue to achieve in relation to already existing established power relations. Clients place emphasis on outputs and consequences that challenge the exercise of power between actors sharing equal or more senior authority. In the second part of the paper we concentrate on the dimension of procedural legitimacy where emphasis is given on the moral character with which activities and procedures are undertaken to produce outcomes. We identify that in procedural types of legitimation clients place emphasis on the emergence of impressions and how perceptions of power relations and vested interests get established (Lavin, 1976). Moral legitimacy is argued to be achieved when consultants help alleviate internal political biases that organisational actors seek to avoid. This is in order to continue to experience the support of their members or to achieve their managerial objectives.

The paper identifies a strong correlation between the exercise of moral legitimacy and the consultants' perceived image of political neutrality towards the client's domestic competitive interests. At a broad level, clients make use of the above normative values in relation to consequential, procedural, or, structural decision making. The implications of the consultants' image are intimately related with existing power relations between client members. Clients

use the consultant's assumed normative qualities to win support over the making of a decision. We differentiate the context in which moral legitimation has been discussed in the literature from the framework of a 'professional code of conduct'. Instead, we identify how moral legitimation is not just subjected to the locus of the interaction but to the political interests and intentions as manifested *within* the client members themselves. The consultants' moral legitimation is not only determined by how consultants govern their activities with clients but by the internal subjectivity of the client which can determine how the consultants' interventions are *interpreted*. At this point, we identify how clients with limited authority exercise pressure against their superiors. To what extent such pressure can be characterised as 'moral', or 'immoral' is subject to further interpretation. However, contrary to the often expressed view of how the consultants' image only serves a symbolic management arena and which is governed with the projection of management of impressions, we argue how the client's use of consultants plays a more instrumental and substantial role in the organisation's state of affairs than is often represented. We illustrate the above thesis not only by demonstrating the occurring organisational changes in the structure but also in the power relations between members.

Research Context

Moral legitimacy and the professional codes of conduct

In a recent article published by the *Washington Post*, O'Harrow (2007) refers to the experience of the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the US, and their contract relationship with Booz Allen Hamilton. The project started from \$2 million and over the course of the next two years grew to £124 million. DHS's increasing dependence on Booz Allen Hamilton and the lack of entry from other competitors meant an unprecedented degree of expenditure being loosely regulated by the people on the project. O'Harrow (2007) states that: "By December 2004, payments to Booz Allen had exceeded \$30 million – 15 times the contract's original value. When the department examined the deal they found it was "grossly beyond the scope" of the original contract, and believed that the arrangement violated government procurement rules. The lawyers advised the department to immediately stop making payments through the contract and allow other companies to compete for the work" (p. A01). Even though the above dispute did not take further legal dimensions as it was DHS's responsibility to regulate their relationship with the consultants, the *moral* side of the consultants' increase of fees (\$124 million from what was a \$2 million project) came to question.

The study of management consultancy has been characterised for its sensitivities in the way consultants address the clients' organisational needs. The ambiguity that governs the term 'professional service' and the absence of a commonly accredited body of knowledge from which such practices are exercised, has given rise to discussions for the clients' possible vulnerability (Gable, 1996, Clark, 1995). Claims of possessing 'knowledge-expertise' are not regulated through a legal framework, but through institutions having local or international presence. The creation of accredited bodies, like the Institute of Management Consultancies Association (IMCA) are recent and important initiatives to counteract the above absence. However, the adoption and exercise of the management consulting title is still subject to individuals' initiatives when changing careers, or entering into the industry (Newman, 1993). In management consulting activities the distribution and communication of advice co-emerges through the dialectic relationship between organisational actors (Clark, 1995; Nachum, 1999, Newton, 1982). The process of meeting the clients' needs cannot be simply predefined or confined within the features of a product/package (Brignall et. al., 1991). It is rather subject to the interaction and the means which consultants detect and satisfy the clients' needs. The potential vulnerability of the clients however, is an issue that has been

extensively discussed in the literature (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b). This is mainly because such professional service is governed by power relations and uncertainty which makes difficult to measure the nature of the clients' needs against the consultants' service (Shapiro et. al., 1993; Poulfelt, 1997). Schein (2002) argues how any consulting interaction is subject to a power relationship between the one who is believed to provide the solution against the one who recognises the need for help. Schein (2002) describes the above power relationship saying: "Just being asked for help is a tremendously empowering situation in that it implies that the client endows the consultant with the capacity to help..." (p.23). The process of delivering an advisory service is highly subjected to the actors' way of managing the projected positions of 'need' as well as 'support'.

Professional code of conduct

Moral legitimation has been discussed in the literature in the context of a professional code of conduct where the specification of clients' needs is somehow regulated against the consultants' distribution of service (Poulfelt, 1997; Høivik and Føllesdal, 1995; Loeb, 1984). Such regulation cannot be determined by written frameworks or through the creation of 'quality standards'. However, the adopted principles are thought to act as ethical guidelines in which consultants need to demonstrate qualities of: fairness, integrity, transparency, and the avoidance of manipulation (Newton, 1982; Hagenmeyer, 2007¹; Coulson-Thomas, 2003).

A professional code of conduct can concern dimensions like: a) keeping terms of confidentiality for the information disclosed and preventing its distribution to competitors. b) Showing qualities of integrity and honesty through which consultants conduct their daily practices (i.e. showing transparency for the information produced). c) Avoid efforts to manipulate the client with representing different realities and in order to sustain/extend the business contract (Ozley and Armenakis, 2000; De Sonnaville, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Exton, 1982). Barker and Curnow (2003) state how the demonstrated behaviours of professionalism and ethics should contain features where the consultant: "Ensures professional advice given is technically sound and relevant to client needs, values diversity in terms of culture, religion, race and gender, is courteous, reliable and responsive in dealing with others, respects confidentiality, engenders trust" (p.74). The creations of such professional codes of conduct

¹Hagenmeyer (2007) illustrate the value in having a professional code of ethics stating: "The guiding idea of an integrative management consulting ethics provides consultants who want to understand themselves as people of integrity with a compass to guide them through their daily consulting activities. It helps them to reflect on their own self-image and arrive at independent judgments among the potential conflicts of interest they encounter in practice. It also helps them identify ethically justifiable courses of action" (p.112).

are aimed at securing the clients' trust in the consultant. Also, to discipline member that do not comply with it. Consulting firms that are not part of such bodies usually adopt their own code of conduct as they themselves regulate the parameters that constitute it². Apart from the positive benefits such accredited bodies are thought to generate for their members, there has been an increased demand for the emergences of institutions that provide accreditation practices (Goode, 1957; Hall, 1968; Greenwood et. al., 1996). Such institutions aim at producing a professional identity and legitimise consulting practices which in turn help secure the consultants' perceived credibility (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Fincham, 1999). Such legitimation however is characterised for its superficiality because it helps create certainty that favours the consultants' business interests and does not protect the vulnerability of the client (Kieser, 1997; Alvesson, 2001; Byrne, 2000). As a result, the consultants' power to create impressions of value and the intentions to manipulate the client's understanding are very much existing features of the relationship. Authors that support this critical approach argue how discourses about accreditation practices help reduce the bad publications the industry is often associated with (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). Nevertheless, the significant issue concerns their associated influence to legitimation. Clients are encouraged to embrace consultants who are following such a professional codes of conduct from those who are not.

Moral legitimacy & the consultants' image of independence

Most of the discussion around moral legitimation focuses around the context of the interpersonal interaction between clients and consultants. We want to propose that an equally important aspect of moral legitimation is situated around the clients' internal organisational environment, and the relationship between members in which competitive interests and power relations are at play. This paper argues that there is a strong correlation between the clients' internal political tensions with the consultants' image of externality, independence and objectivity. The fact that consultants do not share the history, culture, and interests of the organisational members is thought to provide a sense of objectivity which shares an inherent authority of morality and credibility.

² For example, prestigious strategy consulting firms, like McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group, are not members of IMCI.

