Working Lives of Management Consultants

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Leeds
Leeds University Business School

November 2017

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to people who supported and encouraged me in carrying out this research.

At the outset, I would like to thank all the research participants who enthusiastically collaborated with me in this research, by allowing access to their organisations and enriching the study by sharing their experiences.

I will always remain indebted to my supervisors for providing excellent guidance from the inception of the research idea and thereafter throughout the research process. Their continued guidance and support has enabled me to produce this thesis.

I am grateful to my supervisor Dr Elizabeth Oliver for her incredible patience, for nudging me at crucial moments, and encouraging me at every stage of the research.

I am grateful to Professor Jackie Ford for supporting me throughout the PhD process and making learning opportunities available to support my research.

I am indebted to Prof Ann Cunliffe for providing her expert guidance on the subject matter and helping me develop rich insights.

My parents and friends need a special mention, among other things, for their unwavering support and inspiration.

Finally, I thank my wife Preeti and my son Atiksh for their love and for making personal sacrifices in the service of my learning and growth. They made it possible for me to purse this path.

Abstract

This doctoral research focuses on the exploration of the working lives of 'management consultants' with an emphasis on how consultants make sense of, interact with and construct their working lives. From a theoretical perspective, this research is situated within the critical management consulting literature that views consulting as a social phenomenon. In this study, sensemaking perspective has been used as a conceptual framework to explore the processes of management consultants' sensemaking. This research employs a qualitative, interpretive, social-constructionist perspective by which to understand the lived experiences of management consultants. The core methodology adopted in this study is life history research. In-depth life history interviews were carried out with research participants from leading consulting firms in the UK and Denmark. These interviews also included a visual inquiry based on the photographs/drawings generated by participants. The research findings highlight the multidimensional nature of the lives of 'management consultants' and their processes of sensemaking. Three prominent sensemaking processes emerged as part of the research findings: first, the use of differentiation/comparison with other non-consulting professions (outgroup) by management consultants to make sense of their work by equating challenges, downplaying deficiencies and glorifying the paybacks of consulting profession; second, the use of narrative presentations of 'projects' that point towards iterative cycles of action and interpretation; and, third, the use of 'metaphors' to define their practice and open up ways of 'seeing' and intervening.

Key Word/s: Management consulting, Life history research, Sensemaking

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Chapter 1 Introduction

"There is context in every text".[1]

1.1   A Pursuit of Re-Imagining

There is one question that every doctoral student gets asked many times, which is a staple conversation starter for researchers: "So, what is your research about?" I have answered this question many times over the last few years, and every time it made me aware of the vast spectrum of my doctoral research and how much more there is to explore. An occasion that I will always remember is when I was asked this very question by a participant at the Annual Northern Advanced Research Training Institute (NARTI) doctoral conference. The reason I remember this is because, when I told my co-participant that my research was about 'exploring the working lives of management consultants', she responded by asking, "Do they even have a life?" and we both burst into laughter. Her response, funny as it sounded, made me aware of how consultants and the consulting profession in general are perceived. After hearing her comment, I was reluctant to tell her that, until recently, I had been a practicing management consultant myself. Reflecting on this conversation reassured me of the worthiness of my inquiry, which has allowed me to explore the nuances of management consultants' lived experiences as well as possibly re-imagining consulting, only this time as an academic researcher. I feel immensely responsible for the 'life texts' entrusted into my care by the research participants. This awareness brought home the significance of the opportunities that lay ahead in the pursuit of this research inquiry.

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[1] A comment that emerged in my conversation with Satish Kumar, author of the book *The Buddha and the Terrorist*; these words have resonated and stayed with me.

The research process began for me with a sense of enthusiasm and purpose. Through the process of inquiring, I experienced anxiety, felt lost, and was not sure what was emerging through reams of thick data transcripts. At the outset, I assumed that one thing would lead to another and the research would proceed neatly. On the contrary, I moved in a circular rather than linear manner, in an apparent muddle. Bateson (1972) remarks that most of us maintain an order of 'tidiness' in our routines and lives in an attempt to confine life's rich aspects in a neat box. In this thesis, when my writing appears muddled, it reflects those occasions when everything was not entirely tidy and other occasions when I consciously stepped into the muddle, aware of the challenges it would bring in trying to engage with the messiness of participants' lives and moving beyond the confines and comfort of tidiness.

Before presenting an overview of the thesis and its relevance, the next section will briefly discuss the business of management consulting, as this will assist is providing a context to the advisory business and its current position. Therefore, in the following section, a brief overview of the management consulting industry will highlight the growing significance of consulting and, together with this, the scholarly interest in management consulting.

1.2   Management Consulting: A Story of Success

The Management Consultancies Association (MCA)[2] defines management consulting as

> the creation of value for organisations through improved performance, achieved by providing objective advice and implementing business solutions.

Management consulting is considered as a relatively new but fast-growing industry. According to Plunkett Research estimates,[3] global consulting industry revenues (including human resources, information technology, strategy, operations management, and business advisory services) were

2 The MCA is the representative body for management consultancy firms in the UK.
3 Plunkett Research Ltd. is a leading provider of industry sector analysis and research, industry trends, and industry statistics.

estimated to be $488 billion in 2017, a marginal growth from $470 billion during the previous year. The *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, a report by the U.S Department of Labor (2017), estimates that over 8,06,400 people are employed as management analysts (management consultants) alone in the U.S., with an annual mean wage of $82,450. The report predicts that the employment of management consultants is projected to grow 14 percent from 2016 to 2026, faster than the average for all occupations. According to estimates by the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations (FEACO), the worth of the European management consulting sector in 2014-15 was forecasted at €135 billion. In 2016, the management consulting industry in the UK recorded a moderate growth rate of 4.76%,[4] and is now estimated to be worth £9.91 billion. Conversely, in a special quarterly report,[5] the impact of the recent Brexit vote has also been examined, wherein 11% of respondents recorded a negative effect on their businesses, 50% suggested a negative impact on their clients, with most firms, as yet, unaffected, and 6% indicated an impact on their ability to recruit. Despite this, the increased economic significance of the industry over the years has been referred to as the main reason for the development of academic interest in the work of management consultants (Clark and Fincham 2002). While the growth of the management consulting industry has been acknowledged, the geographical coverage of its activity estimated from fee income indicates that it is still concentrated in developed economies, notably in North America (USA and Canada – 49%) and the European Union (33%) (Gross and Poor, 2008).

Along with this growth, the influence of consulting firms on corporates is also reportedly growing, which, to a certain extent, is reflected in the analysis carried out by the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) in 2010,[6] showing that consultants, on average, added value of ten times the fees

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[4] MCA Annual Report (2017), which is based on the fee income of consulting firms. Fee income is defined as the money spent by clients in a sector to purchase a particular consulting capability.

[5] MCA (2016). *Consulting Excellence after Brexit.* Quarterly EU Survey Findings, Survey 1, October 2016.

[6] MCA Annual Report (2010)

charged to their clients. The success of consulting is not only limited to serving private enterprises but has also acquired a significant foothold in the public sector as well as government and policy development, which has been well documented and also severely criticised (Craig and Brooks 2006; Kellner and Crowther 1980). The presence (or shadow) of management consulting is growing in the UK, as in other Western and emerging economies, where consultants are seen as "key agents and symbols of broader social changes" (Sturdy 2009a, p.4).The triumph of consulting is manifested in the significant interest business school graduates in both the United States and Europe have shown in the field, and consulting has emerged as a highly attractive career option (Skovgaard Smith 2013; Chung *et al.* 2008; McKenna 2006; O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). So, the story of consulting success is not limited to economic accomplishments alone but also has a wider influence on public and social life.

It is important to note here that management consulting firms themselves are undergoing rapid changes (Greiner and Ennsfellner 2010), client needs and their business situations are becoming increasingly complex, uncertain, and ambiguous (O'Mahoney 2011). As a result, consultants are being faced with challenges they had never faced earlier, and their work is becoming more demanding. With the growing use of consultants, clients are becoming adept at working with external consultants and expect maximum impact from consultants' (Buono and Poulfelt 2013); in addition, with experience, they are becoming more sophisticated in the use of consulting services and are utilising greater discretion by involving procurement experts in engaging consultants.

As mentioned earlier, with the emergence, success, and challenges the management consulting industry has observed, scholarly interest has also steadily increased. This fact is evident from the review of publications carried out by Mohe, Birkner and Sieweke (2009), suggesting a steady growth in the number of articles published in leading peer-reviewed journals. However, the field lacks scholarly research on management consultants, since the majority of research has focused on the business of consultancy. This research attempts to address this issue by focusing on the experience of consultants. In the next

section, an overview of the research is presented along with establishing the rationale for the study.

1.3   Research Overview and Rationale

As briefly described earlier, this research focuses on the critical exploration of the working lives of management consultants, with an emphasis on how consultants give meaning to, interact with and construct their working lives. The aim of this research is to explore, in depth, the lived experiences of management consultants as they engage in consulting work (advice giving), including the daily goings-on in the workplace. The specific focus of the thesis is in on exploring *'how'* management consultants make sense of these experiences. The study moves beyond the usual rhetoric that evokes the impression of either reverence for, or disgust with, management consulting, by presenting a nuanced argument based on an exploration of the micro-social activities that consultants engage in as part of their working lives: a study that is critical, rich and paradoxical.

It is surprising that, in spite of a growing body of research in management consulting, the literature on management consulting has only scratched the surface (Sturdy 2012). The question—'Why do clients continue to purchase consulting advice that objective analysis finds methodologically and conceptually flawed?' (Collins 2004; Salaman 2002)—speaks volumes about the lack of understanding about what consultants exactly do, how their advice sits with clients, and how they manage sustained interest, notwithstanding failure, after paying exceptionally high fees for such services. Armbrüster (2006) highlights two broad perspectives in the management consulting literature: the 'functionalist' (expert) and the 'critical'. While the 'functionalist' perspective stresses the knowledge-based and assisting nature of the consulting relationship, the critical perspective has largely taken a sceptical view of the hegemony of experts (Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009), including representing clients as passive actors, manipulated and exploited by consultants. Collins (2004) submits that the debunking bandwagon of critical scholars has become a "mass participation sport for academics" (p.557). It is

imperative to clarify that bracketing consultants and consulting work in an 'either/or' paradigm is not only unhelpful, but it also runs the risk of rendering debate ineffective, as these positions encourage a simplistic assumption that client managers actually do just what consultants urge them to do. The focus of this research is thus on exploring the experience of management consultants while recognising some of these taken-for-granted assumptions and routines about consulting work, relationships and professional status.

The extant literature on consulting has largely emphasised the consultancy business (Barcus and Wilkinson 1995; Biech 2011), its process (Sturdy 1997) and different functions (Kubr 2005; Werr and Styhre 2003), the market for consulting as well as the different actors within management consulting, including the clients and client-consultant relationships (Fincham 2012; Czarniawska and Mazza 2012). The discourse on consultants largely relates to the role that consultants perform in the consulting process as influenced by the contextual aspects, in many ways imposing a 'managerialist' view on what it means for consultants (Kitay and Wright 2004). The experiences, vulnerabilities, and impediments management consultants face in their working lives and how they make sense of these experiences have largely remained underexplored (Gill 2015; O'Mahoney 2007; Sturdy 2012). This has resulted in a lack of exploratory groundwork and significant gaps in the fundamental work on management consultants (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel 2016). The intention of this research is to narrow such a gap by engaging in an important debate on the experiences of consultants and the implications on practice.

The exploration of the working lives of consultants here reflects on issues in the spheres of work organisation, working practices, workplace relationships and conditions at work (Sullivan and Baruch 2009), paying attention to how consultants themselves talk about and make sense of these aspects in their everyday interactions. As stated above, both 'functionalist' and 'critical' scholars reflect divergent views about consulting that largely emanate from the consultants' roles; however, the intent here is to adopt a nuanced approach and explore intermingled, relational and paradoxical aspects of

consultants' working lives. Thus, this study is an exploration of issues which are influenced by, and intersect with, the compelling and subtle influences of consultants' lived experiences and local contexts. In doing so, their own experiences of work receive primacy and agency, an important facet that informs their practice and outcomes for clients. By engaging in the exploration of the experiences of consultants this research joins the debate on demystifying what consultants do, who they are and how they see their practice, including their subjective understanding of self in work situations. This has implications for important debates related to their professional status, identity and legitimacy (Buono and Poulfelt 2013; O'Mahoney 2007; Wright 2009).

Related to that, how consultants understand *who they are* and *how they relate* to the context of their work assumes significance. The extant literature highlights consultants as 'problem-solvers' and 'brokers of meaning' for their clients, as sensegivers (Alvesson and Johansson 2002). However, how consultants make meaning of their work, identify with complexities and ascertain their contributions has largely remained unexplored. By inquiring into these aspects of consultants' work, this research engages in the debate concerning consultants' identity, more specifically around their 'elite identity'. While the scholars have focused on attributing 'elite identity' to consultants, the consultants' own processes of making sense and identification have not been explored, an important aspect that this research explores. From a theoretical perspective, this research situates itself within the critical management consulting literature (Clark and Fincham 2002), a wide body of literature exploring consulting from a sociological perspective as a social phenomenon. To explore management consultants processes of making sense, sensemaking theoretical perspective (Weick 1995; Weick 2012; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005) is used as a conceptual lens. As a result, the research indulges in academic discourse on consultants' sensemaking, an area that has so far not received much scholarly attention.

To summarise, the study intends to make contributions to the critical consulting literature, including the literature on consultants' 'elite status and identification'. Along with that this thesis aims to make significant contributions

to how the working lives of consultants can be understood by privileging their own 'lived experiences' and understanding their roles in interaction. In addition to that, by accessing how consultants retrospectively make sense of their practice and the processes they employ in doing so, the study intends to contribute to the sensemaking literature.

1.4   Research Question/s

The research is focused around exploring the micro social activities that consultants engage in as part of their working lives. Research on the working lives of management consultants is a vast canvass, and issues may range from exploring work organisation, workplace relationships and careers, workplace conditions, and identities.

The key question that this study specifically proposes to explore is:

> ***How do management consultants make sense of their working lives as they engage in everyday advice-giving activities?***

Additionally,

What processes do management consultants use to make sense of their lived experiences?

Conceptually, these questions contain specific theoretical elements that the present thesis will apply in order to answer the main research question. Together, these elements embody the critical strategy and basic argument of the thesis.

'Consulting/advisory work and relationships'- Working lives – 'the what'

This research is about professionals in the management consulting practice. Management consulting work lends itself to multiple meanings, such as 'helping' (Schein 2002), 'creating knowledge' (Alvesson 1995), and 'impression management' (Clark and Salaman 1996b), thus evoking severe criticism on its associated rhetoric and somewhat ambiguous impact. I restrict myself to studying management consultants' working lives and, most importantly, their day-to-day engagement with clients, co-workers, and key

stakeholders in the process of advice giving. There is no specific emphasis on the type of work or specific consulting projects or peculiar clients. ***In this thesis, I explicitly call attention to the issues that consultants raise and converse about in their daily lives that may be mundane, unexplored, uncertain, and vulnerable aspects of consultants' working lives***. I am aware that the social context in which consultants are embedded will, in part, inform both the relational and practical implications of their work.

'Making sense' – the process - 'the how'

I believe that the consulting process involves a relational and emotional process taking place within the interaction between consultants, clients, and other actors. The 'sensemaking perspective' (Weick 1995) helps here to explore how consultants make sense of their working lives, influenced by embedded relationships and their life and work histories. This is, in part, the way in which the thesis will shed light on 'how' consultants give meaning to their subjective experiences.

The research questions elaborated here are addressed in the findings chapters and subsequently revisited in the discussion chapter. The core methodology adopted in this study is life history research (Cole and Knowles 2001; Cole and Knowles 2008). Through the life history approach, personal, social, temporal, and contextual influences on consultants' working lives emerged, facilitating a rich understanding on the area that this research set out to explore. In-depth life history interviews were carried out with participants from leading consulting firms in the UK and Denmark. During the course of the fieldwork, participant-generated images were also collated as part of the interview interactions.

1.5   Research Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this research is, by drawing on the 'contextual-interpretive' approach, to explore management consultants' subjective experiences of their working lives. Using a constructionist approach from a subjectivist problematic (Cunliffe 2008; Cunliffe 2011), this research will bring to light the often ignored 'lived experience' of management consultants' working lives. This thesis intends to take the lived experiences of management consultants participating in this study seriously and delve into issues considered pertinent by them in their working lives. The research outcomes shall draw out nuances of their working lives that are unspoken, ambiguous, and vulnerable.

The key objectives of this research are:

- To explore the wider landscape (Shotter 2006) of management consultants' working lives and foreground the issues that they envisage as influencing their lives and practice
- To explore and bring to light the processes through which management consultants make sense of their lived experiences that assist in building understandings of consulting work
- To contribute (theory building) to the critical management consulting literature by drawing upon 'sensemaking' theory as a conceptual framework from a social constructionist perspective

In the next section, I present the structure of this thesis outlining the different parts of the study and how it has been bifurcated into appropriate chapters.

1.6   Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is broadly structured into three main parts, with eight chapters. The first part includes setting up the basic argument of the thesis in the introduction chapter, followed by a review of the extant literature in management consulting. The issues derived from the literature review are further supplemented by the sensemaking perspective as a conceptual framework. The second part of the thesis discusses the methodology adopted, and the third part includes the findings of the study followed by a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 will review the management consulting literature in detail, with a particular focus on situating the theoretical underpinnings for this thesis. The literature chapter is further structured into three broad sections, the first of which focuses on various theoretical streams in the management consulting literature (i.e. 'functional', 'social learning' and 'critical' literature). This is followed by developing an understanding of the contextual issues relating to the consulting profession; here, key debates concerning the nature of consulting work are discussed by drawing upon various theories used by management scholars. The third section discusses the theoretical issues related to the experience of consulting and highlights issues related to consultants' elite identity, status, and control. It also highlights the positionality of consultants as outsiders and their experience of liminality - being 'betwixt and between'.

Chapter 3 sets out the methodological choices for the research. It outlines the ontological and epistemological position of this thesis, before discussing the methodology employed. Here, the discussion is focused on the life history research methodology and its usefulness in achieving the research aims and answering the research questions. The specific advantages and limitations of this methodology are examined, including life history interviews and the photo-elicitation method. The next section focuses on the issues surrounding data collection and sampling. In this section, the rationale for using a specific sampling approach and selection of research participants is outlined. In this chapter, I have deliberated on the issue of reflexivity, in particular in

relation to my role as both a researcher and a former consultant. Finally, I have presented a brief outline of the ethical issues and safeguards that were followed.

Chapter 4 leads the discussion on the conceptual perspective that informs the research by examining the 'sensemaking' literature. In this chapter, the 'sensemaking perspective' is foregrounded to explore the lived experiences of management consultants. Here, I explain my ontological leanings in using the sensemaking perspective, followed by a discussion on sensemaking triggers and temporality. I conclude by highlighting how sensemaking helps in conceptually anchoring the thesis.

Chapters 5 through 7 present the research findings. Here, I have shared my research data in different textual forms. These three chapters elaborate upon three different processes for management consultants' sensemaking that emerged through the analysis. Chapter 5 focuses on the process of comparing and referencing used by management consultants to make sense and locate their identity. In Chapter 6, the second process relates to the use of project narratives by research participants in making sense of elements of consulting practice. In this sense, participants use fragmented narratives to make sense of their experiences. Finally, in Chapter 7, the third process for consultants' sensemaking relates to the use of metaphors by consultants as a discursive resource. In this chapter, by sharing both the life history interview texts and visuals shared by participants, I highlight how metaphors assist consultants in sensemaking, as well as contesting some taken-for-granted assumptions about consulting.

Chapter 8 presents a discussion of my findings. I use a diagrammatic presentation to bring together the three distinct processes of consultants' sensemaking in order to argue for the implications they have on an academic understanding of consultants' sensemaking. In this chapter, I highlight the study's contribution to theory, method and practice and discuss some of its limitations. Finally, I share my concluding thoughts and suggestions for future scholarly research.

Chapter 2 Management Consulting Literature: Mapping the Territory

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to identify, highlight, and critically review the management consulting literature, with a focus on the working lives of management consultants. The literature review informs the theoretical framework of my research, which further underpins the data collection and analysis. The purpose of this chapter is threefold: firstly, to examine the existing literature in the field of management consulting in order to identify the key theoretical perspectives and debates therein; secondly, to identify issues that remain overlooked or unaddressed in scholarly research, specifically concerning the 'working lives of management consultants'; and thirdly, to outline the exploratory framework employed in the thesis and the main arguments that unfold in the findings and discussion chapter. By drawing on the relevant literature and providing reference to contemporary debates, this review situates the thesis within the appropriate stream of consulting literature. The literature review also assists in providing a basis for the focus of the research, which pertains to how consultants' working lives are understood, constructed, and conceptualised.