Moral legitimation & Independence

The consultants' qualities of independence and externality are used within a *moral* connotation by clients which helps create credibility (Moore et al. 2006). Such moral dimension provides an array of collective responsibilities and for which social support is required by other client members. Moore et. al., (2006) characterise the above political activity stating: "political lobbying will be less unseemly and more persuasive to the degree it can be plausibly justified in terms of the broader social good" (p.16). As a result, personal initiatives, or project interests, are not perceived as selfish attempts to satisfy individual interests. Moral legitimation is achieved because of the moral attributes with which the consultants' image of independence and objectivity are associated with. In proposing the above argument, we draw support for making the above relationship, by the work of Moore et. al., (2006). The authors' study concentrated on the use of external auditors from large accounting and consulting firms (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers, Arthur Andersen) and their use by corporations like Enron, WorldCom, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Fast Track Savings and Loans and others. Their study concentrates on examining why the creation of government policies and the institutional establishment of similar bodies by the US government have led to the experience of disastrous results. Moore et. al., (2006) argue how the experienced failure of such business cases can be attributed to conflicts of interest, and a lack of appreciating how the perceived qualities of 'independence' cannot be achieved through the establishment of institutional bodies that are thought to regulate practices. The authors propose a theoretical framework that is based on the notion of 'moral seduction' and 'strategic issue cycling' in order to explain the above. Both of the above theoretical dimensions are also apparent in our study and help support our thesis.

By 'moral seduction' Moore et. al., (2006) argue for how organisational actors make attempts to construct conceptual links for how the auditors, or the consultants' independence, contains ethical attributes that help justify their actions. The authors describe the above stating: "moral seduction proposes that ethical lapses are more likely to occur gradually, as the result of the process of escalation, than they are to occur rapidly. Given that ethical standards often create gray areas of ambiguous ethical propriety, people will find themselves crossing into the zone of ethical violation after they have first committed actions that are ambiguous in their appropriateness" (Moore et. al., 2006:22). The notion of 'moral seduction' is used to characterize the ideal and normative attributes that corporations want to ascribe to external auditors, but which through them also want to fulfill their own corporate interests that might not be morally based. In our study of the consultant-client relationship, we can

think as to how this could apply in the way clients help legitimise their own actions towards their members, by demonstrating their association with the consultants' perceived independence. Clients are believed to be in a better position of defending the validity of their propositions/actions, by widening the scope of the interests to moral and collective implications.

Through the notion of 'strategic issue cycling' Moore et. al., (2006) argue how the substantiation of such alleged moral claims are gradually embedded into the cognitive schemata, or organisational structures. When claims are made about the consultants' independence/externality and their attached moral attributes, such claims can contain elements of ambiguity that are not directly made apparent/explicit to members. Rather, there is a gradual process in which the ambiguity becomes accepted through conversations over time. As a result, the use of 'issue cycling' is used in order to explain the integration of perceptions of independence by auditors/consultants, in a way that does not challenge the alleged credibility by the actors that pronounce it in the first place. The authors support the above by stating: "the theory of issue cycling outlined...implies that special interest groups will be more effective at achieving the interests of their members when their motives for seeking special advantage for their members are effectively veiled behind explanations that invoke more virtuous motives. Indeed, the direct and declared attempt to pursue one's self-interest at the expense of society as a whole will be rare, because such naked power grabs are both unseemly and ineffective" (Moore et. al., 2006:22). This notion of 'issue cycling' is not being made explicit used because actors want to simply manipulate and deceive others to support a given decision. But, as Moore et. al., (2006) claim, it is a psychological outcome where the individual's inherent belief and personal bias makes it logical for them to want to generate support or defend their 'right' position: "People appear to evaluate evidence in a selective fashion when they have a stake in reaching a particular conclusion" (p.17).

Methodology

The study of moral legitimation requires the application of a qualitative methodology in order to understand the subjective experience of decision making across consultants and clients. For this study twenty six interviews was collected, thirteen with consultants and thirteen with clients. Barriers to access meant that the author was not able to obtain data from consultants and clients that worked on the same projects. However, by conducting in depth semi-structured interviews, the author was able to obtain rich data and from a wide range of participants that ranged from the private and public sector.

The data analysis took place in three stages. The first stage included transcribing the interviews onto text and understanding the narratives the participants disclosed. At this stage the author was able to identify the social context that governed the interviewees' experiences with the result of appreciating the weight of tensions. By going through the text several times the author was able to detect the triggers that created the felt challenges. For example, in discussing the history of the organisation's growth the author was able to appreciate how inertia to change was deeply embedded to individual achievements that senior members accomplished in the past. The narratives managed to disclose the felt burden but also the underpinning reasons for which clients made use of consultants. The second stage of analysis concerned selecting the relevant sections that where moral legitimation was more vividly displayed. Guided by the Suchman's (1995) moral legitimation framework the analysis concentrated on understanding how legitimation was exemplified in terms of outcomes and consequences as well as procedures. In selecting accounts where outcome was significant the author was able to detect the deeper political tensions in the client for bringing change and challenging the already established status quo. Here, the consultants' potential consequences were interpreted in light of the harsh interpersonal frictions where change and decision making remained fragmented. In selecting accounts where procedures became the focus of attention moral legitimacy was examined in light of the role and invested interests that parties played in the course of decision making. As Table 1 illustrates the use of relevant texts helped group relevant themes which underpinned a specific trend of interpretation by the interviewees.

The third stage of the analysis involved the analysis of the relationship between the themes themselves. At this stage, the work by Moore et al (2006) became influential in helping provide a theoretical framework through which the author was able to explain how moral legitimation happens. By making use of the theory of 'moral seduction' and 'strategic issue cycling' the author was able to identify the deeper reasoning with which consulting outputs and procedures were legitimised. The framework by Moore et al (2006) helped underline the clients' deeper aspirations for justifying their actions when making use of management consultants. The analysis indicated that the clients' internal organisational political environment becomes highly significant for interpreting the consultants' externality and independence. Moreover, the opportunity to leverage the internal political tensions in the client reinforces the consultants' belief in the usefulness of their role as independent advisors. By comparing and contrasting the relevant themes what became apparent is that organisational outputs were believed to benefit the wider good in organisations. By

envisaging the alleviation of the internal political obstacles clients were legitimising their intention through using consultants. Moral legitimation was also evident in procedural cases where different stakeholders were involved and represented competing interests that could be misinterpreted. Clients believed to sustain a transparent organisational climate by using the consultants' independence to facilitate the process and respond to potential criticism.

Table 1 Indicative sample of selecting the relevant data for analysis

Outputs	Interview Data	Procedures	Interview Data
Client 4	Yes, sometimes you act as an attractor. Sometimes the senior managers aren't hearing what their staff are saying, 'oh, I don't know, we've got problems with staff, blah, blah, blah'. But then I go, and do a story telling workshop and I present those staff stories back to the managers, and, because <i>I'm</i> doing it, I'm acting as that kind of bridge, 'oh god, that's a real issue, and then staff go, oh well we've been telling, they didn't need to, we've been telling you that for ages'	Client 2	Yes, or even to change the way we do certain things, you know, it's, you who get lots of different opinions and views and all the rest of it. Now you can tell people to do it, but if they don't buy into, you know, very often it can make if fail, can't it? So I think the way I looked at this project was here we are getting first hand evidence from the people in the field, therefore it's very difficult to argue with it. (cl.26)
Client 5	So you need to have people to 'win over' other senior decision makers of the <i>validity</i> of this case. So almost a consultants' report can then be used as a 'trump card' in the argument. So <i>they added value in that sense</i> because it is no longer just the council or the usual suspects, green environment saying this, see we have this economic consultancy to say this.	Client 3	We wanted an objective view, some members were feeling very uneasy about the prospect, but what we wanted was to say, right 'we'll bring somebody totally independent in now to research, to check the research that's been done, and then to confirm that, and then develop a constitution and business plan', and that was the last sort of consultant that I employed (cl.2).
Consultant 3	He knows he's got a problem, he knows it relates to one particular bit of his organisation, normally, he does not stand back and because of the issues, - to come back to this thing, and, because everybody is working in their corner, it takes us to say, 'but if you do this thing, then, it will come back to that area there'...it's quite legitimate for us to go and ask, so, often all we are is a conduit between the bottom and the top.	Consultant 1	Because they're not steeped in the internal politics. They can take a fresh look at a certain thing. It's like, you're going to some place and saying, 'Why are you doing it that way? Why not do it this way?' I'm trying to think of an example to give you. I think, for me, it's the completely unbiased, objective view that a good consultant would take in looking in that organization.
Consultant 5	Yes, sometimes you act as an attractor. Sometimes the senior managers aren't hearing what their staff are saying, 'oh, I don't know,	Consultant 2	You know, as exterior - as people who are external to the client's business, we can bring a different aspect, a different perspective, a

	<p>we've got problems with staff, blah, blah, blah'. But then I go, and do a story telling workshop and I present those staff stories back to the managers, and, because I'm doing it, I'm acting as that kind of bridge, 'oh god, that's a real issue, and then staff go, oh well we've been telling, they didn't need to, we've been telling you that for ages'.</p>		<p>different set of challenges. You know, one of the common complaints from people within client organisations is, when you've said something to their board, you go back to the client organisation and you will hear somebody say, 'well I've been saying that for years but nobody's listened to me'.</p>
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Empirical Findings and Discussion

Moral Legitimacy through Outputs & Consequences

Moral legitimation is not situated around the obtainable outcomes which satisfy an individual's personal interests but in the collective shared beliefs between members in pursuit of the normative collective welfare. Suchman's (1995) qualification of outputs and consequences concentrates on the goal-oriented activities an organisation invests to accomplish. Moreover, on the aftermath of an organization's actions that help legitimise its presence in the environment. From the interviewees' experience we identify how such desired outputs relate to an established political presence between members that is difficult to change. We find how the clients' perception of the consultants' objectivity is also made in relation to the power restrictions they cannot directly bypass. This is often because of the position and level of authority the individuals have in the hierarchy of the organisation. The clients' desired outputs often concerns the inability to generate gradual changes to such an already politicised establishment. As a result, clients endeavour to bring resistance against a network of relationships, where direct conduct with the individuals for dealing with such issues, seem futile. Such endeavour is also expressed within a moral fabric of duty as there is an understanding of the 'rightness' of their action. Discourses of the consultants' objectivity are made in relation to the new power dynamics that the clients can now exercise over such members. We note how clients are sensitive in disclosing the inner political dynamics of the organization. Client conversations about 'objectivity' help create a 'safe ground' instead of talking about 'crude resistance'.

Clients' Views

The following client's situation concerns the deteriorating performance of his firm with loosing profits and sharp criticism from the stakeholders. The client refers to the experience of an organisational and personal struggle to go against an almost established 'status quo',

where the members constituting the senior leadership found difficult to change the organisation. The senior members were not willing to introduce new organisational structures that would go away from the strict hierarchical structure. The firm went through a number of different reviews through which it was clear that radical changes were necessary in the way it run its operations in order to survive in the market. The experienced difficulty to introduce changes has been the result of the senior individuals' attitude to maintain their exercise of power.

The tension between members eventually led to a personal as well as political struggle for power in which various senior members needed to intervene, in a way that would not create direct resistance within the Board of Directors. The main premise of the clients' use of consultants was in recognising the need for the firm to be rescued from the rigid bureaucratic, managerial and organisational structure. In a company that is producing revenues of several millions of pounds a year, the firm's declining performance led to the need to create resistance and also introduce change. The consultants' service to clients has been expressed at different levels with producing research and analysis on the industry. Also, with making recommendations to support decisions, and with helping to set deadlines that the members were bound to keep.

However, we are particularly interested in the moral aspect of the consultants' legitimation, and the clients' use of consultants to produce outcomes that would help recover the company from loosing its market share. As the following comment illustrates, the presence of the consultants' created a set of new dynamics, in which the client was able to disclose and obtain information. Also, to make decisions in a way that it did not directly clash with certain organisational members. What drives the clients' moral legitimation in using the consultants is the collective awareness of the need to change. It is the belief in having to create resistance for the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders.

But don't forget the human dimension here. The human-political dimension which sometimes prevents companies from doing what it is that some people *know* needs to be done. And other people won't allow to be done. And that is one of the most *valuable* reasons for bringing consultants in – because you get accelerated change at the human level... And the role of the consultant in that process really is no more than to *validate* the thinking.

Interviewer: Put differently, certain individuals would not change doing certain things unless they were told by an outside party, which would be recognised as credible

Exactly. It's the appointment of a third party, a first division, skilled, autonomous entity, which adds credibility to the process of analysis, such that internal stakeholders can't argue with the facts. They can't distort the facts.

That would be true of a senior or middle management level. There were probably individuals in the company who had a vested interest in keeping things the way they were for as long as they were going to be employed here, for example. That's what happens in big companies. And we didn't have the structural flexibility to know how to organise ourselves to make the kind of changes we needed to make in order to go forward in a profitable way.

Yes they would, but when you bring in a consulting company it gives you the opportunity to turn over a lot of stones and see what's underneath. And the incumbent directors and senior people can't do anything about that, they have to allow that process to happen. Whereas if you try to do that internally, it's sometimes very difficult because they're protecting — you know, you don't get all the information. If they know there's a potential agenda which may have an adverse effect on them, you won't get their cooperation; they just won't play with you. Whereas, if the consultants come in, they have a somewhat free rein to look in any cupboard, to ask any question, to take an objective view that you don't otherwise get when it's all being done internally (cl.13).

One of the key ideas expressed from the above statements is the power the client can exercise over senior members through the consultants' involvement. Clearly, the consultants have a much closer relationship with the team that was initiating the business project from those members to which resistance was expressed. It can be argued that the structure of the consulting assignment, to some extent, became part of the individuals that wanted to change the status quo of the organisation. The clients' characterisation of the consultants' objectivity cannot be just interpreted in a normative way as consultants are clearly influenced by the client members who are in control of the project.

However, the client's belief in the consultants' objectivity also contains a normative character which is expressed against the purposive and manipulative exercise of power and authority by the other senior members. The fact that individuals are not willing to acknowledge that their leadership style has had a negative effect in the organisation, to the extent that wide support from stakeholders might be lost, creates a kind of *moral duty* to the individuals who are not willing to compromise with this behaviour. The client's use of the consultants' objectivity contains more than accurate representation and transparency, as the above statement illustrates. It rather points to a new power scope of action in which certain individuals face difficulty with bringing the same old resistance towards them.

As a result, the clients' feel the moral duty to act against a deteriorating organisational performance and selfish political structure that only favours certain existing members, defines the moral legitimation process. The client's association of the consultants' objectivity with having a moral dimension becomes an unrealised output of his own belief, and in the rightness of his actions. As Moore et. al., (2006) argue such a behaviour needs to be understood within a psychological context and where the creation of bias is unconsciously made: "moral seduction is facilitated by automatic (unconscious) psychological processes. Because few people think of themselves as intentionally corrupt, our theory predicts that

corruption more likely will occur when the cognitive processes can operate unconsciously and the individual can preserve a view of himself or herself as moral” (p. 22-23) We treat the ‘consequence’ and ‘outcomes’ aspects of Suchman’s (1995) qualification as the need to generate resistance that could have an actual affect in the organisation’s performance. At this level of analysis, moral legitimation occurs on the premise that consultants help the client to provide such resistance.

The following client discusses his experience over a business project where the consultants’ contribution helped to create credibility for the propositions made. Apart from the positive contribution the consultants made by the distribution of market analysis and information gathering, the client indicates how consultants added a degree of credibility to the project. The needed collectivism for the decision making stages in the client helped to move things forward. The client’s perceived value for the consultants can be seen in terms of their role in creating a form of stability. The fact that the following client is referring to his public organisation provides an additional dimension to his argument. This has to do with how the stakeholders represented in the project can exercise decision making power over the project, and without being fully members of the organisation in the same way that decision making is delegated within the private sector. All the below statements come from the same interviewee.

So you need to have people to ‘win over’ other senior decision makers of the *validity* of this case. So almost a consultants’ report can then be used as a ‘trump card’ in the argument. So *they added value in that sense* because it is no longer just the council or the usual suspects, green environment saying this, see we have this economic consultancy to say this. (cl.1).

And secondly, even if we could come up with quite good answers, within our own jobs, and sort of within our own time, we may not have the clout and the track record to sell this, because bosses would look at us and say ‘but you’re not a business expert, you’re a waste management officer’. Then you would say ‘but, as part of my work, I have investigated the opportunities for waste recycling on a commercial basis’. But unless you can *persuade* people that you do have some credibility then *you will not be listened to*, and *I think councils are very hierarchical organisations and they tend not to listen to people that they don’t expect to have to listen to*. (cl.1).