Academic interest in management consulting has increased steadily over the years, especially in the last two decades, where it has witnessed a widespread growth in peer-reviewed journals and special edition books, along with the introduction of management consulting into academic degree programmes in business schools around the world (Clark and Fincham 2002; Engwall and Kipping 2002; Kipping and Clark 2012b; Mohe and Seidl 2011). However, commentators (e.g. Bronnenmayer et al., 2016) still confirm the lack of empirical foundations and note significant gaps in fundamental work on management consulting. Kipping and Clark (2012b) argue that, in spite of rising interest and considerable growth in the literature, the research output has

remained on the side-lines of the mainstream management literature (defined as top-ranked, US-based management journals). They further suggest that the main reasons for this are the fluid nature of the industry, the reluctance of the main actors (i.e. consultants), owing to apprehensions about breaching contractual confidentiality, and the absence of a 'grand' theory[7] for consulting. In addition to being pre-dominantly '*a-theoretical',* the management consulting literature is argued to be highly diverse (Sturdy 2004; Mohe and Seidl 2011). However, specific attempts have been made lately to explore the potential advantages of utilising different theoretical approaches in the area of understanding consultants' relationship with clients.
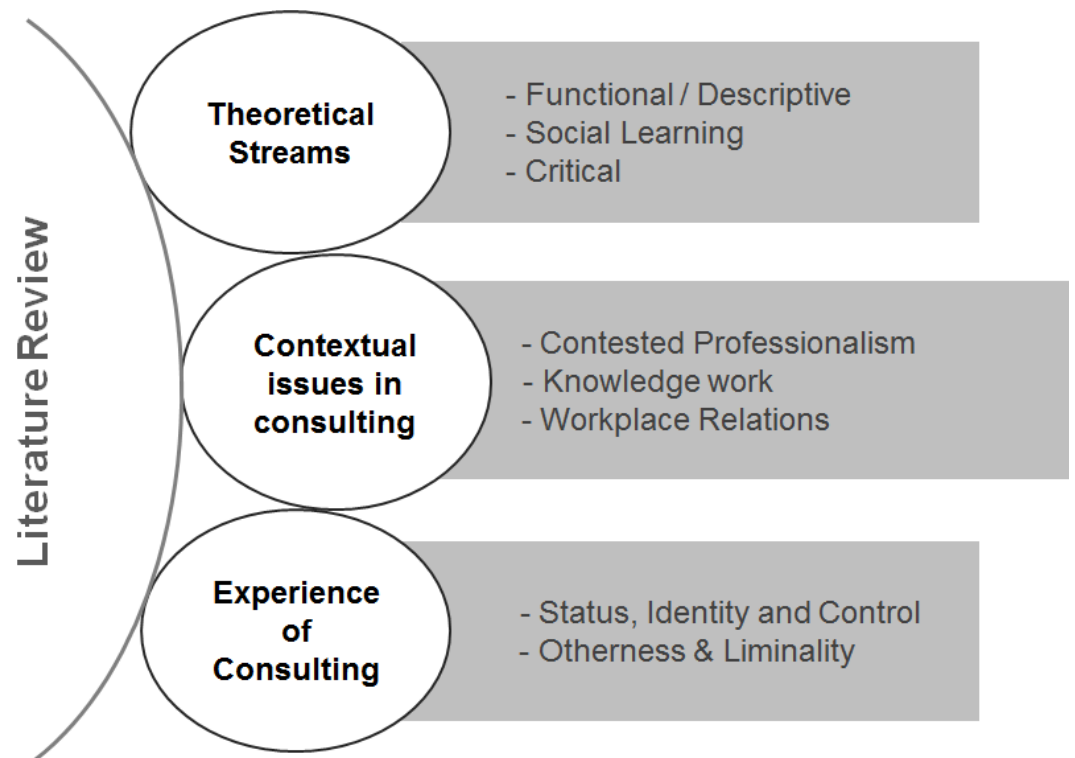
Figure 2-1: Organisation of the literature review and key areas of focus

At a broader level, the management consulting literature echoes the theoretical subdivisions that have emerged and become evident with the growth of 'advice-giving business' over the years. These sub-divisions are discussed in this review and, through this, the theoretical basis of the research

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[7] Grand theory appears as a mainstream management construct here, with preference towards a need for big unifying abstract theorising.

will be presented. This chapter adheres to the structure depicted above in Figure 2-1: (a) Theoretical streams that include functional/descriptive and social learning perspectives, the latter as a sub-division of the descriptive perspective, followed by the critical literature, (b) contextual issues that focus on the nature of consulting work that include contested professionalism, knowledge work, and workplace relations, and finally (c) the experience of consultants, emphasising issues pertaining to consultants' status, identity, and control, along with the experience of 'otherness' and liminality.

2.2 Streams and Sub-Divisions in the Management Consulting Literature

The management consulting literature is characterised by the polarisation of perspectives on the nature of consulting work and the contribution that management consultants make (Engwall and Kipping 2013; Nikolova and Devinney 2012). At one end of this spectrum is the 'functionalist/descriptive' view, which argues for the primacy of expertise that is seen as crucial for consultants in creating value for clients. On the other end of the spectrum, scholars taking a critical perspective have challenged the impact of consultants' contributions and value addition to client organisations. They argue that consultants are too aggressively focused on selling 'one size fits all' solutions, rather than emphasising the unique context of client organisations and attending to their specific needs. From this perspective, the emphasis is on arguing that consultants' contributions are insubstantial and even manipulative (Clark and Fincham 2002).

This section of the chapter will begin by providing a brief overview of the evolution of the consulting literature, briefly tracing the roots of the literature and elaborating on its developments. This will be followed by a discussion on 'functionalist' and critical perspectives, which leads to locating the theoretical focus of this research firmly within the area of the critical consulting literature; after this, the section will provide a brief discussion of the use of literature from a constructivist perspective, highlighting emerging developments in the consulting literature.

2.2.1 Tracing the past and present

The extant management consulting literature places emphasis on the evolution and growth of consulting over the years, the inherent challenges it poses, how business influences consultants, and possibilities for the future. This provides a bridge in understanding the issues related to the structure and nature of business and the internationalisation of management consulting. It describes the evolution of the consulting industry through three (overlapping) generations or waves, starting with the development of (a) scientific management, followed by (b) a focus on strategy and organisation, leading to the growth of (c) information technology (IT) network-based consulting (Curnow and Reuvid 2003; Kubr 2005; Kipping 2002). It explores the complex nature of the consulting business, alongside changes in the business environment and client demands, although such accounts omit the wider political, ecological, and social transformations. Table 2-1 presents an overview of the historical developments, showing that early consultants were primarily industrial engineers who invested in developing efficient systems; however, with an increase in economic activity, areas such as strategy, finance, human relations, and information technology became prominent areas for advisory/consulting business.

Similar to other areas of management, historical perspectives on management consulting are replete with evolutionary metaphors that suggest linear progress and responses from consulting organisations as business dynamics shifted from industrialisation to knowledge-based work. This perspective further forecasts a similar trajectory (linear alignment with market dynamics) into the future. Commentators have celebrated the growth of management consulting, largely claiming commercial success in itself as a positive attribute of the field, while failing to question experiences that may be very unwelcome and may possibly sully[8] the nature of its own business and businesses more generally. What is missing from such accounts is

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[8] This refers to the involvement of consulting firms in corporate frauds and scandals. The famous case of Arthur Anderson and Enron (client) is repeatedly referenced in the literature, alluding to the collusion between the consulting firm and client organisation in failing to carry out the requisite due diligence that led to a major corporate scam.

acknowledgement of the constructed nature of history. A few authors (like, Kipping 1999; Kipping 2002; Kipping and Clark 2012a; Kubr 2005; McKenna 2001; McKenna 2006) have traced the history of management consulting, but while their work has been accepted and disseminated, their claims have not been challenged, and hardly any new perspectives have been offered. Thomas, Wilson and Leeds (2013) argue that "as similar accounts accumulate, they become interpreted as the history of the discipline, which then tend to be reproduced even more widely" (p.1131).

As evident from Table 2-1, the historical developments only deliberate on the evolution and growth of large consulting firms. Therefore, the type of consulting firms, their history, and their origin reveal much about what continues to be a dominant influence in the literature. Smaller boutique and niche firms servicing big corporate clients, and how they have evolved over the years is not mentioned in the historical accounts of management consulting. Independent sole trader consulting businesses have also flourished and continue to grow, yet they hardly find mention in the extant literature. It would be safe to suggest that the history of management consulting is predominantly the history of big firms that emerged in the early industrialised era, and some firms continue to dominate the consulting scene on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

Table 2-1: Major trends in the evolution of management consulting

Major Trends	Period	Dominant Focus	Motive	Approach/Methods/Tools	Prominent Firms/ Consultants
Scientific Management	1900-1920	Efficiency	Professional recognition and, more broadly, to improve management–labour relations	Scientific Management; well laid-out principles	Frederick. W. Taylor
Improvisations to Scientific Management	1920-1950	Efficiency	Critiqued Scientific Management or introduced somewhat similar proprietary systems; generally more flexible	Variants of Scientific Management principles; micro-motion and fatigue (Gilbreth); optimisation of work practices and payment-by-results (Emerson); or methods-time-measurement (Maynard)	Frank Gilbreth, Harrington Emerson, Charles Eugène Bedaux, George May, Harold Maynard (Methods Engineering Council)
Audit and Accounting	1900s onwards	Financial Control; Cost Systems; Audit	Soundness of financial information for decisioning; costing information for commercial and investment purposes	Audits; analysis of financial records/statements	PwC, Ernst & Young, KPMG, Deloitte (various firms split and merged to form the current "Big 4")
Human Relations	1930-1960	Socio-Technical Systems	Altering conditions of work; connection between technology and work organisation	Search conference; action research	Elton Mayo, Eric Trist, Emery
Institutional Change and Strategy	1930s onwards	Strategy and Planning	Strategy and structures; corporate forms (multi-divisional forms); decentralisation	General questionnaire; market surveys; budgetary controls	Booz Allen, McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group
Information Technology	1960s onwards	Systems Implementation; Digitisation	Extending the benefits of computing technology to organisations and institutions; outsourcing in-firm operations	Systems implementation; deployment and maintenance of hardware and software systems	IBM, EDS, CSC, Infosys, TCS, Wipro Technologies

Source: Detailed literature review carried out for the study

In these academic historical accounts, examination of how consultants worked and what their working lives are like is absent. This is in contrast to the practitioner literature written by consultants themselves, which includes excerpts from the daily routines of consultants and descriptions of what to expect from consulting work, e.g. *The Consultant's Calling: Bringing Who You Are to What You Do* (Bellman 1990), *The McKinsey Way* (Rasiel 1999), *House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time* (Kihn 2009), *The Consultant with Pink Hair* (Harrison 2012), and *More Secrets of Consulting* (Weinberg 2002). Therefore, scholarly work has not given much focus to consultants' experiences of their work and consequent arising issues. Historically, both academia and the media have been severely critical of management consultants, largely based on debates about consultants that swing from the extremes of appreciation and denigration (Bouwmeester and Stiekema 2015).

The following sections will attempt to outline the key debates in the extant literature on management consulting and the light it sheds on the working lives of management consultants, including the gaps that become evident.

2.2.2 Eulogising consultants as 'experts': The functionalist/ descriptive literature

Academic interest in consulting began five to six decades ago, and the early literature is primarily functionalist and normative in nature, with its roots primarily in social psychology. The 'functionalist' perspective, the traditional view of consulting, emphasises the expert knowledge and helping nature of consultants. From this perspective, consultants were celebrated as the avant-garde of the new economy (Kipping and Armbrüster 1998), as providers of expert advice (Kubr 2005), and as key agents of the creation, dissemination, and transfer of new management ideas (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999; Fincham and Clark 2002). Their work with clients is referred to as client-expert interaction (Aharoni 1997; Gallessich 1982; Nikolova and Devinney 2012; Wilkinson 1995). From this perspective, management consultants use abstract knowledge as well as concepts and methodology based on consulting practice,

professional association, and long-standing experience, emphasising the need, influence, and behaviour of consultants. From such a *prescriptive* locus, consultants are in possession of (superior) knowledge that clients need and will be helpful for them, thus alluding to a knowledge asymmetry, which is the source of consultants' legitimacy.

The role of consultants is to diagnose the business problem experienced by clients and recommend a solution to be implemented. The roles between the consultants and the clients are clearly differentiated as solution providers and recipients of knowledge. The problem-solving capabilities of consultants are revered and relied upon and are the determinants of power relations between consultants and clients. O'Mahoney and Markham (2013) argue that the consultant's perceived image as an "expert outsider with access to 'real' knowledge provides the illusion of support and certainty to managers in confusing and uncertain times" (p.32). This normative and prescriptive literature has remained influential throughout the years and still remains an important source of underlining the authority that consultants command. It lays out formulaic approaches for consultants to use in their work in order to help them understand what to do and assess how they are performing against set prescriptions for effective consulting practice.

In an influential work first published more than three decades ago, *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting your Expertise Used*, Peter Block describes the consultant as

> a person in a position to have influence over an individual, a group, or an organisation, but no direct power to make changes or implement programs […] the recipients of all advice are called clients (Block 2011, p.2).

It is noteworthy that the book is called *Flawless Consulting*; throughout the text, the focus is on providing prescriptions for consultants to consult effectively, and it provides checklists for important interventions such as preparing for contract meetings, working with clients, and providing feedback to clients. With the purpose of eliminating the 'flaws' in consulting, Block (2011) recommends:

> if you are a part of a consulting team, the checklist gives you a vehicle to get your act together. Mostly, the questions keep you

centred on what you need from the meetings so that you don't get swept away (Block 2011, p.98).

This is a prime illustration of the prescriptive/functionalist literature, suggesting that consultants follow guidelines, frameworks, and models of superior advisory practice. Similarly, David Maister's book is another example of a noteworthy prescriptive text, primarily for constructing the management consultant as *The Trusted Advisor* (the title of the book), who is required to follow a five-stage sequential process of building trust with his or her clients. Like other prescriptive texts, Maister also provides a '*quick impact list'* to gain trust. During the course of my fieldwork, consultants from a prominent consulting firm I interviewed said that they were trying to practise Maister's trust formula and techniques, which had been introduced to them by a professor from a leading business school. In this sense, both academics and practitioners have prominently utilised functionalist literature.

The functionalist literature has witnessed a significant contribution from management practitioners themselves, referred to as self-congratulatory texts and considered as normative in nature (Baaij 2013). Some authors, however, argue that there is a sub-division within the functionalist literature, influenced by practitioners who advocate a more participative approach to consulting informed by organisational development and social learning theories (Nikolova and Devinney 2012). The next section will focus upon this perspective known as the social learning perspective.

2.2.2.1 Consultants as 'helpers' and 'reflective practitioners'

Consultants informed by the consulting approach rooted in the organisational development (OD) literature (McGlvern and Fineman 1983; Schein 1988; Schön 1983), including organisational learning, behavioural sciences, and action research, belong to the social learning perspective (Nikolova and Devinney 2012). The focus of this approach has traditionally been on identifying consultants as problem solvers through the use of diagnostic skills and attempting to alter clients' behaviour. While the emphasis of this approach remains on using the expertise of the consultants to work with organisational issues, the legitimacy of the clients' understanding of their context and deep knowledge of their organisation pushes consultants towards

"mutual helping" (Schein 2002, p.27), differentiating this from the traditional functionalist perspective. Schein's *Process Consultation* (Schein 1988) represents an example of such literature. In this sense, Schein (1997) argues that

> the consultant can only help the clients to solve their problems (…) consultation becomes a matter of establishing a supportive relationship in which the client comes to understand the need and opportunities for change.

Evidently, there is considerable focus in this strand of OD-influenced literature on exploiting the effectiveness of consultants in the consulting intervention process. The effectiveness of consultants depends on their willingness to actively reflect on their practice (Schön 1983), requiring a range of skills. As Huczynski and Buchanan (2007) state,

> an OD consultant requires a range of skills and knowledge concerned with the process, particularly with social and interpersonal skills, such as communicating, negotiating and influencing and conflict resolution (Huczynski and Buchanan 2007, p.580).

Consultants are required to be less dependent on standardised solutions and, instead, are expected to involve clients in problem-solving that requires, among other things, a reflective inquiry in order to determine new solutions (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003). However, the multiplicity of skills that the consultants must possess subtly maintains emphasis on consultants' agentic role; in this sense, consultants are assumed to have these skills in order to be 'helpful' to the organisation, and clients are convinced of the value and know-how of consultants. From this perspective, the literature offers simple, discrete, and positive metaphors grounded in the primary metaphor of the consultant as a '*professional helper*' (Clark 1995). Thus, it can be inferred that, regardless of the approach, functionalist or '*process consultation*'/OD, the expertise of consultants remains the key determinant of consulting success, although there is a difference in the kind of capabilities emphasised. In the literature from this perspective, significant emphasis is also placed on consultants' abilities to have reflective conversations with clients and, to some extent, to be aware of behavioural and psychoanalytical aspects in individual and group interactions. The emphasis is on how consultants interact, reflect, and respond to clients; it focuses on how, as '*outsider*s', consultants will intervene in the client

organisation. Nikolova and Devinney (2012) argue that the views informed by the social learning perspective do not address important aspects such as the resolution of differences between consultants and clients, the political nature of consulting knowledge, and the uncertain value of knowledge that is socially constructed.

My discomfort with the prescriptive literature relates to the emphasis on consulting as primarily an agentic activity, where interventions made by consultants are claimed as effective and helpful for clients. This traditional functionalist literature, including its extended conception, provides a normative and unitary perspective on consulting and consultants, thus limiting understanding of the complexities of consultants' working lives. The focus of this thesis is not on revealing what management consultants do, which the functional literature lays out in its prescriptions for consultants. At the same time, I am not exploring insider accounts of what happens in consulting roles. My focus is on the 'sense' that consultants make of their practice or, to be more specific, *how* they make sense of their practice. This research views consultants' lives in their wider social context, where consultants understand, construct, and retrospectively make sense of their lives, appreciating temporality, challenges, uncertainties, and the influence of social interactions with clients and co-workers. The emphasis is on the sense they make of their practice and the social processes through which they make sense of their working lives as management consultants. This thesis recognises consultants as social actors and not just as agents; in this sense, they work, interact, and construct their lives in relation to their context and clients.

The following section discusses the critical consulting literature, a stream of literature that is argued to have grown out of extreme scepticism towards the orthodox normative literature.

2.2.3 Consultants as 'impression' managers: The critical consulting literature

The increasing presence and influence of consultants has encouraged academic scholars to question, doubt, and even distrust the contribution consultants make (Clark 1995; Clark and Fincham 2002; Clark and Salaman

1996a; Czarniawska and Mazza 2012; Kieser 1997). Therefore, a body of critical consulting literature has gradually developed over the last thirty years as a response to, and a critique of, the traditional normative and 'prescriptive' literature that was perceived to have been largely contributed to by consulting practitioners (Fincham 1999a). A relatively smaller stream, typically seen as existing alongside critical consulting, is that of journalistic literature, including media publications and reports. The journalistic literature has been very derisive yet detailed in its criticisms of consultants (Craig 2005; Pinault 2009) and has contributed extensively to the negative public perception of management consulting and consultants.

It is important to clarify what 'critical' signifies in the context of the consulting literature. O'Mahoney and Markham (2013), in clarifying what 'critical' implies in the context of the management consulting literature, argue that being 'critical' suggests questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions about consulting to develop explanations and theories. A critical perspective is a broad sociological method of examining consulting (ibid.), where it is understood as a social phenomenon. This means more than just looking at what is often described as a 'unitarist' or 'managerialist' point of view. Instead of focusing on questions such as 'how can consultants earn more revenue and acquire clients?' the focus is on issues related to the impact of consulting on organisations, society, and individuals. This perspective adopts a larger sociological/critical perspective through overlapping traditions and approaches used in the wider management and organisation studies literature. In the consulting context, theories related to power, knowledge, professions, identity, and several other areas in the organisational context have been employed. Importantly, given that this research focuses on the lived experience of consultants, the critical literature provides the space for exploring this topic and situating the contribution of the research. I will build upon this later in the chapter (see Section 2.2.3.1).

An emphasis of the critical consulting literature has been on the rhetoric of management consultancy. It is argued that consultants use their power of persuasion, performance, and impression management to highlight the value of their advice to the clients (Clark and Fincham 2002; Clark and Salaman 1996b;

Fincham 1999a; Kieser 2002). This perspective highlights the ambiguous, metaphorical, and context-dependent nature of consulting knowledge (Alvesson 2001; Clark 1995; Czarniawska and Mazza 2012; Nikolova and Devinney 2012).

Prominent critical consulting scholars Clark and Salaman suggest that

> if consultants are to persuade clients of their quality, and convince them of their value, they must actively manage and manipulate the interaction process in order to create favourable impressions of their service. Hence, the art of impression management [i.e. the manipulation and regulation of images relating to client perceptions of the service delivered] is at the core of consultancy work (Clark and Salaman 1998a, pp.18-19).

This statement hints at the ability of consultants to manipulate clients and present themselves as effective solution providers, which supersedes the results they are able to demonstrate. Furthermore, it argues that the intangible nature of consultants' knowledge and advice allows scope for consultants to construct a reality which persuades clients that they have purchased a high quality service, although they cannot assess its value (Clark 1995; Fincham 1999a). The critical perspective highlights the ambiguous nature of consulting knowledge, and therefore challenges the intuitive approval of its value to clients. The critical consulting perspective emphasises the following three aspects that further generate questions about the complexity and ambiguity of consulting work (Baaij 2013):

a) claims on knowledge that consultants make;
b) what management consultants claim to do with that knowledge; and
c) the claimed contribution and results of management consultants

Critical literature points out that consulting knowledge is a language of mutually acceptable ways of knowing, defining, and talking about management, managers, and organisations. It argues that knowledge develops in interaction with the clients through translation, where translation is understood as a process of actors (consultants and clients) convincing each other that their interests collide (Clark and Salaman 1998b). As a result, it sees consulting knowledge as a matter of belief, impression management, and the negotiation of meaning (Alvesson 1993a; Nikolova and Devinney 2012). Meanings are not

"autocratically and manipulating" (Clark and Salaman 1998b, p.152) imposed on clients to unquestioningly consume. Unlike the 'expert' literature, the focus here is on the symbolic nature of knowledge specifically providing a *sense of being knowledgeable*, so the perception of being knowledgeable is more important for consultants (Clark and Salaman 1998b). In contrast to the normative literature, where knowledge asymmetry is the source of power, here manipulation of meaning and management of myths and rhetoric are means of power as well as legitimacy.

The central problematic for the critical perspective referred to above is "how do consultants demonstrate value to clients?" (Fincham 1999a, p.338). Critical scholars point towards the rhetorical actions by the consultants like rationality of appearances (imposing methodologies, practitioner competence, and glossy documentation), positioning services not merely as technical solutions but also as techno-organisational skills, and offering services in areas where it is difficult to judge the quality of advice (Fincham 1999a). The extant literature has referred to this as the *strategic perspective,* largely pointing towards the consultants' strategies involving power play and knowledge interactions. Clients' dependencies are constructed in order to demonstrate indispensability, expertise, and knowledge claims.