So I would probably be too junior to sell this message, even if I was right and knew I was right. Whereas the more senior people in the organisation they may well be slightly in awe of consultants, ‘they are the consultants, they know!’ (cl.1).

The consultants’ moral legitimacy has to be seen in relation to the qualities of objectivity and independence over a given issue. The interpersonal, political, personal and organisational differences between members, creates some kind of vacuum for the consultants’ external role.

Consultants' Views

Apart from the clients' experience on the subject, we find a series of complementary views by consultants that support a similar thread of argument. The following consultants refer to the interpersonal differences between actors and how competitive interests often create a 'blame culture'. The consultant argues for how interpersonal interests are created partly because clients operate within two sets of managerial 'identities'. The one identity is in relation to their departmental functions in which they feel that need to protect its interests. However, individuals have to also exercise their corporate identity where departmental interests often have to be compromised on the grounds of the interests of the corporation. The main issue is how members of an organisation come to deal with their interpersonal differences.

For the consultant, organisational actors come to an impasse of collaboration that might not necessarily be explicit to other members. As a result, the failure to disclose or share information and the lack of willingness to support decisions are indications of the existing political tensions in which blaming others eventually creates a kind of operational dysfunctionality. It is for this reason that the consultant sees that an important contribution of his service is not just the operational distribution of advice itself, but in playing a type of mediatory role to helping members deal with their differences.

What you've got in an organisation is a strange thing, because if you've got a typical organisation with a chief executive, and functional directors which are on the board, these people have to wear two hats: one hat is as a collective team on the board for the strategy of the business – to drive the business – but they also wear another hat, which is their own function. Now, when they go into a board session, ideally they've got to lose that hat [of their own function], and just wear the other hat [for the overall strategy of the business]. But the majority of people in UK organisations can't do that. (con.26).

It maybe that there's a clash between what manufacturing wants to do and what finance wants to do – and we and they have got to look at what's especially best for that business. Not what's best for the man who runs finance, or the man who runs manufacturing, it's what is best for the business...There is so much office politics taking place in some organisations that people try to hide things from the guy at the top, and therefore, he'll never get the straight answers to his questions. Often he won't even know which questions to ask. So you may be an accountant, or the chief executive, and if he's in a manufacturing company, for instance, he actually doesn't know the processes, so, he doesn't know the real questions to ask – so what he'll get told will sort of skew the truth from him. That's basically acting in a blind culture (con. 26).

What helps produce the dimension of moral legitimation according to the above clients' experience is the sharing belief that consultants are external to their interests of the members. The client places trust in the consultants' intervention to challenge individuals in ways that internal members themselves have difficulty in doing so. The fact that political differences come to be alleviated from a situation of 'impasse' to a situation of 'action', is part of the

consultants' produced outcomes in the client. The consultant's value is seen against the internal competitive interests. In an interview with a different client the idea expressed is how managers often show a lack of trust in what their employees tell them. The consultants' positions helps strengthen the position of those less senior members and make their requests more credibly recognised by their superiors. The employees' voice, as echoed through the consultants, is argued to allow the creation of changes that would have been difficult to incorporate otherwise:

Yes, sometimes you act as an attractor. Sometimes the senior managers aren't hearing what their staff are saying, 'oh, I don't know, we've got problems with staff, blah, blah, blah'. But then I go, and do a story telling workshop and I present those staff stories back to the managers, and, because *I'm* doing it, I'm acting as that kind of bridge, 'oh god, that's a real issue, and then staff go, oh well we've been telling, they didn't need to, we've been telling you that for ages'. So once we've done that the next stage for me would be to say to the managers, by the way, the staff have been saying this for ages, why didn't you, and it's a kind of moment of internal reflection on them. And the reason they probably didn't react was kind of organisational *culture* or blind spots, or deeply held value sets about where people see themselves in social hierarchies (con. 3).

Consultants try to deal with the members' differences by playing a decision making role on whether to support or challenge the various different positions. Consultants emphasise the presentational aspect through which they communicate their ideas within conflicting situations. The consultants need to appear neutral to the members' interests but also help bring a resolution that does not seem to favour the action of one member/party. Impressions can be created that can jeopardise the consulting assignment as well as the associated qualities of objectivity and independence that consultants try to promote. However, our argument is that the consultants' process of justifying their position amidst the clients' competing interests, helps produce legitimation in the client. Such legitimation is morally based in that the client trusts in the consultants' neutral stand to the internal affairs. The following client refers to the careful orchestration of response to the members that feel vulnerable to their superiors and the need to create resolutions without blame.

Yes, you have to adopt an approach that does not put the blame or make the individual look like an idiot.

Interviewer: But what becomes very important then is how you present that to the board without making it look like it is the 'peoples' fault or interests the cause for where they are.

Absolutely, which is why I come back to relationships. We go in and establish relationships across that group...Now, so we go in and very often, from the very first time, is to take this group of people away and get them to understand what the issues are — because the issues might be in that guy's area, but he's not going to report them here, because that's going to make him look quite vulnerable. And therefore we try to develop straight away a "no-blame" culture within that team. (con.26).

According to the above excerpt the idea of objectivity is discussed in the normative qualities that it represents. That is, in the consultants' being transparent, fair, and honest against the client's state of affairs. The consultant does not make reference about how the nature of the relationship can create a degree of bias for his later evaluations. Instead, the emphasis is placed on how the consultant might recognise the pitfalls behind the clients' selfish actions and their effort is to bypass them in search of a more collective resolution. However, as we will see later in the chapter, the notion of the consultants' exercise of objectivity is challenged by authors as well as consultants who acknowledge the degree of bias that governs consulting evaluations. In this sense, it is argued how consultants are to an important extent influenced by the clients' internal political situation. The consultants' perceived independence is possible to favour one party's decision making over another. As we will see, consultants can often decide to align themselves with particular client members and take advantage of the objectivity they have been associated with. We cannot generalise by making the above proposition and we do not want to imply scope in which consultants can manipulate clients. However, we want to address the complexities in which the subject is discussed by the interviewees, and how conclusive statements cannot be taken as representative of all consultants. At the same time, we do not want to underestimate the importance of the consultants' perceived valuable contribution in having the opportunity to provide support, and often resolution to the clients' internal tensions.

One of the features that characterise the dimension of moral legitimation, which can be seen in contrast to procedural or structural legitimacy dimensions, has to do with how power relationships are already invested in the organisation (Suchman, 1995). Organisational actors seem to already have knowledge about the other members' political interests, positions of support and exercise of authority. In this sense, members of the organisation can explicitly express their rejection over a given proposition. This might take the form between employees and their superior managers but also between individuals with equal degree of seniority in the firm. The intensification of the political tension seems to create some kind of a power-impasse which the members themselves cannot bypass.

In some way the clients' use of the consultants' intervention is used to create resistance or counteract the exercise of power towards actors. In such situations actors are not necessarily keen on changing their colleagues' views/support over a given issue. They are rather concerned about challenging the existing power structures in which such relations are exercised. As a result, the clients' moral legitimacy, over the consultants, is found in the

consultants' ability to confront and challenge the invested power relations that they cannot themselves change or can only have limited influence upon.

Outcomes of such efforts may concern the fulfilment of their own organisational interests, or some kind of change against the already existing status quo. We want to emphasise how the notion of 'outputs' and 'consequences' as qualified by Suchman (1995), needs to be seen in the context of the results clients try to produce against the clients' politicised environment. The below statement provides support for how consultants seem to recognise their access to client members and how part of their responsibility is to challenge/confront individuals.

He knows he's got a problem, he knows it relates to one particular bit of his organisation, normally, he does not stand back and because of the issues, - to come back to this thing, and, because everybody is working in their corner, it takes us to say, 'but if you do this thing, then, it will come back to that area there'...it's quite legitimate for us to go and ask, so, often all we are is a *conduit* between the bottom and the top. Had they possessed the intelligence or the capacity and the wherewithal the people at the bottom could have got to the people at the top before they came to us and might never have needed us...That happens at times, there's no doubt about that, and you've got to take it face on, that's what you're being paid for. (con.6).

The consultant is explicit about the employees who happen to have less power and authority in the organisation, and seek to voice their opinions and persuade superiors for what they think. In the interview it is repeatedly discussed how senior managers do not 'listen' to the lower levels of the organisation, because they are too preoccupied with acting on their own agenda. Consultants provide an interesting institutional challenge to such senior managers and help provide legitimation over existing concerns. Moral legitimacy can be produced in the above context when the consultants' criticism over clients seem to change a course of action that benefits the employees and which employees do not see feasible to implement themselves.

Procedural Legitimacy

A complimentary dimension of moral legitimacy is based on the procedures with which management decisions are made or the ways in which strategic plans are executed. In contrast to outputs and consequences, Suchman (1996) argues how procedural legitimacy concentrates on the ideological values, members of an organisation share, for how operations *should* be conducted. Such values have been distilled through normative beliefs and the interpretation of ethical qualities like, truth, justice, and fairness. In discussing the nature of legitimation, in regards to transnational organized corporations and civil society organizations Beishim and Dingwerth (2005) argue how: "procedural aspects include the inclusiveness and transparency of decision making, the accountability of decision-makers to

decision-takers, and the deliberative quality of interaction among participants in the decision-making process” (p.5).

Discussing procedural legitimation in the context of governmental legitimation, Coglianesse (2005) states the term “is defined in terms of democratic accountability, with elections being the principal defining characteristic, and also in terms of institutional arrangements like separation of powers, transparency, and rule of law principles intended to combat abuses of power ”(p.3). Society plays an important role for the construction of what such moral values should represent and how corporations should incorporate them within policies and procedures. The creation of regulatory public bodies in Britain, like the Office of Fair Trading (OfT) helps impose standards with which firms should conduct their competitive activities. Furthermore, to ensure the exercise of anti-trust laws and the penalisation over firms that want to monopolise their market. A recent example of a company that failed to legitimise its actions concerns British Airways (BA), and its illegal price-fixing with Korean Air and Virgin and Lufthansa³. The *Economist* (2007) argues that BA’s failure to legitimise its competitive practices did not only have a negative affect on its internal actors, but also in relation to the customers’ perception of it as a worthwhile airline carrier. Procedural dimensions of moral legitimation mainly concentrates on the creation of organisational frameworks and procedures that aim to secure a line of action that is not serving the interests of the individual, but the collective interests of the corporation. Moral legitimacy is argued to be achieved when clients justify that the means to achieve objectives is in alignment with the firm’s normative values.

In the consultant-client interaction procedural legitimation has been discussed in the context of which consultants implement the contractual features of the business agreement (Poulfelt, 1997). Ethical norms characterise the creation of business structures through which they execute their consulting practices (Poulfelt, 1997, Lynch, 2003). Assessing the consultants’ success or failure to achieve legitimation is argued to be dependent on the qualities of confidentiality, transparency and disclosure of the information communicated (Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Lundberg, 2002). Furthermore, by the degree to which the

³ In a recent article by *The Economist* is stated how negative this cartel has been for BA’s reputation as it was hit in its increase strive to become the peoples’ ‘favourite airline’. BA was fined £121m from Britain’s Office of Fair Trading (OFT) and \$300m from Department of Justice (DoJ) of United States. The language used to describe BA’s practices, is interesting for how the company was perceived to fail to legitimise its actions. *The Economist* states, for example, how “Philip Collins, the OFT’s boss, boasted that the large fine would “send an important message...about our intention to enforce the law”. The DoJ was blunter, describing the arrangement as a “conspiracy”.” The one statement places emphasis on the OFT’s aggressive strategies to prevent companies from using similar cartel practices. Whereas, the second statement places emphasis on BA’s intentions to break the law and places responsibility to the organization as a whole. In either case, the overarching theme is BA’s failure to legitimize its practices against the government regulations. Moreover, and against BA’s experience we have the rescue of Virgin’s reputation which was the first one to contact DoJ about BA’s practices and did not occur a fine as yet. *The Economist* interestingly states how: “Not only was the airline saving itself from the risk of prosecution, but it was also grassing up a rival with whom it has had a bruising relationship in the past.”

consultants are committed to serving the clients' needs by complying to the ethical standards, and regardless of how such behaviour might be to the disadvantage of their business interests (Hùivik and Fùllesdal, 1995). Case examples of the above can take place when consultants have to restrict accepting new assignments with clients that happen to be rivals to their current clients (Czerniawska, 2002).

In addition, procedural legitimacy takes place in relation to the clients' internal competitive interests as well as political power dynamics. We find that in the context of the clients' operational-related needs consultants play an instrumental role through their assigned qualities of independence and objectivity. Such qualities become an important input in the course of decision making where the position of the members' interests becomes a sensitive dimension. Actors' interests can influence the nature of the organisational processes and outcomes that members with equal or superior authority are keen to accomplish. In this context, management consultants can be used to undertake particular operational activities and create a sense of detachment against the individual members' political interests. The alleviation of personal and political interests helps organisational actors persuade their colleagues to show some degree of support and commitment. Furthermore, to convince them in that the proposed decision is not subject to their own locus of interests only, but also to the collective benefits of its members. We do not imply that such objectivity is simply a superficial or that it is used as an instrument of manipulation. The clients' decisions to involve the consultants often results in outcomes that were contrary to the expectations or personal interests of those initiating the business contract. Our thesis is that the consultants' input over procedures can help achieve the needed moral legitimation because of the distinct meaning that the consultants' independence helps create within the clients' politicised environment. We underline how such moral legitimation is not necessarily dependent on the clients' interpersonal interaction with the consultants, but can also be found in the political relations between members themselves.

Clients' Views

We come to illustrate the above proposition by examining the clients' experience. We begin with the case of the below interviewee operating in the public sector, and who is responsible for the initiative of a project that involves the collaboration of other closely geographically located local authorities. One of the key features of the project was to introduce changes in the structure and operations for how these organisations operated. The client initiated the idea

and believed there were operational benefits, like the increase of efficiency and output, by working together with other local authorities. The client believed that such partnership would help reduce the use of overheads and unnecessary duplication of procedures with the result of reducing their spending. The partnership would help increase their quality of service to the public.

One of the key challenges the client faced during the early stages of the project, concerned the communication of the ideas to the other organisations. Moreover, the need to win their support and the credibility of the project as having a much wider interest and benefit from just serving the interests of his organisation. One of the key ideas underlined in the below statement concerns the politicised environment of such a public body, and how the competitive political interests are detrimental for the development of the project. One of the most important areas of the consultants' contribution to the project was the process of evaluating the initiative and also providing an independent critique of the existing advantages and disadvantage. This was particularly critical for the client, because the projected benefits would make an important difference among members for supporting or rejecting the project.

From the below statements the impression might be given of how the client's comfort is dependent on his close alliance with the consultants so that the other local authorities could share his view. However, this was not necessarily the case. For the client, it mattered how the idea of the project is not only supported by him, but that there is a greater discourse of *evaluation* about it. In this sense, the client accepts how the consultants' views can support, complement or challenge his views he was sharing. However, the fact that the client was not seen as the only monopolising party for providing an evaluation on the potential benefits of the project, is the important feature.

But confirming the research and validating the research, *was vital for me, - that's where I got value for money.* Because there was concern that [AA] was seen to not monopolise the partnership, and what I couldn't afford to have was the other two partners thinking 'this is [AA's], [AA's] stamped its personality on this, this going to be [AA's] way', and that would create tension, so the consulting was to take pressure off me in this respect. (cl.2).

We wanted an objective view, some members were feeling very uneasy about the prospect, but what we wanted was to say, right 'we'll bring somebody totally independent in now to research, to check the research that's been done, and then to confirm that, and then develop a constitution and business plan', and that was the last sort of consultant that I employed (cl.2).

Some departments bring consultants in purely and simply to give a second opinion, not always to do the research, but to give a second opinion, and sort of an objective view on what we've done, because again, working with local members there's always a suspicion, particularly in local government, that 'maybe this isn't the right way forward, maybe someone else can think of a better way of doing this, and maybe we aren't fully informed, so we'd employ a consultant to come and just say right, let's have your view on this' (cl.2).