An alternative *structural perspective* focuses on the broader context in which consulting operates and "the external factors that fix its meaning" (Fincham 1999a, p.339). The *structural perspective* focuses on the constraints on consulting and its dependence on corporate structures and processes. From a *structural perspective*, power shifts from the individual to an overarching form of corporate power leading the consulting activities to be more constrained and limited as well as primarily defined in terms of corporate demand. Unlike the functionalist approach, where the clients' fear of dependence forms the basis of the client-consultant relationship, here the insecurity and uncertainty of managerial tasks acts as an important force (Werr and Styhre 2003). However, client-consultant relationships may vary over time and space, as they are constrained by institutionalised ideas regarding the nature and image of management as well as management consulting (Fincham 1999a).

The ambiguity of knowledge and perceived manipulation raises questions about the professional status of consultants, and the literature has pointed towards the fragile nature of professionalisation in the absence of a unique, rarefied, and defendable knowledge base (Fincham and Clark 2002). Any claims to authority, status, and credibility by management consultants have thus been extensively challenged and debated. In the critical consulting literature, it is further argued that clients use consultants to accomplish their own political interests. The need for client managers to manage the power, self-image, and maintenance of professional identities propels the involvement of consultants (Alvesson and Johansson 2002). A concern for such issues of knowledge, professionalisation, social relations, power, and politics expands the realm of discussion in the critical literature beyond the immediate pragmatic concerns of practitioners deliberated upon in the functionalist literature (Sturdy 2012). Thus, the critical consulting literature offers a more research-oriented approach to understanding management consulting, and management academics have extensively contributed to this stream of consulting literature (Alvesson and Johansson 2002; Clark and Fincham 2002; Werr and Styhre 2003).

2.2.3.1 Situating my research: areas of agreement and disagreement with the critical consulting theoretical perspective

The critical consulting literature expands the narrow conceptualisation of consultants as 'experts' and presents them as social actors in that their work is examined from wider sociological and organisational implications. Consultants construct their knowledge in social interactions and in relation with clients. Taking this understanding forward, the working lives of consultants traverse mundane yet important everyday aspects of their work, workplace relationships, occupational identity, and dynamics of consulting practice in relation to clients and their unique contexts. *This thesis is aligned with such a perspective and draws upon the critical consulting perspective. It is naïve to believe that consultants can unwaveringly understand and provide solutions to issues brought about by clients in highly complex business environments. Thus, the emphasis on the ambiguity of consulting work by critical scholars is also adopted.* Furthermore, the work performed by consultants is understood

as a series of narratives that constitute and make up the client context, where stories, symbols, and metaphors are used by consultants to create interpretations and solve problems (Armbrüster 2006). This conceptualisation is relevant in my research, and I explore these aspects from the perspective of consultants' sensemaking later in the thesis (see Section 4.3).

However, on reviewing the critical consulting literature in detail, few areas of tension are noticeable. The critical literature suggests that consultants must be authoritative and stay in command, and that their interactions are to be determined by rhetorical and impression management skills. This appears to take the extreme stance of considering everything consultants do as insubstantial, similar to the prescriptive literature where everything consultants do is useful and helpful. I disagree with such an extreme conception; as much as consultants may be idiosyncratic, rhetorical, and even dramatic (Clark and Mangham 2004), this cannot be equally applied to all kinds of work they perform. There are consulting assignments that focus on specific knowledge sharing (Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009) and development. Similarly, the critical literature alleges that the use of stories and metaphors is carried out with the purpose of exercising control and manipulation, which again I find problematic due to its primacy on the possibility of unilateral control by consultants, relegating consultants to simply being sellers of drama and rhetoric (Pellegrin-Boucher 2006b). Furthermore, the critical perspective suggests that clients are 'marionettes on strings', oversimplifying client competence in utilising and working with consultants. This perception of managers as 'gullible' victims does not stand up to scrutiny in the contemporary organisational context, where clients use sophisticated processes of engaging with consultants and play an active role in procuring consulting services (Mohe and Seidl 2011; Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009; Sturdy and Wright 2011).

The assumption is that consultants' interventions are largely focused on propagating management fashions that, at best, have symbolic value, completely underplaying some of their advantages to clients (Abrahamson 1996; Jung and Kieser 2012). While the critical literature highlights the discursive strategies employed by consultants to address client managers'

anxiety and need for control, the vulnerabilities, challenges, and anxieties that management consultants themselves experience have not been explored.

Growing research in management consulting is helping not only in advancing the critical literature, but also questioning assumptions made by earlier scholars. On reviewing the functional (prescriptive), social learning (practitioner), and critical literature, it is evident that the understanding of consulting work and the role of consultants and their capabilities, knowledge, and impact is either extensively criticised or taken for granted. Amidst this polarity, there is hardly any attempt to focus on how the involved actors (consultants) appreciate their lived experiences, think about the value of their work, or make sense of their working lives. Through critical examination of consultants' lived experience, this thesis reflects retrospectively on their life history as consultants and makes an attempt to explore how consultants construct their working lives and eventually make sense of it all.

So far, the analysis of the consulting literature has focused on the key theoretical perspectives that have been employed in scholarly research. *Based on the focus of this research inquiry, the critical consulting perspective is suited to explore consultants' working lives, and this is where the theoretical contribution of the present research will rest*. The following sections will explore various facets of consultants' working lives. While some aspects of consultants' work appeared in the discussion on theoretical perspectives, more incisive discussion will be outlined in the following sections. As mentioned earlier, management consultants significantly impact economic, organisational, and societal issues, while scholarly studies in this field have remained somewhat fragmented and underdeveloped.

2.3   Contextual Issues: Peculiarities of Consulting Work

Work that management consultants do is often regarded as challenging and highly stressful (Meriläinen *et al.* 2004; O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). Consultants are required to travel constantly (Sturdy 1997), remain available (always, anywhere) (Meriläinen *et al.* 2004), excel by selling (Sturdy 1997) and face an 'up-or-out' career trajectory (Kipping 2011). The work challenges enumerated here provide a context for management consultants' work. In the preliminary introduction to the critical literature, issues related to consultants' working lives such as the contested nature of the consulting profession, the fashionable nature of consulting knowledge and complexity of workplace relationships were referred to; these issues will be discussed in detail in this section.

2.3.1   Consultants as contested professionals: 'New professionals' or non-professionals

The consulting profession has been argued to lack characteristics usually ascribed to the traditional professions, such as formal education, a codified knowledge base, and regulation by a professional association. This section emphasises the debate about whether consultants are highly-skilled professionals or not and how this contested nature of professionalism influences the way consultants perceive their work. While consultants usually receive high fees and recognition and execute high-impact work projects, their work does not satisfy the sociological requirements of a profession, resulting in a lack of occupational closure for consultants (Skovgaard Smith 2015). *From the perspective of this thesis, pertinent questions arise related to the professional status of consultants such as: How do management consultants negotiate the fluidity of their professional status in their working lives as an outcome of this weak professionalisation? What significance does it bear for them in their day-to-day work? How do management consultants make sense of their work in the context of fragile professionalisation, including its influences on their process of sensemaking?*

In 1962, while addressing MBA students at Harvard, Marvin Bower[9] described management consulting as "one of the newer professions" (McKenna 2006, p.5).The debate regarding the professional status of management consulting has continued ever since, even though employment within consulting firms has grown aggressively as an occupation (Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping 2011). Kirkpatrick, Muzio and Ackroyd (2012) suggest that the literature on the sociology of professions is informed by a 'taxonomic agenda' that focuses on the classification of different types of occupations, and the extent to which these sociological models of professionalisation apply to consulting has been a matter of active debate in the consulting literature. When compared to other knowledge fields that require abstract expert knowledge, such as law, auditing, medicine, and architecture, management consulting/advisory services have been unable to develop a trustworthy pathway towards professionalism (Furusten 2009; Furusten 2013). In the literature, both pro-consultancy (functionalist/practitioner) and critical theorists have loosely presented their views (Alvesson and Johansson 2002) on this aspect. Traditional pro-consultancy texts project consultants as professionals who are both highly competent and possess expertise to solve challenging and varied management problems, exercising self-control and maintaining integrity. The critical literature on consulting has debunked many claims made by earlier dominant and self-congratulatory texts on management consultants (Alvesson and Johansson 2002), even using terminology such as 'witch doctors' (Clark and Salaman 1996a) or 'whores in pinstripes' (Jackall 2010) to underline the lack of professionalism amongst management consultants. In a similar vein, Lynch (2001) argues that using terms like 'professionalism' and 'ethics' with regard to management consultancy creates an oxymoron.

In strictly following the sociological definition, professions are characterised by "a defined body of knowledge acquired through formal education, ethical codes of conduct, a distinct occupational culture, and client orientation, which requires to be socially sanctioned" (Alvesson and Johansson 2002, p.230). This '*criteriology*' represents a traditional perspective on what

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[9] Marvin Bower was a celebrated consultant and worked as the Managing Director of McKinsey & Company from 1950 to 1967.

may be considered as a profession, a 'yardstick' that management consulting has never measured up to. However, Kubr (2005) contends, on the basis that management consulting already meets some of these criteria, that it is on its way towards meeting the rest and may therefore be treated as a profession. The argument is based on the attempts made to form professional bodies in different countries and, along with this, to establish codes of membership and practice (McKenna 2006; Furusten 2013). Similarly, Reed (1996) categorises consultants under the '*entrepreneurial profession*' category, making an assumption of gradual progression towards professionalisation. Although it is challenging for most professions to objectively meet the strict criteria, management consulting has done particularly poorly in comparison to other occupations (Kyrö 1995). On the other hand, the question of being a true profession is purely academic, as Greiner and Poulfelt (2010) confine the discussion on professionalism to the background by putting forward pragmatic skills and reputation as characteristics not considered under the traditional definition.

Alvesson and Johansson (2002) argue that professionalism is a multi-dimensional and dynamic issue contingent upon a plurality of aspects that include clients, situations, and tasks. They propose five idealised consultant types, namely 'esoteric experts', 'brokers of meaning', 'traders in trouble', 'agents of anxiety', and 'sellers of security', along with their corresponding political behaviour and client types. Consultants continually negotiate between these types across and within assignments. Their key argument rests upon the favourable outcomes for both clients and consultants by mingling professional and political aspects effectively, concealed behind the image of professionalism. Clients can use consultants then for meeting political ends in a securely constructed professionalism. A flexible relationship, partnership, and ambiguity serve clients and consultants, preventing professionalism or keeping it modest (Fincham 1999b). Commenting upon the professionalisation of management consulting, Muzio, Kirkpatrick and Kipping (2011) reveal that it has been largely considered as either impractical or undesirable. However, they emphasise the risks associated with such an argument, suggesting the notion of a 'professional project' and how this may be developed over time "as

a result of negotiations between aspiring professions and other key actors"
(ibid., p.817). Alternatively, it has been argued that consultants have been able
to establish themselves as widely acknowledged and sufficiently trusted
experts, without having achieved professionalisation in the conventional sense
(Groß and Kieser 2006). Traditional sociological concepts may not be capable
of sufficiently explaining the expert status of such '*new professions*' like
consultants (Groß and Kieser 2006). Consultants and consulting organisations
are expected to demonstrate professionalism in their behaviour, and the onus
of professionalisation has shifted to the individual (consultant) (Groß and Kieser
2006). Taking this stance forward, Furusten (2013) attempts to distinguish
between professionalism as an ideal and professionalism as a practice.
Professionalism in practice is argued to be based on '*commercialisation*', which
is the mechanism in the organising of this professional system. Acceptance in
the market is a form of authorisation for someone to act in the role. The way to
achieve this is to earn trust, where consultants are "expected to follow the
institutionalised rites de passage of the market, which are: versatility,
availability, relevance, and differentiation but not deviation" (ibid., p.282).
Quasi-professionals, as Alvesson and Johansson (2002) call consultants,
present a question that needs careful consideration: how do clients engage
with, purchase services from, and differentiate between consultants when well
laid-out standards for such professionals are not explicitly known? Alvesson
(1994) further suggests that consulting is also seen as a '*weak knowledge'* field
that is grappling with the issue of amplifying 'weak knowledge' (Fincham 2006)
and persuading managerial clients of the worth of their advice (Clark and
Salaman 2000). As the traditional route of accreditation and association
appears an unlikely path to recognition for management consulting (Fincham
2006), knowledge work is considered as a distinct occupational strategy.

However, in discussing the professionalisation of consulting, it is also
evident that there is ambiguity about the existence of any common standard of
knowledge, skills, and values. Baaij (2013) argues that there is no agreement
on what constitutes the body of knowledge and skills for consultants. The
following section explores this domain of consultants' knowledge.

2.3.2 Consultants as 'fashionistas': Knowledge work or propagating management fads

While purchasing consulting services, clients are focused on acquiring some knowledge in the form of process expertise, industry know-how, and management trends (Heusinkveld, Sturdy and Werr 2011). Management consulting is recognised as a 'knowledge intensive' activity (Lopes da Costa *et al.* 2013; Engwall and Kipping 2002; Alvesson 1995), and management consultants are accorded a prominent place as well as treated as a prototype of the new '*knowledge workers'* (Engwall and Kipping 2002). The proliferation of new management ideas and knowledge, as well as the expansion in supply, is considered crucial for consultants in building occupational opportunities. These management ideas (fashions) are the 'stock in trade' for consultants and are often translated into techniques either as proprietary methods associated with a particular firm or generic tools that many consultants draw from (Fincham and Evans 1999). Faust (2002) states that large consultancies act as '*producers*', '*wholesalers*', or '*retailers*' of knowledge, practising the art of 'double dealing'.

From a functionalist perspective, selling knowledge as well as the experience of effecting organisational change towards a more efficient system is the overall goal of consultants. Werr (2002) states that knowledge in this industry is created within ongoing client projects, and the value of consulting lies in collating and making knowledge accessible from individual projects to the whole organisation. The arguments from a functionalist perspective focus on the content in consulting and the handling of knowledge (Hansen, Nohria and Tierney 1999; Sarvary 1999). Management consultants fulfil their need for social and personal esteem by developing theories and content and, in the process, reaffirm the importance of the managerial role. Clark and Salaman (1998b) suggest that "it is the search for control and predictability which renders managers vulnerable to the quasi-magical solution management gurus offer as a relief to their sources of frustration" (p.142). They further claim that the creation of value in management consulting is more about building the impression of value, and these beliefs are developed by the manipulation of myths and symbols through language rather than a functional knowledge base.

While the functionalist view takes the existence of knowledge in management consulting for granted, the critical view, in contrast, denies such claims completely (Werr 2002). In attempting to answer the question, '*where does the consultants' knowledge come from?*', Werr (2002), based on an empirical study, claims that experience is the main source of consulting knowledge and basis for action. He stresses that, through identifying knowledge in the ongoing projects and extending this knowledge to the organisation, consultants will be able to put explicit knowledge to effective use. Managers have an understanding of the problem along with the probable solutions, especially in today's context, when they are equipped with management education and some have consulting experience (O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). However, as McKenna (2006) concedes, the legitimacy of management consulting, more than anything else, is in its ability to manage the 'economies of knowledge' that individual managers simply cannot afford. Utilising these economies of knowledge requires both managing the knowledge generation process (spreading the knowledge to organisational members and providing the desired experience to decode it) as well as the successful deployment of explicit knowledge (Werr 2002). Organisations not only are routinely confronted with '*make or buy*' decisions for physical goods, but knowledge or advice is also bought as required (McKenna 2006).

Salaman (2002) identifies the disconnect that arises from an overly narrow range of problematics, especially the "preoccupation with the truth status of consultants' knowledge" (p.249), and while the consulting knowledge is considered flawed, the ever- growing demand is perplexing. While to some critics it may seem to be all superficial and broad, the question remains that if it commands currency with managers, should it not then be explored further? Clients are generally less interested in the truth of consulting knowledge and more with its effectiveness (Hicks, Nair and Wilderom 2009). Drawing upon the practice-based theories of organisational knowledge and knowing, Hicks, Nair and Wilderom (2009) suggest an alternative view based on '*knowing*', the socially-situated activity where knowledge is created and applied during practice. They regard the relationship of knowing and knowledge as mutually constitutive. In *knowing*, the nature of expertise is emergent rather than

possessed, and the transfer of expert knowledge is not unidirectional (expert to novice) but multidirectional (based on participation). They articulate the notion of *knowing* as the basis of an alternative approach to consulting practice. Styhre *et al.* (2010) argue that management consultants have a limit to their expert knowledge role and, more often than not, are required to be careful listeners with a focus on processes capable of helping the clients to articulate meaningful reflections. Consultants are expected to switch between the knowledgeable and the listener, a position with relatively limited purchase from an expert knowledge base. Consultants operate on the edge between these two positions, in which different identities are manifested. Linstead and Pullen (2006) assert that, in the domain of knowledge work, the instances where identity can be fully coherent and integrated are rare. Thus, when examining the knowledge work of consultants, it is imperative to conceive identities as mixed, relational, and inventive (Styhre *et al.* 2010).

In the following section, the discussion proceeds to examine the debates in the literature that centre on consultants' workplace relationships.

2.3.3 Workplace relations

Consultants' work is understood in various ways that relate to their performance and competence; the most important and differentiating aspect of their work relates to interactions with clients. In the management consulting literature, interactions between consultants and clients are undoubtedly one of the most significant success factors (Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009; Edvardsson 1990; Werr and Styhre 2003; Johansson 2004) as well as the defining characteristic of the consulting business (Fincham 2012). The significance of the client-consultant relationship is well established in the extant literature, although the interpretations, positioning, and focus have been debated and still remain actively contested. This is one area where scholars draw extensively from theories within the wider organisational studies domain, and it is an exception to the aforementioned criticism that research in management consulting is predominantly '*a-theoretica*l' (Clark and Fincham 2002; Kipping and Clark 2012a; Mohe and Seidl 2009; Sturdy 2004) and that the 'typical' topics and concepts are not precisely defined (Mohe and Seidl 2009).

In response to the *question* 'what is a client'?, (Alvesson *et al.* 2009) attempt to unpack the nature/s of the clients in the management consulting context. They contend that the myth of monolithic clients prevails in the extant literature and that diversity within client organisations is either not understood or ignored. In day-to-day discussions of consultation, 'client/s' are referred to as if they were always clearly identifiable, but in reality the question of "who actually is the client can be ambiguous and problematical" (Schein 1997, p.202). The accounts provided by some commentators, often consultants themselves, offer a wider definition of clients, as they operate with the concept of the "*client system*" and stress that the client may be the entire organisation and not just the manager commissioning the assignment or a single unique dedicated person (Arnaud 1998; Schein 1988, p.127). More specifically, Schein (1997) advises on being aware and knowing who the client is at any given moment in time, while presenting a simplifying model of six types of clients or client positions. Beginning with *'contact'* clients, who establish first contact, *'intermediate'* clients get involved in projects that may differ from '*primary'* clients – the owner of the problem. *'Unwitting'* clients will be affected by the interventions but are unaware, whereas clients unknown to consultants are *'indirect'* clients; finally, there are *'ultimate'* clients, whose welfare must be considered. This presents a rather pluralist perspective that rejects the unitary status of the '*client*'. More recently, Pemer and Werr (2013) have attempted to provide four client descriptions (i.e. controlling, instrumental, trustful, and ambivalent), albeit from clients' own perspectives, using empirical findings, thus calling into question universalistic images and providing a varied image of clients. While Schein's (1997) framework is predominantly based on the nature of contact, the client description that Pemer and Werr (2013) present is based on uncertainties in the client–consultant relationship and client responses to manage as well as control them.

The functionalist/expert approach largely adopted in the consulting literature pronounces the client–consultant relationship as client–expert interaction (Kubr 2005; Schein 1987; Schein 1988) as well as a symbolic interaction (Clark and Salaman 1998b; Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009) by critical scholars. The relationship is primarily based on completing a well-

defined task and fulfilling the needs of clients in a time-bound manner (Schein 2002). The client in such projects is depicted as being in a dependant position, "often a vulnerable victim of the consultant's rhetorical skills and impression management" (Werr and Styhre 2003, p.44). Although the clients have contractual power, it is the consultants' superior knowledge that is privileged in the relationship from a functionalist perspective, a dominant supply-side push (Fincham 2012). Remarkably, the abstract knowledge of consultants in the expert model is often regarded as superior to the specific, as well as context-dependant, knowledge of the clients (Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009).

The critical literature proposes that the client–consultant relationship is open-ended and contingent (Clark and Fincham 2002). Consultants rely on a high degree of rhetoric, metaphors, imagery, and even humour (Greatbatch and Clark 2002). Convincing clients of the value they bring is critical for consultants (Werr and Styhre 2003), and consulting companies are referred to as a '*system of persuasion*' (Alvesson 1993a). Although their ability to resist consultants' rhetoric has been emphasised, clients are considered as passive–defensive actors (Fincham 1999a). The focus of a critical perspective is on the effectiveness of consulting interventions, especially when no formal codified body of knowledge or qualification forms its basis (Starbuck 1992).

2.3.3.1 Multiplicity of theoretical perspectives on consultants' work with clients

In the last two decades, researchers have drawn from various organisational theories to help in articulating the differences that clients and consultants exhibit (Mohe and Seidl 2009). Table 2-2 illustrates the various theoretical perspectives discussed in this section. *Role theory* explores and describes the different roles of consultants and clients. In describing three consulting frameworks, Schein (1988) specifies one as the doctor–patient model, articulating clearly the different roles played by both clients and consultants. Mohe and Seidl (2009) suggest that these different roles get played out as a consequence of, among other factors, individual modes of socialisation, organisational contexts, and power positions. Although such differences are likely to give rise to some conflict, this is a simplistic linear approach that fails to honour the complexity and dynamics of such a

relationship (Pellegrinelli 2002). *Agency theory* is a theoretical framework that highlights goal divergence (Höner and Mohe 2009) and information asymmetry (Backlund and Werr 2005). It is assumed that agents' (consultants) goals diverge from those of the principals (clients), leading them to try for individual utility maximisation and opportunism (Mohe and Seidl 2009). Fincham (2003) clarifies that, in the context of management consulting, consultants, as 'agents' of management, in some ways resemble managers who are, themselves, 'agents' of the owners of capital; he states further that "much theory on consultancy (both prescriptive and critical) stresses the strategic influence of consultants and their role in bringing new knowledge to the client; agency theory is clearly about the agent as a subordinate figure" (ibid., p.83). Mohe and Seidl (2009) conclude that *agency theory*, similar to *role theory,* builds on the client–consultant relationship based on specific differences that influence the way they interact (Granovetter 1985).

Kitay and Wright (2004), drawing upon *social network theory* and the concept of '*embeddedness'*, discuss organisational boundaries between clients and consultants and refer to the difference in expectations regarding what is required for particular tasks. They build upon Granovetter's (1985) work on the social embeddedness of economic relations, in that economic exchanges are deeply embedded in complex social ties. From this perspective, it is not appropriate to consider consultants as pure '*outsiders*', as they have, over a period of time, become '*embedded*' within the fabric of the client organisation (Mohe and Seidl 2009; Kitay and Wright 2004), blurring the organisational boundaries between consultants and their clients. Thus, as in the other two theories, the differences between clients and consultants are highlighted from a relationship standpoint, albeit in light of the relative permeability of organisational boundaries.

Table 2-2: Different theoretical perspectives on the client–consultant relationship

Theoretical Perspective	Key Assumptions	Focus	Linking Mechanism	Contributors
Agency Theory	Difference in information and goals of clients and consultants	Goal divergence	Governance mechanisms	Fincham (2003); Gallouj (1997)
Role Theory	Difference in role played by clients and consultants	Role differences	Matching process	Kakabadse, Louchart and Kakabadse (2006); Kitay and Wright (2004); Kitay and Wright (2003); Werr and Styhre (2003) Williams (2001); Schein (1988)
Social Network Theory	Organisational boundary imposes different expectations for clients and consultants	Social embeddedness	Institutional settings; social ties	
Concept of Liminality	Condition of liminality (transition); clients and consultants in three different social spaces	Consulting as a condition	Rites of passage	Sturdy (2006); Czarniawska and Mazza (2003)
Situated Learning Theory	Consultants participate in different communities of practice with different values and norms	Network of practice and communities	Identity; practice; participation	Handley *et al.* (2007)
Psychoanalytical Theory	Covert and unconscious group processes; transfer of preconceptions on to the relationship	Impact of preconceptions onto actual relationship	Counter-productive	Czander and Eisold (2003); Eisold (1996)
Otherness/Parasites Theory	Outsiderness of consultants is critical to consulting intervention	Constitutive nature of consulting	Counter-productive	Clegg (2004); Kipping and Armbrüster (2002)

Source: Detailed literature review carried out for the study.

Handley *et al.* (2007), informed by *situated learning theory*, apply it in the context of an empirical study of how management consultants learn the practices and identities appropriate to projects:

> the client–consultant relationship is argued to cut across different sets of networks of practice and communities. In addition to being framed within broader institutional and structural (e.g. managerial) contexts, interactions between these communities are likely to be influenced by the dynamics of the specific project, the dynamics of the existing and continuing relationships between clients and consultants, and other social relations and identities (Handley *et al.* 2007, p.183).

2.4   Experience of Consulting

The peculiarities of consulting work discussed in the previous section raise important issues for consultants' working lives and their experiences of work, including tensions related to power, status, value addition and legitimacy. Similarly, issues concerning the ambiguous nature of consulting work and the challenge of maintaining a positive identity amidst backlash from clients, media and the public are all important constituents for understanding the experience of consultants in the advisory work. In this section of the literature review, the discussion focuses on these crucial aspects of consultants' working lives, which parallel some of those explored in the thesis.

2.4.1 Elite identity, status and control

The 'elite identity' construction finds a prominent place in the identity discourse on management consultants, a vital aspect within the wider domain of consultants' working lives, influenced by occupational, organisational and contextual dynamics (Alvesson 2012; Alvesson and Empson 2008; Kärreman and Alvesson 2009; Kärreman and Rylander 2008). The consulting profession is relatively young and emerging. In the absence of well-defined and agreed-upon professional standards or accreditation, concerns around the professional status of management consulting persist. As a result of the ongoing debate around professionalisation (as discussed earlier, see section 2.3.1), the professional status and identity of consultants remains ambiguous, precarious and contested (Skovgaard Smith 2013). The literature on elite identity has begun to explore the construction and regulation of elite identity of

management consultants. Such studies sit within the critical consulting literature and seeks to overcome the shortcomings of an approach that over-emphasises role (as existing critical approaches do) or skills and abilities (as the functionalist perspective did). The functional perspective portrayed consultants as experts in solving complex management problems that require quantitative skills and the ability to generate models/frameworks and to make complex issues accessible to managers. By emphasising the problem-solving skills and cerebral abilities, consultants assumed the identity of a 'scientist' (O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). On the other hand, critical consulting perspective raises concerns about the legitimacy of the consultants, a key aspect in their identity construction (Buono and Poulfelt 2013) while exploring how consultants employ rhetorical, mystic and cultural devices in constructing their identity (Kitay and Wright 2007; Meriläinen *et al.* 2004; O'Mahoney 2007; O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). The majority of the critical literature uses illustrative metaphors like 'magicians' (Schuyt and Schuijt 1998), 'witch-doctors' (Clark and Salaman 1996c) and 'shamans' (Fincham 2003) in describing consultants, focusing more on role rather than exploring consultants identities (O'Mahoney and Markham 2013).

Elite identity literature has picked up on a tendency for consultants and consulting firms to portray themselves as 'intelligent elite' in lieu of a professional identity (Kitay and Wright 2007). Although management consultants are regarded as professional workers in the field of business and management, they are usually not considered as belonging to traditionally accepted professional elites (like doctors, senior business executives and lawyers). This literature argues that consulting firms are an appropriate setting for the construction of elite social identity, highlighting that consulting firms actively use strategic, symbolic and discursive resources to construct such an identity (Alvesson and Robertson 2006). The construction and manifestation of elite identity and status are highlighted at an individual level when consultants are referred to as '*exceptional individuals*' and '*leading individuals*', pointing towards either their superior cerebral abilities, high academic qualifications, or skills in presentation and interactions (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Gill 2015). These superior capabilities position consultants as 'intellectual',

'progressive' and 'leading edge' or 'the best' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006), perpetuating elite identity narratives.

From an organisational perspective, the identification of consultants as elite is manifested by 'high earnings, access to situations of potential influence, highly selective recruitment practices and cultivation of mystique' (Skovgaard Smith 2013, p.208). The high rejection rates of candidates by management consulting firms, use of sophisticated selection methods (such as case method, assessment centres) and preference for graduates from leading business schools signal both quality and selectivity in hiring consultants (Armbrüster 2004; Kärreman and Rylander 2008). These practices of consultant selection are markers of 'intellectual superiority', signifiers of 'elitism' and 'otherness' and a definer of subjectivity and elite identity (Armbrüster 2004; Skovgaard Smith 2013). The symbolic appeal of such selection practices helps consultants build long-term 'reputational capital' in the managerial labour market (Sturdy and Wright 2008), including future career prospects outside consulting (Armbrüster 2004). By employing individuals with 'exceptional abilities' who work on ambiguous and demanding organisational problems and advise senior executives (even though they are less experienced themselves), consulting firms build and reinforce the notions of an 'elite identity' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Armbrüster 2004; Skovgaard Smith 2013). This area of the literature identifies and interrogates the organisational discourses that underpin the construction of elite identity and status in consulting firms focused on an "identity construction drawn in terms of an insight into '*how we are among the best*' rather than simply understanding *who we are*" (Alvesson and Robertson 2006, p.197). To emphasise their elite status, consulting firms throughout the different stages of employment describe their employees as elites, provide extensive training programmes and build on symbols such as prestigious office locations, pecuniary benefits (bonuses) and career prospects (within and outside the firm) among others (Gill 2015).

Elite identity literature has uncovered the processes underpinning 'elite identity regulation', whereby organisational control is utilised as a power mechanism for '*identity regulation*' (Gill 2015). The field of consulting work presents an insecure employment context due to the intangibility and ambiguity

of the services offered, a fertile ground for consulting firms to foster member identification, group cohesion (project team of consultants) and normative (managerial) control through elite identity regulation (Alvesson 2012; Empson 2004; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004). Thus, elite identity is not only a source of subtle control by the consulting firms (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004), but it also helps consultants construct a positive identity about their work and assists consultants in developing a sense of distinctiveness and self-esteem. Internalised elite identity provides high standards of performance for the consulting organisations, as consultants' own expectations of themselves as elite experts ensure self-imposed standards of high performance (Alvesson and Robertson 2006), while facilitating 'ontological security – a sense of continuity in their lives "through the ongoing (re) construction of a continuous stable identity' as well" (Gill 2015, p.3). Thus, effectively, the elite identity regulation and internalisation augments attributes associated with such an identity, and various examples in the literature demonstrate a clear inclination among management consultants to closely identify with the perceived elite status and positioning of both consulting firms and individuals.

Elite identity literature has also picked up on a disconnect between the rhetoric of an elite professional identity and the experience of the mundane or unfavourable aspects of consultancy work. The consulting profession is generally disparaged for being a 'stressful occupation' where performance monitoring, work deadlines and long working hours are more persistent characteristics than in other occupations (Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester 2012). While the elite status and identity may help in developing a positive image and may appear attractive, consultants experience 'non-elite' working conditions (Alvesson and Robertson 2006). Contrary to expectations, consultants are often required to carry out mundane tasks that a client requires, such as data compilation and making multiple PowerPoint presentations (Clark 1995). Consultants are often treated as a resource—often easily exchangeable—and this experience is accentuated by the 'up-or-out' career culture (Sturdy and Wright 2008) that makes working conditions tough for consultants. Although the 'elite identity' provides a self-pleasing image, such a construction poses considerable challenges for consultants as they negotiate 'non-elite' working

realities (Fleming and Spicer 2003). In order to regulate their own behaviour and retain 'elite status' (i.e. a position in a group in relation to others), consultants often over-commit themselves to their work and push harder in order to compete with their peers, leading to a decreased commitment to other aspects of life (Gill 2015). Meriläinen *et al.* (2004, p.552) aptly share the dichotomy in the context of management consultants' identity by stating that, instead of 'working in order to live', and deriving their sense of identity primarily from family, community, leisure, and so on, such employees 'live to work'. Gill's concept of 'status anxiety' captures the outcome of a tension between the trappings of the process of maintaining elite identify and the reality of experience. Ironically, status anxiety, he argues, may in fact serve to impede productivity (Gill 2015).

The literature provides an extensive commentary on elite identity construction and regulation, an important construct in the context of professionals in consulting firms. Elite identity is argued to be beneficial to the consulting firms, as it helps to provide normative control, and to consultants, since it provides a sense of existential security in a fluid working context (Alvesson and Robertson 2006). The precarious conditions of work and career management do not erode the elite identity discourse; on the contrary, such conditions strengthen it, as consultants may require organisational identity support grounded in elitism to "stabilise a sense of self in an ambiguous, precarious and unstable occupational world" (Alvesson and Robertson 2006, p.217).

Consultants work and relate with consulting firms as employees, and, at the same time, they work at the client site within a different organisation, not as an employee, but as an 'outsider', where they may not be perceived as elite. It is highly likely that it may become challenging to explore their elite social identities in such a scenario and take their elite status for granted. Not only do consultants working with consulting firms have to cope with not being affiliated with the particular place/position, but they also work as associates (sole proprietors) who do not have the security of an organisational identity, only that of the clients. Skovgaard Smith (2013) suggests that the status of consultants is sometimes undermined by clients for political reasons and their lack of

contextual understanding as well as organisational dynamics of the client organisation challenges their attributed elite status. The consultants' elite identity is therefore informed by contextual influences, social relations and roles in interaction. The contradiction to elitism and the presence of multiple, shifting, and competing identities (with paradoxical overtone) thus require further deliberation. The literature presents reasons for consultants to conform to elite identification, with an assumption that consultants have limited agency as they have to buy into elite identity and status for their own good. Gill (2015) highlights the challenges that maintenance of 'elite identity and status' may bring, such as an ongoing anxiety and stress. Similarly, Sturdy *et al.* (2006) content that social positions are not fixed and "any given identity and its status is always provisional and subject to revision" (p.854). In this thesis, I take this argument further and explore the lived experiences of consultants that highlight their process of sensemaking and identification, bringing out the contested nature of elite identity.

2.4.2 Experiencing 'otherness' and 'liminality'

In this section, I draw attention to those theories that present differences between consultants and clients as constitutive of consulting interventions. This view is not overly concerned with emphasising the difference between consultants and clients or how these differences might be rationally explained; it negates the possibility of bridging mechanisms between consultants, as clients see them as counterproductive, for these differences are constitutive of the consulting interventions (Mohe and Seidl 2009). Taking advantage of the rapprochement between anthropology and management, Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) construct consulting work around the concept of '*liminality'* and offer the metaphor of '*liminal space',* which presents consulting as a condition rather than a relationship or role. The authors take an anthropological approach in theory as well as method, unlike other studies that rely on social psychology. The emphasis is on the transformation that happens in the space between one state and another, viewed from the perspective of '*rites of passage*' (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). Consultants are believed to be negotiating the liminal spaces 'betwixt and between' the client organisation and their own firm. Initially, consultants get separated from their previous social space as they

remain temporarily away from their firm during the project phase (separation), and they experience liminal conditions (transition) while interacting with clients learning their interests and (symbolic) meaning; this condition is characterised by the blurring and merging of distinctions. Turner (1969) argues that shared liminality may lead to a heightened sense of togetherness among consultants. The final project presentation in many ways denotes the end (separation) and a "moment of ultimate pride or humiliation" (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003, p.283). Sturdy (2006) argues that the transitional process (as defined by the start-up meeting, sharing documents, and the final presentation) itself asserts a structure to liminality, although it does not significantly impede the experience of its uncertainty. This concept challenges the traditional view of consultants as simply organisational outsiders and clients as insiders (Mohe and Seidl 2009, p.5):

> organisational consultants informed by the 'psychoanalytical theories' propagated by Freud *et al.* (1957) focus their interpretations on covert and unconscious group processes that are organized around transference and countertransference as they clarify authority relations – which is the essence of the Tavistock model of consulting (Gould 2004). As to what these terms mean, essentially, [they] are those aspects of relationships that are shaped by reconceptions that are transferred onto the actual relationship with a real person or group, or projected into it, that limit, confine and sometimes distort the reality of that relationship. Transference refers to preconceptions held by the patient or client; counter-transference to those held by the analyst or consultant (Czander and Eisold 2003, p.476).

It is the perceived distance between the clients and consultants that make these aspects come out more strongly, although the distance is considered constitutive, and difference may itself be vital to the process of consultation. In a similar vein, Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2004) argue that, by introducing interruptive action into the space between order and chaos in the organisation, management consultants may disrupt the established ways by creating a '*noise'* and playing a '*parasitical'* role. Similarly, Kipping and Armbrüster (2002) use '*otherness'* as a major feature of consulting work: they contend that, by being the '*other*', consultants can perform actions that clients find difficult to do on their own. This concept of '*otherness'* is used to highlight how externality alone allows for a view into the organisation that cannot be

formed from the inside, although being the '*other*' "is also consumed with challenges and ambiguities" (ibid., p.204). Clients benefit from '*otherness*' through their public reputation, ability to transfer and transform knowledge, and capacities to influence client activity. Meanwhile, the '*burden of otherness*' poses a challenge for consultants to fully understand tacit knowledge and routines embedded in activities, in addition to the boundaries of both agency and legitimacy.

2.5 The Limitations of the Literature on the Experiences of Management Consultants

It is evident from the theoretical underpinnings of the perspectives discussed above on client and consultant interactions that the differences emanating from their roles, positions, expectations, and practices have been amply explored in the literature. Most of these commentators perceive these differences or 'gaps' as a potential problem that needs to be resolved through bridging mechanisms such as role-matching, governance measures, social ties, transition rituals, etc. (Mohe and Seidl 2009). In contrast, some authors, from *psychoanalytic, parasitic, and otherness theories,* articulate the constitutive nature of these differences and suggest that any attempts to smooth them out may not yield much ground. This discussion of the client–consultant relationship outlines my critique, while at the same time shedding light on my own approach, critical framework, and informing concepts. It is evident that most of the perspectives shared here have an individualised (cognitive– psychological) focus (especially the 'functionalist' perspective), which is a clear limitation, as they ignore the social conception of consulting work and fail to recognise the active role played by different actors (e.g. clients, consultants, project teams, and other stakeholders) in the consulting engagement. Both the 'functionalist' and critical perspectives project consultants' roles as central and 'agentic', leaving the complexities of their workplace dynamics and relationships in the background.

It is well understood that consulting projects are carried out by consultants either along with other fellow consultants or along with a team of

internal managers drawn from the client organisation. However, in the extant literature, this aspect has not been discussed, as evident from the above discussion. There are wide-ranging issues concerning the working lives of consultants that have not been fully explored. These important aspects of consultants' work have not been researched, and neither have any attempts been made to explore consultants' sensemaking around the wider facets of their work. The ambiguous nature of consulting work, its weak professionalisation, intangible knowledge, and shifting and liminal identification, as well as the complex nature of relationship with clients, all present enormous challenges at work for consultants. Therefore, understanding consultants' perspectives in the context of their work and how they make sense of these experiences in their working lives is likely to enhance and contribute to the limited literature on their experiences of consulting work. As stated earlier, this thesis will mainly focus on how consultants make sense of various aspects of their working lives in their day-to-day work, and specifically the processes they rely on to make sense of these experiences.

The literature review here helps in demonstrating an affinity towards particular theoretical perspectives, such as the critical consulting literature, that will illuminate the research aim: to explore the 'lived experiences' of management consultants and highlight the everyday actions and interpretations that give meaning to their working lives. In the next chapter, I share the research methodology that will help in articulating my research orientation and methodology in answering the research question and filling the relevant gaps illustrated in this chapter.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I reviewed management consulting literature, and, as a result of the review, relevant issues emerged related to the experience of management consultants. This chapter sets out the details of an appropriate research strategy that will assist in exploring those issues and in answering the research question. In the sections that will follow, I elaborate upon my research strategy, design and methodological choices. At the outset, the philosophical orientation that informed the research design is spelt out, followed by the reasons for selecting the life history research methodology. From there, I explicate the data collection and fieldwork process. Subsequently, I discuss the approach employed in analysing the data as well as the ethical considerations of the research. I conclude by reflecting on my positionality as a researcher and a former management consultant.

As stated earlier, the research on consultants' lived experience has been largely limited, and mainstream research on management consulting has focused more on researching the consultancy business. In this study, via a qualitative approach inspired by exploring the subjective experience of participants, I bring consultants to the foreground of scholarly research on management consulting.

3.2 Research Orientation – The Problematic

It is critical to discuss the philosophical influence, ontological positioning and epistemological focus of the research because these factors influence research design. Harvey (1990, p.37) highlights that these different components are all linked, claiming that methodology is "at the intersection of philosophical influence, epistemological underpinning, substantive theory and methodological practice". This research aims to explore the construction of consultants' working lives, the sense they make of their work and the

processes of their sensemaking. It therefore lends itself to the use of a constructionist philosophical perspective, a 'subjective' ontology and an interpretive epistemology along with the use of biographical/narrative methodologies.

3.2.1 Ontology

From an ontological viewpoint, my use of the narrative understanding of working lives is a subjective endeavour, a deeply interpretive process that invites sensemaking which is socially informed. My inclination is to work from a 'subjectivism' problematic (Cunliffe 2011) that emphasises culturally situated understandings submerged in particular contexts, times, places and individuals. According to the subjectivism problematic, there is no independent reality to study because we construct our social and organisational 'realities' in our everyday interactions; the emphasis is therefore on exploring constructions of social and organisational realties in a particular context (ibid., p.656). Within the broad spectrum of the subjectivist problematic, I find affinity with the philosophical orientation of social constructionism in that social science research is concerned with interpreting human behaviour and meaning making; it is regarded as an alternative to the 'positivist' philosophy, often called the 'received view'. It counters the positivistic notion of a passive, mechanistic and reactive human being (Chen, Shek and Bu 2011). In ontological terms, I consider 'reality' as socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1991) based on iterative actions of social actors for its formation and reformation, rather than on the existence of objects in a natural world independent of human perception.

From a social constructionist position, it is critical to appreciate subjective meanings, motivations and experiences of people as well as time and context. Working from this position, researchers reject the simple cause and effect' argument proclaimed by the objectivism problematic. The argument of the "inherent indeterminateness in the lifeworld", put forward by Denzin, highlights the issue of a variety of meanings, actions and circumstances (Denzin 1983, p.133). Constructionists view realities as multiple, constructed (relativist position) and fleeting, confined only to those moments in which they are actively constructed and sustained (Morgan and Smircich 1980). They reject the existence of a single reality. Unlike the 'realist' who asserts the

independent existence of structures and objects in the world, the constructionists challenge the independent 'out-there-ness' (Chen, Shek and Bu 2011) of the world. Constructionists affirm that reality is subjective and influenced by situations, contexts and individual experiences. Berger and Luckmann (1991) further elaborates on the reality of everyday life, arguing that it presents itself *"as an intersubjective world and we cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others"* (p.33). This research therefore views the working lives of management consultants through a relational lens, rather than positioning them as something 'entitative' (Hosking and Morley 1991).

3.2.2 Epistemology

It is necessary to consider the question of 'how' knowledge is acquired and to explore the relationship between the knower (research participant) and the researcher. Social constructionists believe that researchers cannot separate themselves from the process of meaning-making; therefore, they need to recognise their influence in constructing the research narrative. It is argued that knowledge comes from immersion into the subject matter, through an interpretivist lens (Blaikie 2007). It is imperative to pay attention to the 'lived experience' (Van Manen 2016) of participants, challenging taken-for-granted knowledge. Knowledge is gained from everyday meanings and concepts, which are then translated into the language of social science. The resulting data may then simply exist as an account or may be developed into theories. I am inclined to explore the meaning research participants give to the interactions and incidents that have informed and continue to inform their working lives. I problematise the telling of the life history accounts by research participants as both constructive and performative, for, in so telling, the working lives are continually being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed (Cole and Knowles 2001).