One of the key themes we identify from the above is firstly, the client's use of the consultants' objectivity in reference to the operational aspects of their work and secondly, in relation to the internal and politicised environment. Clients appreciate the vigour and detachment with which consulting evaluations are made. At the same time, they make connections for how such an externality relates to their own *interests*. The discourse that develops about the consultants' objectivity/independence, and how this makes a difference to the politicised environment, continues to be addressed under the normative qualities of objectivity and independence in the functional sense of the word. That is, the consultants being detached from the personal assumptions of the individuals, providing a 'fair and true' evaluation of the client's situation.

We argue how it is uncomfortable for the client to directly address the political internal tensions by talking about crude resistance, even though at times clients make crude reference to such power relations. We do not want to imply how clients simply manipulate the understanding of 'objectivity' to only serve their interest as this is often not the case. However, conversations around objectivity rotate around the clients' operational as well as internal political needs. Clients can play an instrumental role for how conceptual connections are made, and for how the consultants' objectivity is interpreted in relation to the particular project.

We also wanted someone to come and form a view on, whether the benefits that we perceived through our research could be fulfilled, and, it was a matter of giving some level of comfort to some of our members (cl. 9)

A key feature that we also identify in discussions of procedural legitimacy by clients rotates around the notion of *credibility*. Namely, credibility about the way in which the different operational stages of a project have been conducted. One of the ways in which client members deal with their own uncertainty and for the perceived hidden and undisclosed tensions of the other party, is to often challenge the credibility about the process with which such facts have been constructed in the first place. As a result, clients face a hidden tension in the course of the deployment of initiatives, in being able to influence the presentation of facts, in a way that favours their interest. Clients believe that when consultants undertake the same operational tasks their presence projects an inherent credibility, that other members find difficult to argue against.

Moore et. al., (2006) argue that "when it comes to biased judgments, evidence suggests that people are more willing to endorse a biased proposal made by someone else than to make

one on their own” (p. 17). This is not only because a common set of ideas are simply reiterated by the consultants rather than the client. It is the fact that the consultants’ associations in producing their findings are not perceived to share the same invested interests as the particular clients. We can illustrate the above through the experience of the below client whose use of consultants helped verify concerns about the firm’s operational structures. The following excerpt indicates how only one colleague supported the position against the rest of the board. The client suggested the use of consultants in order to verify or reject his propositions as the below quotes indicate:

Yes, or even to change the way we do certain things, you know, it’s, you who get lots of different opinions and views and all the rest of it. Now you can tell people to do it, but if they don’t buy into, you know, very often it can make it fail, can’t it? So I think the way I looked at this project was here we are getting first hand evidence from the people in the field, therefore it’s very difficult to argue with it. (cl.26)

Interviewer: But at the same time you have the difficulty of how to channel that view to the rest of the members of the board.

Yes, but I think having got the consultant involved and having got some evidence, I think people find it difficult then to say ‘well I don’t think there is a problem, because we were saying well hang on, 35 managing directors think there’s a problem’, so that’s how it tended to work (cl.26).

In the above example, the consultants’ process of verification against the client’s expressed concerns is being justified within the board, because it was supported by an external party. Even though the particular client forms the minority in support of the idea, the power dynamics changed when the consultants supported some of his premises. The client’s belief in the use of consultants, for bringing more accreditation to the project, can be interpreted as being part of his close political alignment with the consultant. As a result, it can be argued how the consultants aligned their position within the client’s interests in a way that verification of the propositions were being possible.

However, another way of interpreting the above is also through the fact that the client managed to bypass what was believed to be an already existing and inherent bias by his colleagues, in supporting that this was not a real issue. This can be further supported by the proposition that they had vested interests for the operational procedures to remain the same. As a result, it can be counter-argued how the consultants helped verify the existing business case the board members did not want to accept. To what extent the client aligned himself *politically* with the consultant and in a way that they supported his case is unclear. We do not want to generalise further as the interview data does not offer detailed information about the political dimension between the board members. However, the important issue is how moral

legitimation takes place as consultants add credibility to an issue that he could not get the board to accept.

A complementary example to the above is also expressed from a different client who refers to the political dimension between departments. The use of consultants helped alleviate some of the inherent competitive interests between members. The client makes reference to 'departmental agendas' and how a possible clash is possible when the representatives disagree or want to pursue their own independent aims. The client refers to this idea in two separate but interesting statements that we have attached in full below.

Very often it's when you are dealing in a large organisation you are dealing with a multi functional taskforce, so in other words, I'm sitting in the marketing and the brand area but I've got colleagues in finance and production, and investments and all the other bits and by bringing in an external person at that level, it alleviates all the political issues, in the sense, that you've got someone there that is independent, ok you're the sponsor and you know you've brought someone in to do something specifically but people can relate to that, because they know at the end of the day there is going to be a degree of objectivity (cl.8)

So in other words because you understand if you've worked in an organisation sometimes you get, you get 'agendas' basically, the IT agenda might be to build everything internally, whereas the best business practice would be to actually say 'well yeah we'll do certain things internally but really we need to bring in the experience of IT from outside' so they help to put together those cases and by and large, if you want to get things done and have successful projects and deliver on time it just helps with the project. So really we bring them in for project management skills and that helps. And then also, because they just add a, if you like, a different perspective on things as well, because organisations can become quite introverted, you know, inward looking in terms of how you do things (cl.8).

A keynote feature that we identify from the above comments, and which can be seen in contrast to moral legitimation as discussed in relation to outputs and consequences, is that relations of power are in the process of becoming *emergent* than having already been established. In procedural legitimacy, organisational actors are trying to use the consultants in order to help influence the construction of perceptions rather than to go against power relations that are explicit. Clients do not want to simply change the already existing status quo or challenge members with already vested interests. They are rather interested in positioning their actions in a way that impressions are created about their own political interests and which can be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

From this it can be inferred that the client's identity in dealing with other members, to some degree, is at stake for what other actors perceive them to be. We refer to the below statement from the same client in order to outline the above idea and how the emphasis is placed on the emergence of how competitive interests are perceived. The client who is a representative of the marketing operations does not want the IT department to assume that he has vested interests in his desire to outsource an IT project. The client's use of the

consultants' objectivity and independence is blurred for whether presents functional or political qualities. Clients want the consultants to become independent evaluators of their proposed ideas, but at the same time they can influence how the consultants come to verify their propositions. To what extent the political or functional features of the consultants' involvement are representative is an issue that varies between clients.

the only political decision I have in bringing in a consultant is that external view, where basically you say, 'this is not marketing agenda politics, this isn't marketing politics, this is a business problem and we are bringing in an external person who will go across the top'. And that's to alleviate politics, if you like, you know, that's to overcome any potential politics so you are bringing in someone to say 'look we haven't got the skills in house, otherwise, if we had the skills in house we would probably do it in house, but generally you bring in a consultant to alleviate the politics rather than to [add something new] (cl.8).

Consultants' views

The consultants' views on procedural legitimacy places emphasis on the operational qualities of their work and how their detachment from the client's politicised environment helps produce a fair evaluation over decisions. Consultants support the view of how their presence helps legitimise a set of propositions, because of the assumed credibility their position of externality brings to the client.

In discussing about their own objectivity consultants acknowledge the competitive interests within the client members. Some consultants are keen to underline how the quality of their knowledge service does not coincide with political alliances but rather *challenges* them. However, explicit acknowledgement is also made by consultants who support that they are often used as a rhetorical instrument to the clients' interests. As a result, clients tend to use consultants in order to often justify their own views against their colleagues. In a similar tone to our previous discussion we also find how equal emphasis is placed by consultants on the emergence of clients' reputation while decisions are produced. Consultants support the view that in aspects of procedural legitimacy clients are concerned with the crafting their identity. Such legitimisation is sensitive for how colleagues construct impressions that can impact their future career.

We discuss the above theme by looking at the consultants' emphasis on their independence and objectivity, in the sense of detecting issues that were not apparent to the client members. Moreover in providing credibility to already expressed views, which nevertheless failed to be justified by the more senior internal actors. We discuss the consultants' view in acknowledging how clients can make use of the consultants' attached

credibility to serving their political interests, and how such practices are strongly governed by rhetoric and impression management.

In the below statement the consultant argues for the relationship between his detachment from the client organisation, and how this can positively influence the quality of advice produced. Even though the following statement can be thought of exaggerating the consultant's position, it nevertheless, indicates the fabric between the ethical nuances of legitimation.