The main aim of this research is not to extrapolate broad generalisations or to develop an explanation of any phenomenon via an empiricist explanation; rather, the focus is to understand and to gain insight into the experiences of management consultants viewed from their own realities (Plummer 2000). Researchers following a qualitative approach are interested in exploring and

understanding and not in prediction and control (Pinnegar and Daynes 2007). After briefly discussing my research orientation and philosophical commitments, I now move on to discuss the research design and methodology.

3.3   Research Design and Methods

The deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated, but with the objective of constructing it as a 'special case of what is possible', as Bachelard puts it, that is, "as an exemplary case in a finite world of possible configurations" (Bourdieu 1998, p.2).

In this section, I focus on my choice of methodology for this study. Selecting an appropriate methodology assists in achieving the aims identified for the research and answering the research question(s). The methodological approach that informs this research is both qualitative and exploratory. The richness and depth of explorations and descriptions are key virtues of a qualitative methodology. Rather than verifying truth or predicting outcomes, the main objective of qualitative research is to discover meaning and understanding. As stated earlier, the intention of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of consultants' lived experiences; hence, it was imperative to select a methodology that would assist in exploring their subjective experiences allowing confrontation with the messiness of their lives. This required a research design that could illuminate the experiences of management consultants, disrupt any (probable) assumptions about their working lives, and foreground their subjective perceptions. It was equally important to have a relaxed, less formal interaction where consultants could open up about different aspects of their life and have an opportunity for personal reflection.

I selected the life history methodology (Becker 1970; Dollard 1949; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918) for this study as it suited the requirements of the research, an appropriate methodology considering my ontological and epistemological orientation. The choice of life history methodology was also informed by its effectiveness in enabling in-depth, over-time and individualised

narratives of people's lives. This study is a critical exploration of important aspects of the working lives of management consultants which are influenced by and intersect with the complexities and uncertainties within their local context as discussed in the literature review.

3.3.1 Life history methodology

As noted in the literature review, studying the lives of consultants has not attracted much scholarly attention in spite of their growing significance and role in organisations. Through the use of the life history method, it is possible "to disrupt the commonly held beliefs which, over a period of time, are widely considered to be 'the truth' regarding a certain group and will require that its readers recognize, acknowledge, and confront subjective perceptions and prevailing discourses" (Olive 2014, pp.2-3).

Life history and biographical and narrative approaches (Goodson and Sikes 2001) assist in exploring the subjective meanings of the lives that emerge in the narratives of the participants (Plummer 1995). The foundation is the subjective interpretation of the situations in which people find themselves in the past or present (Musson 2004), bringing out a holistic, qualitative account (Gramling and Carr 2004). In organisational studies, the use of the life history methodology has accompanied the turn towards postmodernism and poststructuralism (Goodson and Sikes 2001). Dhunpath (2000) asserts that "the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the innate intersection of institutional and individual experience in a postmodern world" (p.544). Tierney (2003) defines life history as "a culturally produced artefact in one light and an interpretive document in another. It might be defined by way of method (interviews and observations), theoretical vantage point (hermeneutics, phenomenology), or disciplinary perspective (psychology, anthropology, sociology)" (p.539).

This methodology has two central constructs. The first is 'Life'. Kouritzin (2009) points out that the concept of 'life' in life history research does not connote the entire biographical account of an individual's life; rather, it represents contextualised events or issues around the experienced lives of others. Second, a somewhat misleading one is 'history'; this not only consists

of events in the narrator's past, but also of his/her experience, commitments and ongoing projects in the present (Järvinen 2004). Järvinen (2004) further points out that, "from the point of view of the present, there is no objective past in the history of individuals […] or societies" (ibid., p.47). This method, pioneered by anthropologists, is actively used by sociologists and in many other disciplines.

Life history research belongs to the 'biographical genre' (Kim 2015), focusing on life narratives and stories participants share. The objective of this research approach is to "understand how the participants construct and interpret their life experience, appreciating participants' genuine accounts and interpretations" (p.126). The terms 'narrative' and 'story' have been used interchangeably above, as certain overlaps in usage are inescapable. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the distinction provided by Watson (2009) is helpful in stating that 'narrative' is a generic term to refer to accounts of events in the world which are organised in a time-related sequence. 'Story' refers to narratives that are more highly developed in that they are "temporally sequenced accounts of events which unfold through plots involving the interplay of characters with interests, motives, emotions, and moralities" (p.429). Narratives can constitute stories, and stories rely on narratives (Kim 2015). A helpful differentiation between stories and narratives has also been suggested by Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje (2004), who similarly argue that, unlike stories, "narratives do not always have coherent plotlines or characters" (p.263). Therefore, some commentators take the view that stories are a "higher category than narrative, and they are deeply intertwined" (Kim 2015, p.9).

In this thesis, I follow this distinction and take such an argument forward by suggesting that, in sharing their life history accounts, research participants construct a narrative of their lives. Musson (2004) stresses that the life history method does not accept individual accounts as the objective 'truth'; rather, it assumes that all perspectives "dangle from some person's problematic" (p.35). The approach views the individual, embedded in a network of relationships and statuses, as the irreducible unit of analysis (Mathews, 1977 cited in Musson 2004). The role of a researcher is participative, value-laden and dynamic.

The following sub-section explains the use of the life history research methodology in order to accomplish the research objectives and elaborates on the methods, including life history interview, participant-generated visual images and field notes that form the part of overall research design.

Methods

The methods included a combination of life history interview conversations with management consultants, and, within these interviews, participants were invited to share visuals (e.g. photographs/drawings). Therefore, life history interviews, participant-generated visuals (photographs and drawings) and my fieldwork notes (part of my reflective inquiry) formed part of the data collection methods. These are discussed in subsequent sections.

3.3.1.1   Life history interviews: "Guided conversations"

In the extant literature, life history interviews are discussed as 'guided conversations' (Cole and Knowles 2001), and the word 'guided' needs to be understood in the context of the specific focus of the research combined with limited temporal and spatial resources. Labaree (2006) suggests the necessity to "conduct an intensive exploration of specific lived experiences (determined by the research aims in this case) and the purpose is not to develop a biographical profile of the individual" (p.127). Therefore, the interviews attempted to capture as closely as possible the most relevant moments in consultants' working lives without being completely open-ended. Hence, these life history interviews were semi-structured in nature. Issues concerning management consultants' working lives, as brought out in the literature review, assisted in developing broad themes for the interview conversation. Bryman and Bell (2015), while describing the difference between different types of interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured), highlights the fact that semi-structured interviews mostly have either a selected set of questions or a brief guide that assists in carrying out the conversation, allowing such an interview to cover important aspects and flow more or less naturally. Both Plummer (1995) and Musson (2004) suggest using life history interviews along with other methods like participant observation and field notes to come up with richer and holistic understanding.

3.3.1.2 Participant-generated images

The growing acknowledgement of the significance of the visual data in researching organisational life and the appreciation of holistic, sensory and symbolic perspectives as opposed to largely rational and cognitive views on organising has given impetus to the 'visual' turn in organisation studies (Bell and Davison 2013; Taylor and Hansen 2005). The visuals/images can be engaged within research in relation to either the process of image creation, the image itself or the contemplation of an image as a trigger for the narrative produced (Huss and Cwikel 2005). Images and visual artefacts are not merely additive to verbal text; rather, they have become an elementary mode for the construction, maintenance and transformation of meaning (Meyer *et al.* 2013). The proliferation of visual practices and artefacts (Banks 2008) help in the redressal of privileging the use of language in order to acknowledge multiple 'ways of seeing' (Holliday 2000). Meyer *et al.* (2013) suggests that the growing use of visuals in organisation and management studies encourages closer attention to understanding the process of making sense in the individual's everyday life within an organisational context.

In this study, I asked respondents to share visuals (photographs) that hold significance and meaning for them related to their work. The purpose of these visuals was to allow participants to reflect on their working life and share how they see themselves in their work. The use of photographs and images in the process of interviewing as a non-directive method allowed respondents to engage in the research (Collier 1957; Lapenta 2011) and helped in providing a greater access to personal interpretations and responses. Collier (1986) asserts that images "invite people to take the lead in the inquiry, making full use of their expertise, and they readily invite open expression while maintaining concrete and explicit reference points" (ibid., p.105). I used participant-generated visuals, a variant of the classic photo-elicitation method (Warren 2005), also referred as 'reflexive photography' (Hurworth 2004), a term I resist using as it assumes reflexivity (distinct from reflections) that may not necessarily accompany elicitation of images by participants. Here, it is important to clarify that I do not subscribe to the view that a photograph represents a subject realistically or a particular reality; I hold them 'lightly' and

as conveyors of meanings (Lapenta 2011). From my perspective, it is in the dialogue with the participants that images acquire a meaning and the context that surrounds them, not in themselves.

Bell and Davison (2013) suggests that research into visual forms such as photographs is developing quickly. In this research, the photographs/images generated by participants during the process of interaction form the basis of visual inquiry. Photo-research methods assist in developing an understanding of complex organisational settings and lives of people associated therein. Clark-Ibáñez (2004) makes a distinction between researcher-driven and participant-driven photographs: whilst researcher-driven photography aids empirical research, participant-driven photography is more useful for gaining insight into the lives of participants that assist the aims of this research. The research design gained impetus by using participant-generated images; the analysis of these images shines a light on the benefits that accrue, in addition to what is articulated in the extant literature.

3.4   Strengths and Challenges of the Method/s

Among the choice of methods above, some key aspects of life history methods have been elaborated upon, and along with the specific features come inherent strengths and weaknesses of this method. One of the key strengths that Musson (2004) elaborates upon is that this method is firmly rooted in an interpretive perspective. Kouritzin (2009) explains the advantages of using life histories specifically in organisational research and delves into the benefits that ensue to both participants and the researcher. One such benefits of the life history method is the revelation to the mundane, the less-than ordinary and the people whose stories have not been documented before. Sturdy (2012) claims that, in spite of the recent upswing in management consulting, writing and research, very little is known about what consultants exactly do day to day. Although consultants are not particularly disadvantaged, their work is often represented through familiar rhetoric, considered fashionable and shrouded in mystery. The life history approach provides a means to disrupt the mystique of consulting work through an exploration of the mundane.

Life history methodology enriches understanding, and, as part of life history research, participants present profoundly conflicting views and as a result help in challenging, recasting and supporting prior theory. Life history research is acknowledged for its comprehensiveness as it allows the lives of participants to be revisited and reinterpreted at different times and in new ways in the light of new insights (Kouritzin 2009; Labaree 2006). Life history research enables contextual and historical clarity, its accessibility through literary and rhetorical appeal makes the complex and the untidy reach beyond the captive audiences (Bertaux and Association 1981). The benefits for the participants come from being listened to and being able to represent their voice in a constructive endeavour. Bloom (1996) states that participants, by listening to their own stories, become aware of how "subjectivities fragment, change and become transformed" (p.193), leading to greater self-knowledge.

A challenge in using this methodology is the considerable time and effort required from both the researcher and the participant to gather data. The methodology requires high tolerance to ambiguity along with resurfacing of emotional and unpleasant incidents for participants that may affect the researcher during the inquiry. Through this research approach, rich data on the working lives of consultants emerged, but the challenges of access persisted in the light of the commitment and depth this approach required. Few prospective participants were unable to provide time, especially for a personal face-to-face interaction and on finding out the commitment it may involve both in terms of time and personal disclosure. The inaccessibility of consultants to engage with academic research from the concerns of "commercial, political and existential sensitivities" (Sturdy 2012, p.468) remained and to a certain extent were accentuated by the method employed for data collection. Some potential participants hesitated in agreeing to participate as they expected a pre-determined set of questions to be sent to them for response.

From an analytical viewpoint, the issue of *representivity* and *verifiability* are raised in the literature. Representivity is a positivist construct and the vocabulary of such research approaches is best answered by the relevant sampling approach suited to the relevant research methodology. In this study, insights from initial interviews, subsequent fieldwork and narrative exhaustion

helped in meeting issues related to representivity, although I do not agree with the use of these terminologies in this inquiry. Tracy (2010) specifically proposes criteria for excellent qualitative research. According to her, *reson*ance is appropriate terminology to demonstrate that research should meaningfully reverberate and influence the reader: "Resonance emerges through a study's potential to be valuable across a variety of contexts or situations—practices that have been called generalisability or transferability*"* (Tracy 2010, p.845).

Another challenge, especially for the life history researcher, is that of seeking to bring together a coherent narrative spread through time (Mishler 2009; Plummer 2000). Kathard (2009) states that,

> coherence should bring together disparate, multiple, shifting, contradictory and seemingly random elements of a narrative to create a 'complicated' or 'fractured' coherence within a social frame. This stance overlaps with Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) understanding of fidelity. The story should be coherent within an approximate of the complex lifelikeness establishing not truth, but verisimilitude, the appearance of being true. (p.55).

Similarly, Measor and Sikes (1992) submits that the truth participants narrate "can be quite different from the historical truth of what happened in their lives, nevertheless it has a force in their attitudes and actions*"* (p.224).

The other aspect in researching a life history that needs attention that both Plummer (1995) and Musson (2004) highlight is the problem of data contamination, suggesting that it is useful to have raw data as general theory and an acknowledgement by the researcher of the degree of interpretation that has taken place. Connell (2010) also raises two issues for life history research: narrative accounts are not homogeneous as they are mired with contradiction and "that autobiographical memory is structured, not simple and is shaped by motivated forgetting" (p.55).

I argue that some of these criticisms are not fully related to the ontological and epistemological positioning of this inquiry. These criticisms are not an impediment from a social constructionist/interpretive perspective, which

is based on the premise that researchers cannot take themselves out of the meaning-making process. Such compartmentalisation is undesirable as I do not endeavour to make 'truth' claims in ontological terms. I agree with Foucault's idea that claims to knowledge are historically and situationally contingent, and the orders of discourse prevailing at that time assist in their recognition (Foucault 1972). Again, such criticism is based on an underlying premise of objectivity and generalisability. It is imperative to accept that all research is informed by researchers' subjective experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Stripping my own subjectivities in this research will only account to a pretence to objectivity.

3.5   Data Collection – Sampling and Access

The nature of inquiry necessitated meeting management consultants with significant professional experience and those who are currently actively involved in the consulting/advisory business. The participants were not required to hold any specific position or represent a specific level in organisational hierarchy; however, the study required participants with well-grounded consulting experience, and the final participant group broadly represents the seniority and experience initially desired.

A sampling plan is the design for specifically choosing the sources for data collection (Tracy 2012). Selecting an appropriate sample was critical for this research to consider the nature of inquiry and methodology. The qualitative research design envisages three modes of data collection that are available for research: 'asking questions', 'hanging around' and 'reading texts' (Miller and Dingwall 1997). Semi-structured interviews, participant-generated images and my field notes helped in gathering data from different modes. The primary data collection was carried out by conducting semi-structured life history interviews based on participants identified through a purposive sampling approach (Polkinghorne 2005) and more specifically following a 'typical instance sampling' (Tracy 2012). The focus of the 'typical instance sampling' is on the routine, the average and the typical, thus helping in selecting participants who are, to a large extent, easily relatable. For the purpose of this research, I required management consultants (typically) working in mid- to large-sized

consulting firms, without any preference for area of consulting practice or positional seniority. Plummer (1995) emphasises the careful selection of participants whose life history will be explored, referring to both chance and criteria for selection.

I chose the organisations and participants through a selective process that suited the purpose of this study. Based on the overall goals of this study, I approached participants based on considerations: (a) consultants currently working with mid- to large-sized consulting firms; (b) consulting firms operating within general management, strategy, design, and organisational change practice; and (c) participants with at least ten years of consulting experience. The purpose on this study is to explore consultants' lived experience; this required that research participants have relevant consulting experience in an organisational setting (as distinct from self-employed practitioners) and have a few years of consulting experience from which to draw out their narratives. The research participants were sought from different areas of practice; however, I did not include consultants from the accounting- and auditing-related practice areas as these professionals are usually included in research within the accounting and auditing literature.

As shared earlier, gaining access to management consultants has traditionally been challenging. The process was no different in my case to start with. I required access to consultants with significant consulting experience actively involved in consulting assignments (hierarchical seniority was not a requirement for the study). I relied upon my colleagues and acquaintances in the industry to assist with access. However, most consultants were reluctant to meet for a formal research interview. Moreover, it was extremely challenging to find time to meet amidst busy schedules and sudden changes in plans owing to client requirements and travel. Most of the consultants requested interviews to be conducted over the phone with a set of questions emailed to them in advance. It thus required considerable effort to highlight the nature of inquiry and the relevance of a face-to-face interaction. Convincing participants to meet in person was the most challenging part as potential participants preferred emails and phone calls to respond to interview questions. Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) suggest that "obtaining and maintaining access involves

building relationships by being continually sensitive to attitudes of suspicion and trust a researcher may encounter when meeting different members of the organisation"(pp.547-548). In the consulting firms where I met multiple participants, I experienced that participants were initially apprehensive and wanted to know who recommended them for an interview and why they were chosen over other colleagues. In such cases, the initial discussion was focused around answering some of these question, making them feel comfortable about their participation in the research.

The process of collating, recording and interpreting data based on the life history interview is very intense and time consuming (Goodson and Sikes 2001), and the research samples are invariably quite small. The fieldwork (spread over six months) included life history interviews with twelve participants working with seven different consulting firms. Though sampling (size) is an important consideration, quality (relevance) is more important than quantity for qualitative research (Tracy 2012). From my perspective, achieving the appropriate abundance of themes that resonate with my research questions, as well as adding new layers of understanding, new contexts and new foci were more relevant than achieving the numerical abundance within the sample size. After the first set of five interviews, rich data were produced, and the process of collation started simultaneously. After few more interviews were conducted, narrative abundance was evident, helping in concluding the fieldwork. Table 3-1 depicts the role/position performed by participants along with their respective consulting specialty. To ensure anonymity, details of consulting firms are not disclosed. While an initial set of participants was pre-selected and access solicited, based on initial fieldwork experience, the sampling strategy was reviewed and kept open and emergent (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

The research participants were actively engaged in consulting assignments at the time of fieldwork and had considerable experience in their roles. Fieldwork was carried out in both the UK and Denmark. The first few participants I met were working on international assignments in Denmark and based on my requirements as highlighted above recommended more potential participants within their firm and city (Copenhagen). Most participants were engaged in consulting projects spread across client organisations located in

Europe, the Scandinavian countries in particular. As stated earlier, semi-structured interviews were utilised as the primary technique to gather data, and a non-linear flow of dialogue spread over a couple of meetings helped in gathering data. In some cases, a second discussion was held over the phone while participants also preferred to respond to follow up on information/clarifications through emails.

Pseudonym	Role/Position	Consulting Practice Area
Joshua	CEO and Partner	Strategy
Emily	Principle Consultant	Change Consulting
Leon	Senior Advisor	Design Consulting
Shaun	Partner	Strategy
Logan	Business Catalyst	Brand & Marketing Consulting
Edward	Partner	Strategy (Technology)
Albert	Associate Partner	Strategy (Product design)
Ryan	Managing Partner	Strategy (Financial Design)
Mathew	Senior Manager	Strategy (Technology)
Tyler	Partner	Strategy
Jessica	Business Manager	Change and OD Consulting
Dave	Senior Manager	Strategy (Financial Design)

Table 3-1: Participants split by position and consulting practice area
Source: Based on the participant demographic data collected during fieldwork.

Most interviews were conducted in a relaxed environment determined by the participants, and some were conducted outside the work premises as well, allowing participants to share their experiences without the constraint of office location and pressing restrictions of time and space. The interactions with participants ranged from roughly two hours to half a day in some cases. Participants chose various locations, including public spaces like Hyde Park in London, restaurants, a riding club and even dinner meetings at home. The fieldwork was an enriching experience and allowed me to be a part of their lives in that time and space. The initial trouble in organising access and setting up meetings ceased upon personal meeting, and, once participants experienced a

conversational discussion in a non-threatening environment, defences were dropped.

3.6   Data Analysis

In writing this chapter, I follow a sequential flow describing the research philosophy, preferred methods, subsequent data collection and then analysis. Reflection and analysis were an ongoing iterative process, in many ways commencing much earlier: at the stage of interaction with research participants. Boyatzis (1998) urges that the processes of gathering data and analysis need to be simultaneous. As a qualitative researcher, I find it helpful to engage with data as they emerge, thus facilitating better understanding of the co-constructed nature of the data as well as informing the following interviews. (Labaree 2006).

Related to analysis of life history research data, Goodson (2001) discusses a critical issue that has confounded both researchers and commentators concerning the output of such research endeavours, cautioning that "life history work is interested in the way people *do* narrate their lives, not in the way they should" (p.16). This clarifies the fact that the lived experiences shared by participants are partial, interpreted and selective. Similarly, Fine (1994) warns against the search for complete narratives as well as a refusal to engage with inherent contradictions in such texts. I am inclined to reflect here upon the actual 'doing' of life history research that has significant bearing on the analysis of data. Bar-on (2006, p.33 cited in Adriansen 2012) specified the possibility of analysis of life history interview at three different levels:

- Chronological analysis (the life history) – events and specific incidents

- Linguistic analysis – differentiation between descriptions, argumentation and stories

- Sequential understanding of biographical data – starting from the interview and moving forward step by step

Cole and Knowles (2001) caution that a search for set of tools and prescribed 'tried and true' analysis process is fruitless usually leading to disappointing results. They argue that analysis requires a systematic and disciplined attention without slicing life history data into discrete bits, the attempt however should be to understand data in a holistic way, that allows for "exploring the connectedness and interrelatedness of human experience within complex systems" (p.101). In analysing mounds of data I have tried to stay systematic without making it a reductionist activity. In the next section below, I provide a detailed overview of step by step process involved in the analysis.

3.6.1 Process of Analysis

Analysis involves understanding the inferences and pulling out the implications from data to arrive at the possible conclusions (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs 2010). I am aware that the process of analysing data and following a prescriptive analytical protocol can quickly take a 'reductionist' form, whereby we can easily miss the trees for the woods. Doing an analysis that involves 'lived experience' of participants will seldom be neat or complete, and this process of analysis is one of immersion rather than dissection (Cole and Knowles 2001). The data generated through the life history interviews were thick and voluminous. With the help of fieldnotes and listening back to participant conversations (audio files) repeatedly, I became familiar with the data. The first step was to systematically organise and collate all the data I had gathered. I transcribed all the interviews verbatim that were digitally recorded. The fieldnotes and headnotes[1] (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011; Tracy 2012) were also transcribed. I captured the process and my observations about the interview process. In this way, I brought together both content and descriptions of how they emerged. All these transcriptions were initially stored as word-processing files. In order to analyse the data more proficiently, I created detailed spreadsheets that helped to organise the voluminous data. At this stage, I made additional notes and labelled the data.

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[1] Mental notes or specific instances/events in the field that are remembered and recorded at a later stage rather than during the participant meeting.

Meyer and Avery (2009) have highlighted the advantages of spreadsheets in qualitative research, pointing to their ability to organise data in a meaningful way and the aid its logical functions provide in analysis. I have been using spreadsheets for a long time and am adept at using features that support the storage, retrieval and organisation of data. I preferred spreadsheets for sorting and labelling data to help me arrive at the themes, over standardised qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), where this process is a bit opaque. Although there are advantages in using such software tools, concerns regarding "increasingly deterministic and rigid processes, privileging of coding, and retrieval methods as well as reification of data" (John and Johnson 2000, p.393) didn't generate confidence in using them and didn't resonate with my research orientation. Also, software programs mostly assist in managing data; the analysis, the process of making connections and interpretations, has to be performed by the researcher (Silver and Lewins 2014; Humble 2012).

At the outset, I planned to analyse the data using a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006; King and Horrocks 2010) to identify common and/or recurrent actions and interactions as they were described within and between different life histories. I organised the long interview data into small chunks of sentences and paragraphs in an individual spreadsheet for each research participant. Then I started collating brief essence-capturing phrases in the columns next to the smaller chunks of interview data. These words and phrases were then assembled wherever there was a similarity and regularity in the interview text. This actively facilitated the emergence of broad groupings to bring together essential elements of the transcripts. These groupings were reviewed; here, I followed an iterative process akin to the metaphor of 'decorating a room' that Abbott (2004) uses, conceding that "you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganisation" (p.215). Based on these iterations and reflections, narrative themes started to emerge, initially a lot of them. Hence, a long list of themes emerged through this process. A representative sample of these themes that emerged from the transcripts is enclosed in Appendix A. This sample highlights the key themes and shows how data were analysed.

These narrative themes were carved out as all the interview texts were collated and examined largely following an 'abductive' approach, 'alternating between theory (empirically-laden) and empirical data (theory-laden)' (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009, p.5). Similarly, Tracy (2012) elaborates upon the iterative analysis that I drew from, following largely an emic approach to data analysis to start with. This iterative approach inspired reflection upon the active interests, existing literature, as well as my practical understanding, bringing together the emic and, to an extent, etic influences as well.

Tracy (2012) observes that an iterative approach "is a reflexive process in which the researcher visits and revisits the data, connects them to emerging insights, and progressively refines his/her focus and understandings" (p.184). Initially, when I pulled out the narrative themes, there were a large number of distinct themes. I then started to engage in an iterative cycle of inquiry and developed a few overarching themes. The process of putting together multiple themes under the overarching themes was based on my understanding of their natural affinity rather than any focal theories. This helped in keeping the process of analysis emergent and allowed the expression and re-expression of the narrative themes. I brought data together while keeping avenues for including interesting insights open. However, on reviewing these narrative themes, most of them pointed towards 'what' sense consultants are making about their work and life. For examples, final themes like *'primacy of selling', 'adding value', client perception and positioning'* (refer to Appendix A) all pointed towards issues pertaining to what research participants were doing in their day-to-day engagement at work and with clients. Clearly, in sharing their lived experiences, consultants were occupied with what they do at work and the issues that surround them. The focus of the research is mainly on 'how' consultants make sense, so, at this stage, the initial outcomes of the analysis represented a departure from the original emphasis of the research. I needed to find a way to access the underlying processes that consultants were using while sharing their life history accounts.

At this stage, a few avenues were contemplated, such as the possibility of extending the analysis by using existing debates in consulting literature to develop framing concepts by which to explore consultants' sensemaking and

develop theoretically informed themes. However, this option, albeit explored, had to be rejected because it lacked philosophical and methodological consistency, as this study emphasised participants' lived experiences rather than use theory as the key enabler. While, so far, the exploration of the themes did not help in achieving the research objectives fully, it helped in an intimate understanding of the data. Thus, another option that emerged through discussion required juxtaposing the sensemaking perspective (Holt and Cornelissen 2014; Weick 1995; Weick 2012) with these narrative themes to explore the underlying processes of consultants' sensemaking i.e. 'how' they make sense. A sensemaking perspective not only provided a conceptual grounding for the research but also assisted in the process of analysis, by specifically anchoring the analysis to reveal the processes of consultants' sensemaking. This iterative process is depicted in Figure 3-1 below. The next chapter (Section 4.1 to 4.3) explores the sensemaking perspective in detail, elaborating on key conceptual perspectives on sensemaking and how they have been utilised in this study.
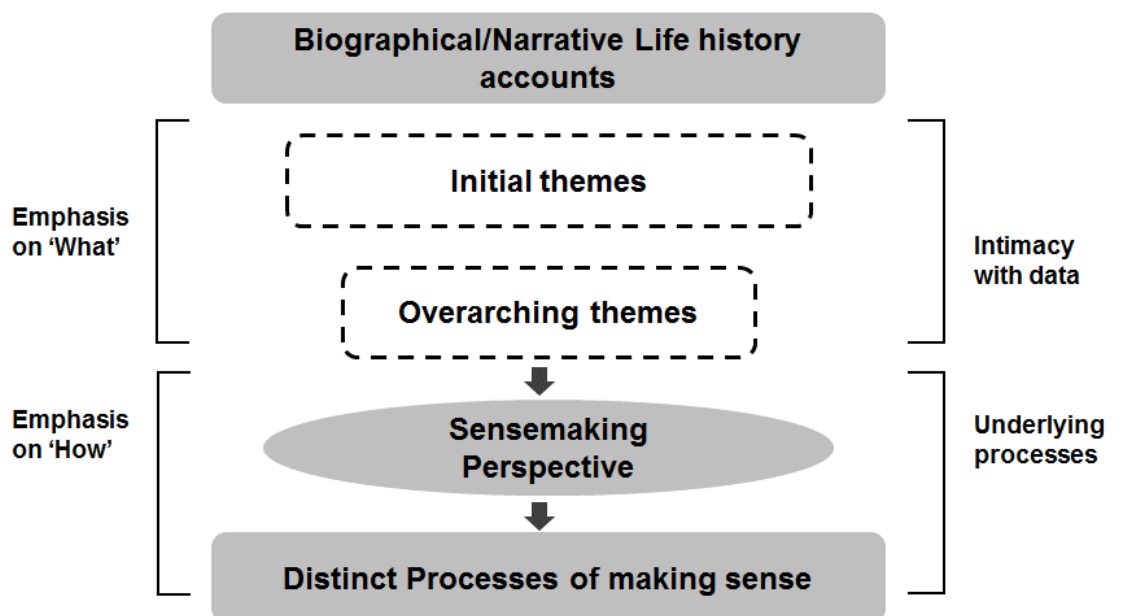
Figure 3-1. The iterative process and stages of analysis

The use of a sensemaking perspective helped in carrying out the second cycle of data analysis; at this stage, re-reading the data and narrative themes helped in discovering the underlying processes that management consultants

used in narrating their life histories and making sense of their lived experiences. For example the final themes like *'primacy of selling', 'adding value', client perception and positioning'* that I referred to in this section earlier when juxtaposed with sensemaking perspective revealed an underlying process i.e. *narrative presentation of projects,* that consultants employed . The consultants' inclination for sharing 'project narratives' when talking about the day-to-day elements of their practice became apparent. Similarly, by engaging with the narrative themes in conjunction with sensemaking perspective, three distinct processes of sensemaking employed by consultants emerged: (a) use of differentiation/comparison, (b) narrative presentation of projects and (c) use of 'metaphors' – to define and make meaning of their practice.

In terms of representation, instead of showcasing each specific life history highlighting individual uniqueness, I express the findings based on narrative themes that are complemented by narrative quotes from interviews as well as specific images/photographs that resonated with specific issues. An artful representation is an outcome of bringing to bear challenges, excitement and even the frustrations encountered at each stage of data collection as well as analysis.

3.6.2 Analysing visuals

Participants shared photographs/drawing with me as part of the interview conversations. Photographs are considered immensely valuable as they carry an enormous amount of information (Grady 2004). At one end of the spectrum, photographs are claimed to be able to produce knowledge that is "dissociated from and independent of experience" (Sontag 1977, p.155), and, at the other extreme, it is felt that "photographs have to be seen as social constructions, that is, as artefacts of the contexts in which they were constructed" (Fasoli 2003, p.36). Ray and Smith (2011) share that sociologist Howard Becker (Becker 1974) urged for following a more interpretive approach to photographs and quotes Harper, "all images are socially and technically constructed" (Harper 1994, p.406), thereby strongly advocating for utilising the interpretive insights generated through photographs. The challenge arises in understanding the nuances of an image and carrying out the analysis. Both Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) as well as Rose (2016) have highlighted the analytical complexities and

multiple perspectives that various scholars have been debating in proposing an approach or a process of shaping an interpretation of the images. At one end, the photographs and images can make the abstract tale the researcher shares convey 'real, flesh, and blood life' (Becker 2002). However, others have argued against the primacy of visual content, focusing more on the process and the context in which it is interpreted. It is understandable that there is no clearly developed methodological approach to discuss and analyse photographs (Rose 2014). However, the reflexive epistemologies of visual research suggest that the "meaning of images reside most significantly in the ways the participants interpret those images rather than some inherent property of the images itself" (Stanczak 2007, p.11), thus providing an approach for analysis.

As articulated above, the 'image' and interview data are inextricably linked (Guillemin and Drew 2010); therefore, a process of simultaneous and iterative analysis is appropriate. Rose (2016) identifies four sites of meaning within images—production, image, circulation and audience—that are affected by certain modalities that she frames as technological, compositional and social. She argues that, in analysing photographs, these sites and modalities influence the process of analysis. In cases where the focus is on image and its technological aspects, analysis focuses on discussing the technological accomplishments of an image and the process of its development.

Similarly, research that focuses on the audience may overly concentrate on the reactions and identities of the reader. In analysing the images created as part of this research, it was important to revisit the objective of employing images as part of the research design. The emphasis has been on invoking participation, helping participants open up and freely engage in talking about their life histories. Life histories not only require time and effort from the participants but also require building rapport, interest and subtle persuasion. The aim of this analysis is to assist in the understanding of the pictures along with the interpretation of the participants and, through that, creating a deeper appreciation of the working lives of management consultants. Therefore, the analysis of the visuals generated as part of the research links to the very objectives that informed their use.

The images here are interpreted through the description as well as interpretation made by the participants as part of the research conversation on participant-shared images. I analysed how participants talked about the images and assisted in pulling out metaphors that were embedded in the interpretations and associated with the visuals. The initial part of the analysis required repeated reading of the interview transcripts to become intimately acquainted with the 'talk' as well as the 'visual' and helped in pulling out the metaphors, some explicitly named and others embedded in the narratives. Berger mentions that,

> every image embodies a way of seeing, […] every time we look at an image, we are aware, however slightly, of the person selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing. (p.10).

In order to select the images that are replicated in the study, I relied on the interpretations provided by the research participants, on my understanding of these participants during the course of the fieldwork, and on how these images illuminate the discussion on the working lives of consultants while drawing from the literature on consulting and sensemaking.

The 'sense' that the analysis brings out is a combination of juxtaposition of images with participant 'talk' and my interpretations of them as a researcher. The images are ascribed to a key issue that emerges from the participants' description and interpretation of the image and resonates with as well as exemplifies an issue emerging for participants in their consulting work. Then it is linked to the consulting context, highlighting the emerging metaphors for the work and lives of management consultants. I noticed metaphors emerging in participant interviews naturally and that allowed me to follow an *idiographic approach*, which analyses inductively metaphors that organically occur in through the data (Oswick and Grant 1996). Tracy (2012) suggest that researchers can also analyse the interview data and interpretively construct a metaphor that sums them up using this approach.

3.6.3 Writing up and quality

It is pertinent here to discuss the important issue of quality in research along with its usage and wider relevance. I agree that reliability and validity through which the quality of research can be assessed are "tools of an essentially positivist epistemology" (Winter 2000, p.10). The validity criteria imposed by the quantitative paradigm are clearly inappropriate for qualitative research (Hammersley 1992). Generalisation is argued to be closely related to validity, representing the mechanisms through which truth-claims can be justified (Norris 1997). Undoubtedly, the nature of qualitative research is contextual and subjective rather than generalisable and objective. It has been argued that qualitative research seeks illumination, understanding and extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl 1997), and credibility, transferability and dependability provide the appropriate translation of quality criteria in qualitative research (Lincoln 1985).

Tracy (2010) proposes criteria for excellent qualitative research and specifies eight key markers of quality in qualitative research: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigour, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics and (h) meaningful coherence. Similarly, Cole and Knowles (2001) addresses issues of rigour specifically in the context of life history research, describing the standards or criteria used to make conclusions about the quality of research and suggesting a set of eight elements (Intentionality; Researcher presence; Methodological commitment; Holistic quality; Communicability; Aesthetic form; Knowledge claims; Contribution) that "can serve as standards or criteria by which life history research – which places central the notions of self, relationship, and artfulness – can be judged" (p.125-127).

I find similarities between both Tracy's criteria for qualitative research in general and Cole and Knowles' eight elements. In responding to the criteria for rigour, I contend that, first, intentionality for the research is clearly laid out in the purpose of this research by highlighting the objective of scholarly illumination of the lived experience of consultants without allegiance to extreme negative conceptions about their work. Second, the multiplicity of methods that included life history interview and photo-elicitation from research participants allowed me

to actively engage the participants and, to an extent, ensured full presence in the process of inquiry, thus ensuring commitment to the methodological tool. Third, the coherence with which the narratives are collated and represented here suggests the holistic quality of the study. Fourth, the use of visuals and their inclusion in the analysis contributed to the aesthetic form. Finally, the claims to knowledge and contributions highlighted towards the end of the thesis brings together the multidimensional, complex and contextual nature of management consultants' experiences. There is space for resonance and humility to acknowledge that multiple interpretations of life histories are possible. The sensemaking processes for management consultants explored through the analysis are by no means exhaustive, so there is space for possibilities and new meanings.

3.7   Reflections on My Role and Positionality

When we construct texts collaboratively, self-consciously examining our relations with/for/despite those who have been contained as 'Others', we move against, we enable resistance to, 'Othering'. (Fine 1994, p.74).

In setting up this research study, I was mindful of my own context, background and experience as a former management consultant. It was important to actively stay aware of my taken-for-granted assumptions that imposed limits on listening and understanding. It is easy to become obscured by the pre-existing conceptions about consulting work and consultants' lives. During the fieldwork, there were occasions when research participants would say, "You can understand these things, can't you?" and carry on without elaborating their responses, assuming that I already understood their issues and what they meant. I could not escape my prior role as a consultant and positioning as one among them. I experienced a shadow identity of a professional consultant along with an identity of a researcher. In interview conversations, there were delicate moments to seize, referred to as 'researchable moments': an awareness of my presence was crucial in connecting with my participants when serendipitously 'inner reaches' of

meaning shone through (Cole and Knowles 2001). It is crucial to acquire an in-depth understanding of the context of participants' situated lives.

The exploration of the local context of participation rested on my listening and questioning. This led to an important aspect of my reflexivity as a researcher: a reflexive stance to research is likely to broaden the focus on the presence and involvement with participants. I was aware that a relational space might open up as I could not, nor did I want to, keep myself detached. During the fieldwork, I made notes on the research process and interactions as part of the field notes. Reflecting on these observations made me challenge my own assumptions and ways of being as a researcher. Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) presents a useful mapping of issues related to researcher position and identity using Fine's conception of otherness and working the hyphen. These hyphen-spaces[2] (Cunliffe and Karunanayake 2013) between me and the participants illuminated my positionality and the extant tensions. These four hyphen-spaces, namely insiderness-outsiderness, sameness-difference, engagement-distance, and political activism-active neutrality, resonated with me.

My professional background and understanding of the consulting context positioned me as an 'insider' although different on accounts of cultural and ethnic context. I realised my professional background helped in establishing contact with potential participants and initial conversations provided them comfort in engaging with me. I am conscious that I might have not received the same interest had they perceived me as another student researcher, a challenge fellow research colleagues faced in securing access. During the course of research interviews and interactions in general, participants often engaged inquisitively in my consulting expertise, keen to learn about consulting assignments I had undertaken, making it easier to build rapport. To that extent, self-disclosure about my professional background was helpful. I was 'like them', a consultant – an 'insider', easier to relate to.

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[2] Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) suggest four hyphen-spaces as a way of recognising and understanding the tensions/connections in researcher–respondent relationship and their impact on research identities and practice. An awareness of these four hyphen-spaces are likely to inform my positionality and ethical behaviour.

However, I experienced challenges when, during the interview conversations, assumptions were made, details were omitted and strong opinions held back. I realised that participants relied on my prior professional background to help me in filling these gaps. I had to stay alert, ask and insist that they share their perspectives.

3.8 Ethical Issues and Safeguards

This research required extensive primary data collection from interacting with management consultants. Securing access and data collection were done in accordance with the research ethics and guidelines laid down by the University and participating organisations. A detailed email for soliciting participation was sent to all prospective participants, specifying the ethical norms that the research would adhere to. A consent form (See Appendix B) was enclosed and participants were urged to read and sign the form before commencement of the interaction. Just before starting the interview, participants were again told about their rights as participants as well safeguards to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were given free choice to not answer a questions if they didn't feel comfortable and withdraw at any stage of the research if they so desired.

I assured participants that confidentiality, with regard to the specific documents, policies and methods of the consulting firms, details of the assignments and related information about the client organisations that I would become familiar during the course of the fieldwork, would be strictly maintained. All aspects that required attention such as a participant's right to withdraw, well-articulated exclusion criteria (for participating firms wherever relevant) and non-coercive/intrusive questioning, were adhered to, ensuring any 'deontological' concerns were respected (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). All interview transcripts/recordings were anonymised, including the narrative quotes in the text conforming to the data-protection requirements. The research adopted a safe, ethical and authentic way of telling the stories of consultants' lived experiences in varied contexts.

Life history stories are impactful, evocative, and sometimes painful and emotional. These are the stories that need to be told, as they are likely to reveal a great deal, and I am aware that they must be represented with care. These 'relational' ethics were adhered to by staying aware and mindful of participants' reactions and comfort in responding to questions that were potentially sensitive.

3.9   Conclusion

In setting out to explore the lived experience of management consultants, my emphasis has clearly been on adopting a qualitative approach. I clarified that my orientation to research is subjectivist/interpretivist (Cunliffe 2011) and not positivist. The life history research methodology (Cole and Knowles 2001) helped in exploring the research questions with the help of semi-structured life history interviews and participant-generated visuals. Finally, it would be appropriate to submit that life history research has an alchemical appeal that comes from its accessibility and grounding in everyday meaning (Kouritzin 2009). The chosen methodology helped in foregrounding issues in consultants' lives and in providing space for sensemaking and reflections.

Chapter 4 Working with the Sensemaking Perspective

4.1   Introduction

In this chapter, I present a brief overview of the 'sensemaking perspective', specifically from the point of view of my research, in order to understand and clarify how it may be used as a theoretical approach for the study. I attempt to highlight the specific aspects that resonate more with my preferred ontological position and objectives of the research. Also, this review relates closely to critical aspects of sensemaking that align with the study and centre around the 'working lives of management consultants', with the focus on illuminating their processes of sensemaking. The review touches upon the influential work of Karl Weick and other prominent scholars in the area of sensemaking, in addition to drawing upon recent sensemaking literature. I begin by briefly introducing the 'sensemaking perspective', arguing for the ontological space within which I situate my research, before preceding to use the sensemaking theoretical perspective with the management consulting literature in analysing the process (how) research participants (management consultants) employ in making sense.

4.2   Sensemaking - What Does It Mean to Make Sense?

In simple terms, sensemaking is understood as the making of sense. It is presumed to be a process through which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). In organisations, sensemaking occurs when members confront events, issues, and actions that are confusing, complex, or surprising (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Maitlis 2005; Weick 1995). Sensemaking is concerned with the construction of new meanings that strengthen existing or create new ways of organising and understanding. These are produced when individuals engage with others while struggling with complex problems (Gawlik 2015). Weick (1995) argues that active agents construct sensible, 'sensable' events. How, what, and why they construct, and with what effects, are essential questions for

anyone interested in sensemaking (Weick 1995, p.4). To make sense involves contextualising a particular cue or experience in the context of a learned frame, narrative, or category as the conceptual template, which then produces and enables interpretation (Holt and Cornelissen 2014). Sensemaking extends beyond interpretation and includes the authoring[1] of events and frameworks for understanding by people who play an active role in constructing the situations they attempt to comprehend (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). It is a useful theoretical construct, as it invites researchers to understand how and why people arrive at their outcomes (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005).

Traditionally, sensemaking is understood as a cognitive process, focused on appraisal and interpretation, usually mentioned as frameworks, schemata, or mental models (Bingham and Kahl 2013; Fiss and Zajac 2006; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). For Weick, sensemaking has been taken to mean doing something sensible in ways that are not purely cognitive but also socially constructed. Weick (1995) takes a cognitive perspective on social constructionism; from his point of view, sensemaking is the enactment of mental models and 'salient cues'. In so doing, people shape what is happening.