But if you look at the consultant, from the consultant's perspective, the positive side of the consultant is he's completely unbiased. He is 'new'... he can take a completely objective view of that organization. And he can say, 'I've reached a judgement that needs doing this.. needs doing that.. needs doing that.. etc.' And there's no personality issue with him because he's completely new. And because he's experienced in doing this before, he'll say, 'Well, this worked last time I did this, that worked ...' So that's the *positive* side of the consultant. (con.5).

The consultants' externality to the clients' internal state of affairs is argued to provide some type of a privileged point of view, from which the consultants can make his/her evaluations about the client. The way in which the notion of externality is used is not only for characterising that consultants are not part of the organisation, but to emphasise how such detachment makes a *qualitative* difference for the advice that they are giving. This is illustrated from the experience of the same consultant who argues for the transparency with which views are constructed when entering into an agreement with the client. The consultants' interests are believed not to interfere with making a proposition. It is thought that this should be appreciated as a positive quality about the consultants' work.

Because they're not steeped in the internal politics. They can take a fresh look at a certain thing. It's like, you're going to some place and saying, 'Why are you doing it that way? Why not do it this way?' I'm trying to think of an example to give you. I think, for me, it's the completely unbiased, objective view that a good consultant would take in looking in that organization. (con.5).

In the context of procedural legitimacy, the importance of the consultants' independence concerns the decision making stages in which views/positions are formulated for what the organisational actors should adopt and why. As it is further supported below, consultants are argued to have a positive affect with influencing the client's perception to detecting alternative options or unrealised issues that matter to him/her.

I think they like the fact that there's someone who can give you impartial advice or offer impartial comment, who's able to see it from a different perspective than they can because they're in it everyday, they are in with it (con.5).

A similar comment is made by a different consultant stating:

But often people just need an outside pair of eyes to come in with no baggage, no history, no emotional attachment to it, and, just take a cold look at the business (con.8).

The conversations around *objectivity* and *externality* make an important assumption that is often not clear through the expressed statements. This assumption has to do with how objective and independent ‘point of views’ are not treated as simple consulting speculations or commentaries. The consultants believe to provide insight in a way that new are incorporated to action plans and can achieve results with detectable outcomes. As a result, consultants place emphasis on the qualitative attributes of the independence that is not just cognitively driven, but helps bring a new realisation that is currently absent in the client.

Apart from the consultants’ emphasis on how their objectivity can be seen as correlating with the nature of advice communicated to the client, consultants also argue for the difference that their ‘image’ makes to the clients’ decision making. As we discussed in a previous section, moral legitimation can be seen not just in the context of the consultant-client interaction, but also in relation to the clients’ internal state of affairs. The issue of importance shifts the attention of how consultants generate insight through their independence, to creating credibility over the employees who have endeavoured to legitimise their position towards their own members. As a result, it is clear how consultants use the notion of objectivity in the sense of characterising the change in the power relations between members, while at the same time adopt the same term and its connoted meaning.

The following consultant makes the above point clear in arguing how managers fail to listen to the concerns by those at the lower layers of the organisation. The consultants have the opportunity to challenge those actors employees could not persuade. To what extent such credibility should be associated with the notion of objectivity and independence is subject to further discussion. However, consultants tend to associate that in the course of supporting a set of views, expressed by the internal client members, they also perform an important role to legitimising those views. As a result, consultants do not simply become a means to reiterating what has already been expressed, but legitimise the content of the ideas in other party by making use of their authority as outsiders.

Some of the people I work with are extremely clever clients, brilliant people, very, very clever; know more about management than I’ll ever know. Yet see the value of having somebody in who is not contaminated with the organisational history, to sit, and this is where things like ‘borrow the watch to tell you the time’, so I can go in say things, like in ACAS I’ve been working, and I can say things which they’ve already said, but because *I’ve said it*, things start to happen (con. 3).

The same is also succinctly expressed and supported by another consultant

You know, as exterior — as people who are external to the client's business, we can bring a different aspect, a different perspective, a different set of challenges. You know, one of the common complaints from people within client organisations is, when you've said something to their board, you go back to the client organisation and you will hear somebody say, 'well I've been saying that for years but nobody's listened to me'. And all of a sudden consultants arrive and you get listened to. And you do bring a sort of — the price tag that comes with the fees brings instant credibility. Now you then have to support it and prove it time and again, and, you're only as good as your last piece of delivery. But yeah, you're not bound by their fancies, you're not constrained by their limitations, no, you can bring a fresh perspective to things. (con.15)

The above consultant discusses the superficiality with which clients may buy into the clients' image as outsiders, and how legitimation is produced because of the trust in consultants. However, the consultant makes clear how such legitimation brings an element of risk that consultants cannot simply bypass in the name of their reputation. They have to effectively substantiate their claims and produce detectable 'results' through their actions. In the below discussion we concentrate on how consultants' acknowledge the rhetoric with which legitimation occurs in the client, and how their service is used in order to justify a decision that has been made by members. Throughout the various expressed views we want to also underline how consultants emphasise that their working practices live in a continuing type of *tension*. This is a tension in which consultants can choose to serve their business interests by supporting a point of view of a particular client member. This is a tension in which they also have to come in confrontation with client members that initiated their contract, or who may want to use the consultants' image of independence in a way that serves their interests.

To what extent consultants choose to serve the client's needs by adopting strategies that have a normative, ideological, but superficial character, varies between actors. Moore et. al., (2006) make an interesting argument by stating how difficult it is for auditing or consulting firms to know the future outcomes of their current actions. By referring to 'plausible deniability' and 'escalation of commitment' the authors argue that: "While it is clearly true that accounting firms do have an interest in preserving their reputations and avoiding legal charges of fraud, it is entirely unclear whether these distant and probabilistic threats are sufficient to counteract real and immediate incentives to build relationships with clients and sell them services, especially given reductions in the threat of legal penalties" (p. 17-18).

In the following discussion we examine the consultants' experience in acknowledging the different reasons for which clients purchase their service. It is argued that clients use the consultants' services in order to legitimise a set of ideas that favours their interests. Consultants emphasise the plurality of causes behind the nature of clients' needs, and how the

political dimension is one that experienced through various projects. In the below statement it is argued how clients need to project a positive image to stakeholders and protect their reputation. The consultant refers to the notion of *trust* and how reputation is established through the use of prestigious consulting brand. This is a theme that has been extensively discussed in the critical literature, and it often dominates the discussion as to how consultants operate in the broader scope of their service (Sturdy, 1997b, Grint and Case, 1998).

A lot of it is driven by the city. The chief executive might say to his board of directors, we have some problems. To get it through the city, for people to continue to invest in this company, shareholders will need to *show* that we're bringing in one of the big boys: Mackenzie, Booz Allen Hamilton, Accenture, PWC, PA, etc

In the next interview reference is made to the internal political affairs between actors. In particular, individuals seek to satisfy the demands of their superiors despite their superficiality, so that they can maintain type of alignment or power relations that is to their interest.

Well, I guess the client wants activity to happen, which produces results that matter to the principal actors in the organisation or in order to impress its stakeholders. It's depending on what you measure. I mean, sometimes people measure things which are difficult to affect. I mean Scottish Enterprise for instance, like most of the enterprise agencies, has a metric which is in all of their annual reports, which is about jobs created and jobs maintained

In discussing whether consultants tend to align their consulting activities with the interpersonal interests between members, we have shown how emphasis is placed on their independence, objectivity and overall detachment with such interests. Next, we identify cases of when consultants might align their interests with what clients want to promote internally. It is difficult to provide a detailed interpretation for how 'ethical' or 'unethical' such consulting practices are. This is because the nature of the clients' needs can vary from wanting to support a decision that does not have negative effects to the interests of the members, to the one that does. As a result, we are keen to qualify how vulnerable the consultants' practices can be interpreted to be. Apart from the above however we also want to argue how consultants can exercise practices of rhetoric and impression management in order to help legitimise a client decision.

Correct! And they just wanted to say that it's come from somewhere else and that is classic. For example where they are not getting a response from the organisation where they are saying 'no we don't need to do that'. So they get a consultant in to say *what the client says* and because it's got a brand on the bottom they've got to do it yeah

Sometimes Chairman or Boards are very reticent to give appropriate information to their staff, to make the appropriate decisions. So a lot of the problem, I believe, is that the board/boards of companies in certainly when I was a consultant, didn't give the

appropriate information down to the managers, and didn't delegate the appropriate *authority* to actually make the decision yeah?