Weick conceptualises a framework with seven properties of sensemaking that highlight it as: 1) retrospective, 2) grounded in identity, 3) enactive of '*sensible environments*', [2] 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) plausible rather than accurate. Referring to one of these properties, i.e. 'sensible environment', Weick (1995) suggests that people create their environments as they are making sense of them, and these environments then constrain or enable their actions. He further contends that sensemaking aims to create a holistic picture of ambiguous events through three interrelated processes: creation, interpretation, and enactment (Gawlik 2015; Weick 1995). This triptych of interrelated processes suggests an

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[1] It addresses both *how texts and actions are constructed and how they are read.*
[2] The expression '*sensible environment*' suggests that actions, along with sensemaking, create environments that subsequently become available for creating the social reality within which individuals operate (BEAN, C. J. and F. E. HAMILTON. 2006. Leader framing and follower sensemaking Response to downsizing in the brave new workplace. *Human Relations,* **59**(3), pp.321-349.

instrumental view of sensemaking that has been highlighted and critiqued in the extant literature (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012).

4.2.1 Ontological leaning

Maitlis and Christianson (2014), while discussing different definitions of sensemaking, suggest that the ontological difference that is reflected across such definitions concerns whether sensemaking takes place within or between individuals. As discussed earlier, some regard it as a cognitive process that takes place in individuals' heads (Fiss and Zajac 2006; Labianca, Gray and Brass 2000; Harris 1994), while others perceive it as a shared cognitive process of social construction that is carried out through interaction between people (Weick 1995; Weick 2012). From this perspective, sensemaking is assumed to be a social process that occurs between people, as meaning is negotiated, contested, and co-constructed. It is seen as a process of interpreting events by extracting cues and making plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into ongoing events (Weick 2012). This may also include the enactment of identity by social actors in the social context. From a constructivist perspective, the process of sensemaking and its output occur through communication, as people label and categorise their experiences (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005), as well as through narratives, including 'accounts' and stories.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) suggest that sensemaking has been gradually removed from its psychological origins and has been slowly embedded into a more social constructivist perspective, which is reflected through a shift in the focus of sensemaking from cognition to language in recent research studies (Colville, Brown and Pye 2012; Weick 2012). However, Brown, Colville and Pye (2015) suggest that there is no consensus on whether sensemaking is best regarded primarily as sets of individual–cognitive (e.g. schemata and mental maps), collective–social (interactions between people), or specifically discursive (linguistic/communicative) processes, and they consider this divide potentially generative for the sensemaking literature. This study draws on sensemaking from a social constructionist perspective. Although it focuses on the lived experiences of individual consultants, the process of sensemaking is not solitary, as everything management consultants

do is contingent on others (Weick 1995), including clients, co-workers, and project teams.

4.2.2 Sensemaking triggers

Sensemaking is an inherently social and collaborative process, since all individually attributed meanings must be socially plausible, and collaboration is key to this. In organisations, people interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that help them to comprehend the world and act collectively (Weick and Roberts 1993). An important '*trigger*' to sensemaking is '*identity threat*': when identity is under threat or ambiguous, people are prompted to engage in sensemaking around the sources of the threat in order to restore their sense of identity (Petriglieri 2011). People respond to threats by working to understand the grounds for the challenge through the construction of new accounts of themselves (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Sensemaking may be understood as an important way of trying to regain control when people feel most deeply threatened. In Weick's framework, identity finds an important place; sensemaking may also be understood as a significant way of gaining control and infusing predictability when feeling threatened. The on-going negotiation of identity happens through a narrative process of authoring as well as re-authoring of frameworks created by individuals (Moore and Koning 2016; Weick 1995).

Another trigger for sensemaking in organisations relates to how certain *groups/leaders influence others* and develop their understanding of the issues, largely towards a preferred definition of organisational issues (Maitlis 2005). When new or existing leaders commit to a new vision or a new direction, they attempt to trigger sensemaking by communicating such plans that might challenge existing beliefs (Maitlis and Christianson 2014).

Organisational sensemaking is triggered by '*unexpected and unanticipated events*' that have captured the attention of employees and are often construed as a contrast against more normalised organisational practices and routines (Weick 1995). Christianson *et al.* (2009) identify both '*rare events and interruptions (crisis or change)*' in normative and expected workplace routines as additional framing devices for organisational sensemaking.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) reviewed various ambiguous events represented in the extant literature and developed categories by distinguishing between major and minor as well as planned and unplanned events. Similarly, Turner and Rindova (2012) and Rerup and Feldman (2011) refer to the disturbances in ongoing routine within ongoing organisational activities as triggers for sensemaking. In addition, Holt and Cornelissen (2014) suggest that sensemaking also brushes up against everyday life, in relation to how people embody a sense of who they are and where they are going in order to cope with their everyday lives. In a similar way, Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) argue that individuals make sense of their everyday lives in an ongoing embodied process of interpretation of the self and experience inseparable from the self, sense, body, and emotions. Thus, they privilege the "totality of our experience in the course of ongoing, everyday interactions" (p.78).

In this research study, my concern is with how management consultants make sense of their lived experience in ongoing everyday activities, interactions with and the co-presence of colleagues and clients, as their life histories traverse one set of individual and organisational circumstances, and the ambiguities, complexities, and surprises that provide triggers as well as cues for sensemaking.

4.2.3 Sensemaking temporality

Although Weick (1995) agrees that people's actions are informed by future-oriented thoughts, he defines sensemaking as being inherently retrospective as it gains awareness from what has already occurred. The literature on sensemaking strongly argues that actors are always making interpretive connections in time and are usually looking back in order "to understand the present – through retrospective sensemaking – and imagining paths that will have been taken to reach projected futures" (Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013, p.3). The '*meaningful lived experience*' can be understood when it has already been lived. The debate on the prospective nature of sensemaking alludes to the conscious and intentional consideration of probable future actions and their impact on the meaning construction process (Gioia *et al.* 1994). Drawing upon the theory of '*temporal embeddedness*' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), which suggests that the development of plausible

connections among interpretations of the past, present, and future is required for action, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) argue for a holistic temporal perspective on sensemaking. In addition, the debate on whether sensemaking is continuous or episodic is prominent in the sensemaking literature. While proponents of the continuous nature of sensemaking proclaim that there is '*no timeout for sensemaking*' (Gephart, Topal and Zhang 2010; Maitlis and Christianson 2014), there is also considerable emphasis on the episodic nature of sensemaking in the literature. Weick (2012) presents a nuanced argument by suggesting that any episode of sensemaking undergoes a cycle of continuous adjustment, thus privileging an episodic ontology (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015). However, Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) extend the debate by focusing on the temporal nature of sensemaking that, according to them, is accentuated by past experiences, present interactions, and future anticipations drawn into the moment of performance.

4.3 Conclusion: Sensemaking in the Context of Research on Consultants' Lived Experiences

The above brief discussion on the sensemaking literature and its elements helps understand some of the issues in light of the research objectives. The sensemaking perspective is helpful for bringing out the meaning that management consultants make of their lives and what is 'sensible' to them. It is useful for understanding (a) what sense consultants make of their work and (b) how consultants make sense of and enact their practice amidst the dynamics of a profession that includes uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity. In this thesis, the focus is on understanding '*how'* consultants locate meaning and make sense of their working lives and its various facets. Life history interviews with participants and the subsequent analysis of the interview transcripts form the basis for identifying the processes of how consultants make sense of their working lives. Even though consultants make sense of their lived experiences, life history interviews offer an opportunity for retrospective sensemaking and for naming and rationalising what they are doing (Maclean, Harvey and Chia 2012; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005). As elaborated in the methodology chapter (see section 3.6.1),

narrative themes from initial analysis when placed alongside with sensemaking perspective helped in illuminating three distinct processes of consultants' sensemaking.

In the following chapter, I present the first of these three sensemaking processes (i.e. making sense by comparing and differentiating) that emerge through detailed analysis of life history interviews (empirical work) with the research participants, juxtaposed with the theoretical understanding of the sensemaking perspective. In this first findings chapter, I argue that research participants make sense of their consulting lives by making relative reference to non-consulting roles/contexts and explaining the constraints, challenges, and advantages in relation to such non-consulting roles/organisations.

Chapter 5 Making sense by comparing and differentiating

5.1 Introduction

The next three chapters present the findings of this study and lay out the arguments in support of the assertions made. As highlighted earlier, the exploration of participants' life history accounts revealed three distinct processes of their sensemaking. Each of these three processes has a distinctive discursive quality that comes out in how they have been presented in each of these three findings chapters. At the outset, in this chapter, I discuss the first process of sensemaking identified based on the analysis of life history interviews and juxtaposing the narrative themes with the sensemaking perspective as a conceptual framework by which to arrive at the processes of sensemaking (see Section 3.6.1). The responses from a number of participants (six) from different consulting organisations and practice areas have been woven into the analysis and presented to substantiate the arguments here, threads of which resonate across the life history accounts of other participants as well. The responses from these six participants complement each other and assist in building a comprehensive narrative that will be evident from the ensuing discussion, highlighting the purpose of selecting them.

Analysis of the participant accounts reveals that management consultants reference non-consulting professionals as well as people in their wider social relations (family, friends), hereafter referred to as the 'outgroup' (Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester 2016) to make sense of their own experience. In doing so, they downplay the contextual issues they face as consultants, disassociate with dominant meanings and contest their elite identity and status.

5.1.1 Exploring sensemaking – Referencing and relating

The discussions with management consultants revealed that they do not make sense of their working lives and various aspects of working life in isolation but in reference to other professionals working in non-consultancy organisations and performing roles that are different from theirs. This reinforces differences that are based on their sensible environment (consultancy/advice giving), their roles, and their identities as consultants. As mentioned earlier,

sensemaking is grounded in 'identity' Weick (1995): "Identities are constituted out of processes of ongoing social interaction in which the 'sensemaker' is undergoing continual redefinition and sensemaking is influenced by the actual, implied, or imagined presence of others, making it an inherently social activity" (Patriotta and Spedale 2009, p.1229). In the consulting context, the identity discourse is strongly tied to professional elitism. Extant literature also explicates a strong identification to 'elite identity' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Armbrüster 2004; Skovgaard Smith 2013; Kärreman and Rylander 2008), a claim that participants account challenge here.

During the course of an interview, on being asked about how his spouse views the consulting work he does, Logan responded by making a comparison with other professionals such as doctors, economists, and scientists who, according to him, were more respected:

> when you talk to other people, they are very proud of being a doctor, economist, or someone, but being a consultant (…) I don't think that it's something that people say, "Wow! It is so cool you are a consultant" (Logan).

In this way, Logan indicated that the pride other professionals may feel eluded him because consulting is not as revered as other professions. The important aspect to note here is that the lack of pride in the consulting role is not ascribed to any perceived precariousness of consulting work but, when compared with other professionals, it does not seem to command the same understanding, reverence, and status. In a similar vein, Emily expressed that it had been challenging for her to make her family and friends understand what she does working professionally as a consultant:

> a number of my brothers and sisters and their spouses actually know what I do, yet they still don't understand what I do. One of my brothers and one sister gets it, but they still do not understand it. When we go out with people and someone asks me, "So, what do you do?" every single time my sister inquires, "What *do* you do?" I have various ways of explaining what I do based on what I see as their level of interest and engagement in it. It would have been different if I had worked as a nurse, maybe (Emily).

Emily further suggested that she can disappear socially in spite of doing very well professionally, as it is difficult for others to understand and acknowledge her professional identity. She makes sense by making a

comparison with nursing, which she considers would have been easier for people to understand and visualise.

Both these experiences shared by participants are in contrast to the organisationally-inspired elite discourse of consultancy firms: an elite status and social identity that management consultants are perceived to occupy and that persists in the mainstream management consulting literature (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Gill 2015; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004).The experience of participants here suggests that they do not receive external confirmation (e.g. via family members) to support an elite identity construction; rather, it poses a threat to any such construction. The participant narratives suggest that family members' impressions and confusion about their profession encourages sensemaking by comparing it with other comprehensible (easily discernible and widely known) professions. Taking the participants' lived experiences seriously, the statement presented from an elite identity perspective of '*how we are amongst the best*' seems to be reframed as '*how we are in relation to other professionals*'. This suggests that the process of sensemaking here is embedded in the construction of an identity informed by making comparisons and viewing the '*self*' in a wider '*sensible environment*' that posits itself in a broader spectrum of professionals apart from and including management consultants.

Similarly, Joshua drew a comparison with any other corporate job in order to steer the argument in favour of pursuing a consulting role:

> I could have a secure job and very good income working in a corporate role with any big organisation, but what if I can't breathe and I get choked by routines and repetitions? I cannot work for years not having any passion (…) it becomes grey. For me, it made more sense that I follow my original intuition that you need to be passionate about what you are doing, and then something good will happen. Consulting provided me with just that (Joshua).

The argument presented here highlights how comparison provides the grounds for making sense of pursuing a career in consulting. The basis for a narrative that any other corporate job would be repetitive and boring is fragile and hyperbolic; however, it is important to highlight that Joshua did not have any prior experience of working in a non-consultancy role. This indicates that, while there is a reference made to other corporate jobs, the basis for making

this reference and opinion could be based either on working with clients in the corporate sector and discovering the contrast, or a socially-authored, self-serving meaning without full acknowledgement of the complexities involved in non-consulting roles. Pauleen *et al.* (2015) suggest that sensemakers take a relative approach to the truth: here, people not only believe what can account for experience but also that it is interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and relevant. There is opportunity for retrospectively and pragmatically rationalising experiences through plausible accounts that may explain meaning making and outcomes. Brown, Stacey and Nandhakumar (2008) suggest that such pragmatic means of framing experiences, which build up coherent '*repertoires of understanding*' based on retrospectively fixed events in space and time, may help in legitimising a set of perspectives and anchoring the self.

Although Joshua's response did not allude to an elite status or elite identity, his remark makes his professional role more attractive and appealing, which is closely linked to the debate in the management consulting literature relating to '*impression management*', i.e. self-presentation behaviour employed to influence the perceptions others have towards the self (Jones and Pittman 1982). Thus, being a part of the consulting organisation and participating therein involves a '*creative authoring of self*' (Shotter 1993) that Brown and Jones (2000) argue centres on the individual and social processes of understanding in the form of sensemaking and manifests itself as action in the form of '*impression management*'.

Edward had worked in an organisation as an internal member of staff before re-commencing work with a consulting organisation. Notably, unlike Joshua, he had organisational experience in a non-consulting role. The meaning Edward drew for his preference for a consulting role was informed by the opportunity to problem-solve a variety of organisational issues:

> I tried not being a consultant and worked as an internal staff member in an organisation. Comparatively, I found it boring because I was seeing the same things day in and day out, the same problems. I need to be challenged by different problems, so, probably, had I not been a consultant, and worked as an internal throughout my career, I would have found something else in my private life to make up for it, something interesting like skydiving or rock climbing (Edward).

There is a similarity in the perceptions of both Joshua and Edward about the boredom they envisaged in a corporate role. In today's organisational context, where work is intensifying, seeking an even more dynamic environment (consultancy) suggests a liking for a frenzied level of activity by some of these consultants. Gabriel (2000) suggests that making sense is a process that often culminates in the expression of an opinion, belief, or a lesson for others. Edward expressed his opinion based on his organisational experience in a corporate role, highlighting what can be expected in a corporate role and how that compares to a role in a consultancy environment, at the same time as almost mocking the difference by expressing how he might have filled the gap by engaging in an adventure sport. Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe (2003) suggest that the value of a job is influenced by values, preferences, and passions, as well as by the features of the social context. The message conveyed by these consultants here suggests that work must be replete with variety, challenge, and almost a persistent dynamism, with the inherent possibility of crafting something good.

It is imperative to attend to the social context in which the consulting work is carried out in order to fully understand the issues that contribute to the process of sensemaking that hinges on making reference and comparisons. Consulting work places huge demands on time and availability from consultants. The involvement and level of commitment consulting work demands could potentially limit the time for indulging in other outside activities. It poses challenges with regard to alienation from family due to extensive travel, a requirement to be available to clients 24/7, and an inordinate scope of responsibilities likely to influence relationships and well-being.

However, the participants countered this narrative by equating the demands a consulting job poses to other professions, thus downplaying idiosyncratic working hours, excessive work demands, and the intrusion of business into their private sphere. Flexibility to manage one's own consulting projects and organise working hours was suggested as an important tool to complement and negotiate such challenges:

> there are a lot of rumours that you need to work a lot when you are a
> management consultant, but I don't think it's different from most

other professions. Of course, it's not nine-in-the-morning to five-in-the-evening working hours, but it's not that bad. I am not sure if it brings many challenges in terms of my life outside of work (Tyler).

Tyler's response suggests that the situation is not as dire as some of the literature on management consulting and the rhetoric (as discussed in the critical management consulting literature) suggests, although it is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. It is important to note that Tyler suggested that it is just as difficult as other professions and, in so doing, he tried to justify and legitimise what happens in working as a consultant. The source of his sensemaking, and that of other participants in relation to their working lives and elements of their work, is relative, which may be the best argument for making sense and being convinced of its meaningfulness. Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking processes take place in the service of maintaining or restoring a consistent, continuous, and positive self-conception.

Here, it is worth noting that consultants not only try to legitimise their actions but also to act out the sense they make. Tyler does not accept that anything needs to be made out of the excesses at work, and instead passes them off as eccentric tales people engage in about consulting. There is a palpable sense of self-deception here. Self-deception (as a form of impression management) can enable individuals to manage their external image in order to preserve the opinion of others. Drawing on the work of Brown and Jones (2000), 'self-deception' is considered as a significant mode of sensemaking in influencing how actions and their consequences may be interpreted. While the responses of individual participants are discussed and analysed here, self-deception is also a feature of the collective social life of groups and institutions (Brown and Jones 2000). The participants could well be echoing the dominant discourse within the consulting firms they are a part of, which, through a process of referencing and comparing, actively positions or deflects any indictments of excessive work by suggesting that it is the norm that most organisations follow.

Similarly, Dave argued that it is difficult for people working in other corporate roles and profession to appreciate how consultants accomplish their work, which, although the job demands may be strenuous, carries with it a great deal of flexibility:

> when you are in the consulting profession and have a family, there
> has to be a constant interaction with your spouse about how you will
> be doing your job. People who are working in a regular corporate job
> struggle to understand how someone can be so flexible, but you
> have to wake up at five in the morning to review a report that has to
> be delivered (...). They can't understand because sometimes I leave
> my office at four in the evening, too (...) I believe I have more
> flexibility than they have (Dave).

In this sense, Dave believed that people who work in other corporate roles cannot comprehend his work and its demands as well as the mechanisms for managing its complexities. It is clear that, in the process of making sense of their role, most of the participants compared and differentiated their position with other professions in order to emphasise their uniqueness. Dave's response highlights his approval of organisational expectations regarding work intensity and the accompanying notion of flexibility. Employees interpret, actively translate, and are often ambivalent about the demands of their organisations, especially in terms of work intensity and 'balance' (Sturdy and Wright 2008). It is worth noting that most of the research participants referred to 'flexibility' in narrow terms, focusing largely on the 'timing flexibility' (pertaining to when work occurs). Kossek and Van Dyne (2008, p.305) suggest that "work-life flexibility occurs when employees are able to initiate flexibility in how long, when, and where they work" and in a way that allows them to integrate work with their other life roles such as family or leisure (Perlow 1997). This accentuates the point that, for consultants, their context and the environment within which they make sense of various aspects of work is largely limited to the consultancy business, and yet, as 'sensemakers', they make reference to and compare themselves with other professionals, highlighting mainly those aspects that presents a positive perspective.

5.2   Conclusion and implications

Based on the discussion in this section, it can be concluded that management consultants use comparing/referencing as a vital frame in their process of sensemaking. A lack of credible external recognition for the consulting profession prompts a threat to organisationally espoused 'elite identity', and participants' reverence for other professionals compared to their

own poses a challenge to the notion of elite status for the consulting profession. Paradoxically, participants guard their liking for consulting work by suggesting the variety, excitement and challenge their work presents in relation to other corporate roles. They make this sense mostly without any first-hand experience of working in such corporate jobs, although it can be assumed that they acquire understanding about these corporate roles vicariously while working with their client counterparts.

The pronounced attractiveness of consulting work encourages the projection of a positive impression by consultants, and making claims in support of the influence consulting work can exert suggests its meaningfulness (laden with significance and value). By endorsing positive self-appraisal and 'impression management' behaviours (Alvesson 1993a; Clark 1995; Clark and Salaman 1996b; Kieser 2002), consultants seek legitimisation for work intensification, pressure and intrusion into their private lives. They present the 'timing flexibility' (suggested as working remotely at the time of the day they prefer) available to consultants in pursuit of their assignments as comparatively striking when compared to the high face time[3] other professionals are expected to provide in their work. It is evident that consultants use comparison with other professionals to equate challenges, downplay deficiencies and glorify the paybacks of their profession in the process of sensemaking about their work.

I argue that management consultants do not fully relate to their elite identity and status; however, their appreciation for certain facets of their job, such as variety (through different consulting projects), challenge (difficult client problems) and perceived flexibility (timing), is implied as strong member identification to the organisationally reified elite status (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Kitay and Wright 2007). It is important to note that they clearly experience a lack of social acknowledgment of their elite status and find themselves vulnerable in asserting a high status that is attributed to them at the workplace. In the extant literature, the sole emphasis has been on how firms perpetuate an elite organisational identity that consultants willingly engage with

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[3] A physical face-to-face presence. Some roles, like a bank teller or a retail executive, require employees to be present during the pre-designated bank or store opening hours.

and actively get involved with. The participant narrative highlights the socially constructed nature of elite identity where the role of 'outgroup' is very significant, an aspect which has so far not been acknowledged in the extant literature. This posits that wider social relations play a big role in consultants' contestation of elite identity. The contestation of attributed elite status highlights the taken-for-granted nature of consultants' 'elite identification' (Skovgaard Smith 2013). It may be argued that the precariousness, insecurity and ambiguity that consultants experience in their work cannot be wished away by associating them as 'intelligent elite', akin to other well-established professionals (such as doctors and lawyers). The nature of the sensemaking process that they adopt by referencing other professionals not only highlights the relative nature of sensemaking but also highlights the importance of categorisation others in their social sphere subject them to.

Finally, sensemaking for consultants emerges as a relative process that materialises through comparison and referencing, drawing attention to the wider social relations and disputing the taken-for-granted 'elite status'.