So that was within the organization itself?

Correct. Whereas when a consultant comes in they are happy delegating the authority because they sold the story that these consultants will make things better. So, when, for example, a management consultant he'll go in to tender, they will come out with 'we will save 20% of your manufacturing costs', 'we will allow you to expand into new markets', 'we will look at alternative sources of supply, for example, yeah?'

We do not argue for whether such actions should be defined as moral or immoral in themselves, but how they are understood in the subjective context of the clients' experience. To what extent is legitimate for a client to buy such service in order to increase his/her image in the firm is subject to interpretation. Furthermore, we underline how the justification of the credible image clients want to project has a moral connotation to it (Moore et. al., 2006). The value which organisational actors perceive to obtain from relying on the consultants' reputation is associated with qualities of integrity which is socially constructed within that environment.

The following consultant refers to his experience with clients that would buy into his service in order to appear professional, or in order to avoid criticism by their colleagues. It is clear how clients operate within an organisational 'mind setting' that it is perceived as credible. This creates a greater variation for understanding the reasons for which clients make use of the consultants' perceived independence and objectivity. Clients amalgamate the personal features of their own aspirations with the consultants' projected image and against the particular mindset of that organisation.

For example, in some organisations, your status and your seniority are to some degree indicated by how much you spend on the external consultants, and therefore, there can be a motivation to just buy in a lot of consultancy, to show that you're a senior and important person. Another motivation can be to associate with people that are interested in them as firms. So often people will go to a McKenzie or Booz-Allen or someone with a name in a field, simply because they want to associate with individuals from those organisations. So there can be a range of reasons why people [buy consulting services]... Absolutely, people make buying decisions for all sorts of reasons, some people do it to avoid fear, some people do it to say 'Well ok, I don't really know what I'm doing here but if we hire in a big name firm then if it goes all pear-shaped, I'm going to say to my boss, well we got McKenzie what better risk can you...'

We want to argue for the organisational affect that the consultants' image of independence creates to the life of the client organisation. Clients use consultants against their internal politicised environment which is characterised by competition of personal or departmental interests (Moore et. al., 2006). Consultants are used in order to add credibility against already raised views from within members and which senior individuals often fail to trust or take into

account. Procedural legitimation takes place because of the moral dimension that the consultants' credibility gains. That is, from being external to the particular state of affairs of the immediate client. Even though discourses about the consultants' objectivity are interwoven with personal interests, we have argued how the consultants' independence is treated for its operational functions and with providing 'true and fair' evaluations which are believed to be unbiased.

We recognise that the effort to elicit how procedural legitimation is *interpreted* within its moral connotation is not representing the content of moral values per se. Clients get hold of the consultants' attached objectivity as if it has an inherent authority in itself. At the same time, organisational actors try to incorporate such broad moral dimension while they pursue their own interests (Moore et. al., 2006). There are cases where client tends to manipulate this attached moral quality/authority to their own interests. Even though, we do not want to make conclusions about the normative character of the above practices we want to argue how the actors' use of the consultants' image of objectivity and independence has a direct affect in the state of affairs of the organisation. Regardless of the superficiality with which the consultants' impression management practices are discussed in the literature (Ernst and Kieser, 2002a, Ernst and Kieser, 2002b; Heusinkveld, 2004) and with being dependent on ritual and rhetoric (Alvesson, 2001), internal power dynamics between members change often with positive affect.

As argued by Werr (2002) the consultants' image despite being perceived superficial does not have just a superficial effect. In cases where actors make use of their organisational power in a way that often becomes abusive to other individuals, the consultants' presence creates a kind of 'rescue affect' which the clients treasure. As seen from the previous examples, already expressed concerns by employees were not taken into account by their own superiors. The organisational position in which these individuals can find themselves can often be highly restrictive or distressing. For them the consultants' image and regardless of its often attached superficial credibility, serves a particular function. This is to challenge already established power relations or a set of vested interests that the employees have difficulty orchestrating themselves.

It is important to acknowledge how such client intentions influence the impressions created about the consultants' involvement. Moore et. al., (2006) for example argue for the importance of acknowledging the difference between conscious and unconscious bias, from auditors and consultants, in legitimising their clients' actions. The authors make good reference to this issue by stating: "in models of auditor independence, researchers have

assumed that independence is a question of whether the auditor chooses to carry out a thorough, unbiased audit or collude with a firm's managers. Psychological research on the impact of motivated reasoning and self-serving biases questions the validity of this assumption. This evidence suggests that intentional corruption is probably the exception, and that unconscious bias is far more pervasive. This distinction between conscious corruption and unconscious bias is important, because the two respond to different incentives and operate in different ways" (p. 16) As a result, the consultants' produced legitimization cannot take the same dimension of responsibility for when consultants often remain unaware of the impact of their actions in the client. Different interpretations can be given for how legitimate such reasons are in themselves and whether what the employees feel about their managers should be treated as fact.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the dimension of moral legitimation as it is expressed in the consultant-client interaction. We have concentrated on discussing how moral legitimacy is expressed in relation to the collective interests between organisational actors. It is driven by those ideological values that concern the construction and exercise of social norms like, fairness, justice, truth, and rightness. The application of moral legitimacy is argued not to privilege an actor's personal interests and his/her immediate obtainable outcomes, but the wider collective interests which are not necessarily measurable or financially driven. Studies of moral legitimacy often concentrate on understanding the professional code of conduct in which consultants deal with the client (Poulsen, 1997). As a result, emphasis is placed on whether consultants attempt to manipulate the client's perception of his/her problems by means of information reporting or with disclosing facts (Kieser, 2002a, 2002b).

Moral legitimacy has been mainly discussed in the context of whether consultants favour their business interests over the clients. Emphasis is placed on how the exercise of consulting activities, and the outcomes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, are situated in the nature of the interpersonal interactions between actors. The consultants' process of fulfilling the clients' need is situated in addressing the complex personal and organisational needs which may go beyond the immediate sphere of organisational problems and solutions (Reynolds, 2000). Interpersonal factors like, personality, unrealised assumptions, and previous experiences, are

thought to come into play and influence how the receiving party perceives the quality of the service (Brignall, 1991). As a result, it is argued how the nature of clients' needs is fluid, difficult to predict, and there is a strong presence of uncertainty for how consultants need to know the order through which to undertake activities (see Poulfelt, 1997). From the above, is inferred that consultants manage to legitimise the morality of their actions by applying principles which provide guidance for how to deal with above dimensions. For example, making of extravagant claims and requesting the client to make unnecessary expenditures for activities that are not required are believed to be practices that break away from such professional code of conduct.

This chapter has tried to examine moral legitimacy not only from the perspective of consultants' professional code, but also for what their practices *mean* in relation to the internal and often politicised environment of the clients. We argued that an important dimension for whether consultants succeed or fail to legitimise their competing knowledge claims are not necessarily situated on how they apply such a code of practice. It is rather dependent on how the consultants' externality and perceived independence is affecting the power relationship and competitive personal interests between client members. In this context, consultant might help generate dimensions of moral legitimation because their actions produce accounts of meaning-relations that are closely associated with the lacking credibility between members. We used the work by Moore et. al., (2006) in order to support our proposition and show how associations to moral attributes are made in order to foster a degree of credibility or create resistance. The consultants' independence is used as if it contains an inherent element of authority but which is interwoven with the individuals' interests and power relations.

We do not discuss the nature of the consultants' moral legitimation in relation to a set of normative or ethical qualities through which we can objectively evaluate whether they are moral or not. We have argued how the clients' conversations about the positive attributes of the consultants' independence and objectivity are closely associated with their own political interests. Even though there is reference to the consultant's role in helping produce such a moral legitimation, the clients' motives and interests for wanting to accomplish their aims might not be counted as moral, if assessed from a different set of values. However, we argued how vested power relations between organisational actors as well as the exercise of authority, is often perceived as abusive/distressing for other actors. This situation creates an important opportunity to use consultants in order to generate resistance. At various situations there is a constructed sense of 'moral duty', by clients, to create opposition against colleagues. The use

of consultants to accomplish such an aim becomes a valued resource. In this context, the consultants' moral legitimation towards clients is highly dependent on the clients' internal and politicised environment.

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