Chapter 6 Locating 'Sense' through the Narratives of Consulting Projects

6.1   Introduction

This chapter carries forward the discussion of management consultants' sensemaking processes from the last chapter. Here, I argue that consulting projects are not only characteristic of the consulting profession and its contexts, but also bring out how consultants make meaning of their day-to-day work. Such projects are indicative of what goes on at work and exhibit a microcosm of opportunities, issues, and challenges that consultants often encounter. During interview conversations with management consultants, consulting projects noticeably came across as synonymous with both past and current work. Apart from referring to the experience of participants in executing consulting projects, I discuss the nuances of delivering projects that they consider vital in understanding the daily 'goings-on' of their professional lives. These micro-activities are recounted by the participants in their project narratives.

It is important to highlight my choice of participant narratives as presented in this chapter. Narrative fragments of one of the participants (Shaun) has been explored in detail, and the reasons for exploring the same are that (a) it presents a progressively developing career narrative, providing a temporal understanding of the participants' lived experience and sensemaking; (b) the narratives stand out as unique examples that confront a conventional understanding of a consultant's working life that involves working on multiple projects both simultaneously and over a period of time; and (c) narratives bring out a 'project' as a site of meaning construction with a web of interrelated actions in day-to-day work. It is imperative to share that, while a large section of the chapter focuses on the life history accounts of Shaun, narratives of other participants have also been included that help in establishing the primacy of project narratives in the sensemaking endeavours of management consultants. The life history account of other participants brim as well with similar project

narratives, giving strength to the argument that consultants locate sense through narratives of consulting projects and utilise them to make meaning of their everyday involvement in advisory work.

As discussed earlier, sensemaking in this thesis is constructed as an inherently social process that is tied to participants' identities, wherein narratives are available as discursive resources to illustrate and locate meaning. Duff and Bell (2002) suggest that people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them, narratives are constantly reconstructed in the light of new events, and they do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and social narratives in the past, present and future. Thus, in this chapter, I will present the participant narratives in detail, highlighting the issues articulated above.

6.2   Projects as a 'Frame' for Consulting Reality

Drawing upon Weick's work on sensemaking, it is pertinent to discuss the concept of 'frames' here. Weick (1995) explains that 'frames' mark the boundaries within which someone can make sense, and they are a way to manage meaning by selecting and highlighting certain facts as well as issues over others (Bean and Hamilton 2006). Weick argues that 'frames enable people to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences in their lives and world' (Worden and Benford, 1986 cited in Weick 1995). I argue that projects provide a 'frame' for consultants to understand, construct, and negotiate meaning in their working lives. The experiences and narratives that consultants share about projects help in appreciating the layers of complexity inherent in their work and bring to light how they locate 'sense' within and through them. Quinn and Worline (2008) propose that, rather than considering 'frames' and narratives separately in isolation, a more integrative perspective is helpful (Cornelissen 2012). They argue that narratives, like frames, are socially negotiated constructs that organise people's thoughts and action, and narratives do so in a temporal sequence. While a 'frame' is a wider construct than a narrative, narratives are particularly valuable here because of their focus on the meaning along with the organisation of action/events plotted across time. In this section, projects are the 'frame' and research participants' stories

about the projects they undertake provide the narratives. It is important to mention that the life history accounts contain various vignettes, and narrative 'fragments' and stories (Brown and Humphreys 2003); the most prominent narratives emerged from the participants' experiences of working on consulting projects, and through them, the sense that they made of their work. In order to take the argument forward, I will outline some of these narratives shared by the research participants. The terms 'narrative' and 'story' have been used interchangeably at places. Certain overlaps in usage may be inescapable. This aspect of stories being a part of and surfacing in the participants life history narratives, and how the two have been differentiated in the thesis has been already identified and discussed in the methodology chapter (refer section 3.3.1). It shall suffice, that I follow a distinction between the two (narrative and story) and take the argument forward by suggesting that, in sharing their life history accounts, research participants construct a narrative of their lives. Some discrete narratives came alive during the course of interviews with research participants discussed here.

As pointed out above, I begin by sharing the account of one participant, Shaun, who narrated the experience of working on a large consulting project that had a lasting impact on his development as a consultant and on his entire working life.

6.2.1 Narrative #1: Becoming a consultant

Shaun had worked for a large management consulting firm in Denmark for more than twenty years. He shared his experiences of a significant consulting project of which he was an integral part; this project informed how his entire working life unfolded and the meanings he traced. He began by sharing a small narrative of how his professional career started before he became part of this career-altering consulting project:

"I am an engineer by education, and I also completed a degree in commercial marketing from Copenhagen Business School. When I finished my engineering studies, I came into the job market for the first time. I had different kinds of opportunities and possibilities. One of the jobs was in a semi-public company, another was an engineering role for a telecom company, and the third was a job in a management consulting firm. When I came to the point of

making a decision, I thought about a job that would give me maximum opportunities and, at that time, I chose the offer from the management consulting firm. The reason was that you can work with different kinds of organisations, big or small, on various projects, so you are not locked in, and when I was young that was the most important thing. I did the same thing when I was doing my engineering; I always took the option that could generate the most opportunities in the future. Therefore, that is the kind of mind-set I had all the time. I joined a very small Danish technical management consulting firm that was offering design and development strategies for manufacturing companies; it was largely a combination of management and technical aspects. At that time, it was a small firm; we were only thirty consultants, and the job included all sorts of activities: technical advice on projects as well as the execution of parts of the project. When you get into the consulting company, you start at the bottom of the pyramid. You do not sell that much and do not manage others; you just attend to specific assigned tasks. To me, it was fine for a couple of years, but I realised it would be interesting to get involved with how to frame and how to sell projects to clients. While working on these projects, I started realising the significance of selling more and more. I then enrolled in and completed a degree in marketing and sales, as I was confident it would be the right combination. I knew the technical stuff, but unless you can sell the project, it is not a perfect combination in consultancy. Everything begins with selling, no matter what. You could be very clever technically, but if you do not get it over the table, it does not matter. I continued to do that until, three years later, a big multinational consulting firm acquired this firm. To me, it was really exciting because before I was largely working on the technical aspects in a Danish consultancy firm, executing projects that did not give me any international opportunities. Now, I could work on projects with clients based outside of Denmark, too."

In the interview, Shaun constructed the role of a management consultant based on a hierarchy of responsibilities that was linked to selling consulting projects. However, to begin with, the variety that project work provided guided him to opt for a consulting role. Subsequently, through his involvement in executing consulting projects and the significance of project work, he recognised the primacy of 'selling' project work to clients; this prompted him to

pursue an academic qualification in marketing and sales in order to stay up on the challenge of selling. Shaun made sense of his decision to obtain an academic degree in sales and marketing with regard to negotiating the hierarchical barriers that were constructed around the ability to sell.

From a sensemaking perspective, environmental events provide cues that offer opportunities for an iterative cycle of interpretation and action to emerge (Weick 1995). Shaun used the cues he developed and the sense he derived from being part of the projects and his subsequent actions. By retrospectively creating a progressively temporal learning narrative, he made sense of his becoming a consultant. Similarly, his emphasis on becoming part of a bigger international project suggests the priority he placed on the projects he aspired to be a part of, including the nature, size, and challenges these projects were likely to present. In the above narrative, as will be evident later, Shaun became a consultant who made sense of the consulting business and acknowledged the significance of project work and selling. He located aspiration and a sense of success in his ability to become a part of and execute projects efficiently.

6.2.2 Narrative #2: Locating sense by crafting a big consulting project

Shaun further shared the story of his career being influenced by working on a big consulting project, an opportunity that he made his own:

"When I became part of the newly constituted organisation after the merger of the small Danish consulting firm and a large multinational consulting firm, I had lots of opportunities to sell projects in the UK and be part of bigger projects. We could leverage skills, resources, and know-how from other countries at that time, particularly from the UK, as it was a big knowledge resource hub of the firm. That was really exciting. This was in the late 1980's and, at that time, I was specifically working on Total Quality Management (TQM); it also got a lot of push from the government, and in the UK, it was a requirement laid down by the UK government for suppliers to have this quality standard; one could not be a supplier unless certified. As consultants, we took it as a framework and sold it as a consultancy project to our clients.

When companies have a requirement that they have to comply with, it becomes easier for consultants to sell; it is not a question of an option or trying other products. There was a quality wave among Danish companies and society, as well as other countries, but, of course, we were still working a lot in the Danish area. The requirements came and knowledge was there in the firm; it was no longer a Danish firm but an international, global firm; we could sell the knowledge we had in the UK, and we could leverage it in Denmark, too, and I built the business. I remember, at that time, the skills around selling this stuff and managing other consultants were within this firm. I could actually leverage it in Denmark, and that was extremely exciting compared to managing my own job and delivering projects to small Danish companies. I built it together with some other people; I built a small business within the firm, a little department with ten people that was growing very fast due to very heavy demand in the market. We had a requirement for this service from Danish Post, the main postal firm in Denmark. I was the manager, and I had built a team of consultants for project (ISO: 9000) implementation. I built on the knowledge we had in the U.S.A, and we developed a project with Danish Post and then found that Danish Post, along with the other Scandinavian countries, actually had a system that they wanted us to build for them similar to one in Denmark, a Nordic system.

The whole idea was very simple; it was to ensure a mail delivery from place A to B, from the place you dropped the mail to the place it was received; today it sounds crazy because, you know, the standard postal mail has almost vanished now, but at that time there was a lot of money in this business. The most important thing I initiated (this is a bit technical, but it was very important for my career) between the postal authorities was the 'terminal dues' that postal agencies paid to each other depending on how much mail went from one country to another. They required us to link it to the quality of the mail service; they did not want to pay the dues unless the quality of delivery was acceptable (until it reached B as per the expectation of A), and it had to be regulated according to overall mail delivery quality. We were the first movers in this area and developed this system for Danish Post, then later for the Scandinavian Postal Administration, and it involved a huge amount of monetary transaction between the postal services. What we were getting as a fee for the project was

peanuts compared to the overall value of these transactions. So, in terms of value, with regard to the fees for the consulting service, it did not matter because they required the system. We were the first mover, and there was no competition; we got the best rates."

In Shaun's narrative, it is clear that the project is the protagonist. He highlighted that it is important to understand the project, including the technical details, in order to understand his working life and what was going on at that stage in his career. Shaun alluded to the quality management push by the federal governments in different countries and how it opened up an area of opportunity for consulting firms, in addition to how he understood this opportunity; by making people work around that, Shaun leveraged resources and skills from throughout the firm in order to carve out a project that could work for everyone involved. As a consultant, he made sense of his ability to locate an opportunity and develop a project he could sell. In making sense of his experience, he placed himself as a key actor within the broader context of his consulting practice and clients. Sims (2003) suggests that people live, move, and have their being marinated in their own stories. The point of departure here is how Shaun accounts for, constructs, and justifies actions using a project storyline. The plot and characters of the narrative remain the project that Shaun invariably reified. Weick (1995) suggests that people see and find sensible those things that they can do something about; capabilities for action affect what is believed, and what is believed as a consequence of action is what makes sense (p.60). Through Shaun's shared account, he was making an effort to make sense of how he constructed the project, and through that, how he made it plausible for himself and for other.

6.2.3   Narrative #3: 'I wanted to be a Partner': Credibility and rationality

Shaun understood the opportunity presented by this project and realised its significance for his career and his career goal of achieving the position of partner in the firm:

"The whole postal project was a big journey for me, one necessary to go through in order to become a partner in that kind of a firm at that time, and I think it's still the same, when it comes to becoming a partner. It was very

important for my career; my goal was to become a partner. In addition, creating this project was huge for me. You need to build a case with a solid and sustainable performance over the years, and normally it would take eight to ten years, where you have to demonstrate personal capability but also develop an area of business. In my case, ummmm (…) the thing around the postal project, I could see that it would be quite interesting because there was a business; it was a speciality, and we were the first movers. At that time, most consultancies in Denmark were local, and this was a very international project. The fantastic thing that happened, I think, was that we built references in Denmark as a result of this project for other Nordic countries. Later, we took it to Brussels in Belgium to an international body that was owned by 21 international postal administrations, including Royal Mail, USPS, Japan Post, and others (…) 80% volume globally was actually between those 21 postal administrations. The issue centred on the fact that terminal dues were massive when compared to the Nordic area. We started the process, and it took us 18 months to build the system, creating and developing an international system we had developed for the Nordic countries. We were the only firm that had done it at that level; although Scandinavia is smaller, we had developed the project at an international level. Therefore, we built that up, and we were, of course, in competition with other firms, but we won the contract and it was huge, the biggest contract by far for any Danish company and for our consulting firm worldwide; clearly, it was the biggest contract ever. The project was very specialised and global; all the top partners in the U.S. /U.K. were excited about this project because it had to integrate 21 offices and teams globally. It was good business; we were the first mover, and the whole pricing (…) we could command. This was the project that could harmonise and integrate the entire firm. People said, 'Wow!' and asked, 'Who is responsible for this?' I was the one who was responsible for this."

The narrative fragment shared above throws light on the 'social positioning' Shaun aspired to and tried to achieve through this project. Whittle, Mueller and Mangan (2009) highlight the significance of a narrative perspective for understanding 'work', which they recognise as a central aspect in organisations. Moreover, 'work' can be understood both by understanding what people do as well as who they 'are'. The narrative here brings out the lived

experience of Shaun and how, through the project narrative, it was made meaningful by him, including constructing an 'identity' that was closely embedded in the project he had developed. Brown (2015) points to an understanding of 'identity' that refers to the meanings individuals reflexively attach to themselves and that are developed and sustained through processes of social interaction as they seek to address the question, "Who am I?"; these meanings are described as derived from available discourses, taking the form of narratives (Giddens 1991). Shaun liked being identified as the project leader who had orchestrated the entire assignment. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) argue that, in constructing the work, individuals construct their own identities. Not only was Shaun's identity tied to this project but it was also linked to his aspiration of being elevated to the position of 'partner' in the firm. As Weick (1995) suggests, sensemaking is self-referential and the self may be the text in need of interpretation. It is noteworthy here that Shaun is alluding to two distinct identities; in this sense, as Brown (2015) suggests, identity does not (necessarily) signal a stable core self; rather, identities are ad hoc and positional. The 'identity' of a creator/leader of a consulting project may only be transitory, mirroring the characteristics of the project.

At this stage in the conversation, prompted by Shaun, I asked whether he believed that he struck a gold mine (a rare opportunity).

"Yes, absolutely a gold mine. After we won the contract, it took me a year to become a partner. The project was spot on in terms of what the firm wanted and spot on in terms of what the client needed; it was also spot on in terms of building and integrating a lot of people/teams. For me, it was amazing. As you can imagine, we realised a contract that was not normal in consultancy; it was a contract spread out over a period of five years. We started with the development work, and it was run nearly like an annual programme. Imagine, even the audit folks understood what we were doing; all the other stuff we did in consulting, they did not understand. They thought consulting was very fluffy compared to putting together an annual report replete with numbers. This was very different; it was about quality, and the stamp of approval came through big global consulting, so they understood what the project was; that made it much easier for me."

Shaun's narrative here is a narrative of success, i.e. a narrative of identifying an opportunity and taking action for creating success for the firm while being aware of how it would serve his interest of personal aspiration. A single project integrated different functions within the consulting firm, generated revenue for the practice, and propelled Shaun's career upwards. It is not hard to understand that, during the interview, Shaun focused excessively on the story of this project, which gave him access to understanding his work and his own identity, as well as his aspiration. As much as he conceded the significance of his work for the organisation, external recognition (from the audit function of the firm) helped in legitimising the sense he made of his work. Analysing the shared narrative above, it can be argued that the 'credibility' that consulting projects and their success provides to a consultant is not only a distinctive feature of consulting work but also enables more specificity in understanding how it influences identity construction and re-construction (Karreman and Alvesson 2001) in consultants' process of making sense. Shaun draws attention to the ambiguous nature of consulting work that members in other departments also showed limited understanding of – the fundamental tenets of a credible consulting project such as long-term engagement with clients, repetitive (year on year) engagement, and the ability to charge a high fee (usually uncharacteristic). Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) argue that " we may create some sort of sense – no matter how transient – from differing and disparate narrations if we can find justifications (narrative rationality)" (p.69). Shaun creates narrative rationality by describing, explaining, and acting to construct a large successful project.

The narrative of a successful project helped Shaun to engage other stakeholders within the firm, allowing him to secure credibility and construct an impression for himself and for others, enacting an identity in the process. By sharing his aspiration to become a partner, he provides a narrative coherence: 'how does he fit into the story of this project?' I realised that, at the start of his narrative, he was focusing on one 'project narrative'. He revealed that this was the only project he had executed, starting as a junior consultant and eventually becoming a 'partner'; this is quite rare in the consulting environment, and it challenged his own assumptions (see Section 6.2.1) about the role of consulting providing opportunities to work on multiple projects, in addition to

being the reason why he chose a consulting career. In becoming a consultant, aspiring to be a partner, and then achieving this goal, Shaun gained a sense of narrative closure, a 'sense' of finality (Carroll 2007), a way of completion by reaching the highest level in the consulting hierarchy and successfully crafting a large consulting project.

In the following narrative, I explore the experience of another research participant, Dave, who worked with a large global consulting firm. He shared an unpleasant project experience, where disagreements surfaced primarily on issues related to project execution, effort, and consulting fees.

6.2.4 Narrative #4: Locating 'trust': Managing client disagreement in projects

In this narrative fragment, one of the research participants shared a specific incident that involved a conflict between the client and the consultant. The client disputed the time and effort put in by the consulting team while working on the project. Dave described this situation:

"Clients often say that consultants are expensive and sometimes they do not tell us what really works; they just show us good plans, but when it comes to the implementation there are many challenges. I would say that I have heard a lot of this from many clients, but not from the clients that I have been serving because it is not the way I would like to be treated if I was on the other side. I do not work in a manner where only junior people work and the partner does not show up. I am not too close to the production line. Of course, on many of the key projects, I would need young people to do most of the work, but I stay close; I very much interact with my team, and I am more willing to call them my colleagues when they are on the assignments; also, they can sense what the client is saying and can understand when he is not satisfied because they are the ones who are out there (…) I cannot be everywhere all the time. Nevertheless, we have been very close to the client, also (…) very open dialogue with the client, and we acknowledge that we also make mistakes. In a big project, it is very difficult for everything to go in one line with no points of disagreement, but we are open; we have informal meetings and also say how we can get things to work. It is not something that I have experienced much, but I have been in projects where things did not run as per the plan, and we

had fights with the client over the consulting fee. In one instance, while working on a project for a Swedish firm, I remember we were sitting in front of the client that I believe didn't know or understand how to handle a consultant, even though we had solid proof in the form of an engagement letter. As a project team, we did exactly as described in the engagement letter; we knew what we were doing and how we were recording, how we were reporting our time, how we were scoring points etc., and how we were getting our hours billed. The client's managers were unaware; still, at that time we told the client that we would make it quick and finish the project. However, it was a very bad experience, although I was very experienced, along with my senior partner on this project, and I believed that I knew how to deal with clients.

Their CEO asked me, 'Dave, can you help us fix the problem and how much will it cost us now? We believe that this should be within the frame we discussed and defined earlier, and you can report weekly and state how many hours you have already spent. We always had the understanding that you are very intimately involved in the project. You can say no, I do not want to do this anymore. We trust you.'

Being very close to the client, in the end I had to allocate resources to other parts of the project as well as resolve billing matters. I would say that, as a consultant, you get to assess big projects and you have to reach a point where you understand what is going on here. Although not very often, things go back right on track."

Dave discussed some of his conceptions about the client work and potential conflicts that emerged. Although he had not witnessed many such issues, he dwelt on a particularly difficult project experience where the clients challenged the work completed by him and his team, disputing the hours billed and the indicated fees. There was a reference made to negative conceptions that he believed exists about consultants, that some clients have shared with him, making him spell out his own approach while working with clients. He recalled a project that brought about disagreement with the client and its resolution. In this narrative fragment, as a consultant, Dave identified the client's a) inability to work with consultants, b) lack of understanding of the documented process, and c) inability to notice how the project timelines and

deliverables were being recorded and accounted for. The narrative highlights some of the above-mentioned deficiencies on the part of the client; however, Dave did not share any possible discrepancies on the part of the consulting team. He utilised this incident to make sense and remind himself of what actions he ought to take as a senior consultant in managing big projects. There was caution when he explained that not all such conflicts may get resolved. It has been argued that the first question of sensemaking is, "What's going on here?", with the second focussing on, "What do I do next?" (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005, p.412). Dave highlighted 'what's going on?' and 'what's done thereafter?' and made a subtle argument for staying close to the situation, the project, and the client, which the clients reciprocated by referring to 'trust'. He assumed the 'identity' of an arbitrator, albeit in an informal manner, as an incentive for staying involved and earning trust. The incident made him acknowledge that such conflicts may not always be resolved; however, making sense is an attentional process, in particular to that which has occurred (Weick 1995). Recalling the events in hindsight allowed Dave to be aware of the issues at that moment, rather than in the midst of living the experiences (Bute and Jensen 2011). In addition, through this narrative, communication with the client emerged as an important aspect in the process of making sense (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005); any individual sensemaking may have little influence in such situations of conflict.

6.3   Conclusion and implications

In conclusion, I argue that sensemaking for management consultants is embedded in the 'frame' that consulting projects provide, and the narratives of these projects provide the raw material for sensemaking through available cues. Project narratives here act as an 'organising tool which allows certain elements of the past, present and future to emerge and others to wither away (perhaps only to be brought forth in future sensemaking processes)' (Degn 2018, p.307). The project stories/narratives provide an insightful source of understanding of consultants' sensemaking; they provide a window into understanding the nuances of their work as well as iterative cycles of action and interpretation. A critical understanding of project narratives provides a

window into the beliefs, actions and understanding of consultants' sensemaking that is missing in the extant literature (Espedal 2008). The narrative examples discussed in this chapter highlight that management consultants make sense of their everyday engagement within consulting projects through narrative presentations, and these narratives may not be detailed and well-structured, with well-developed plot lines; rather, they emerge in fragments.

The focus on micro-activities in the day-to-day advisory work highlighted the challenges to the signifiers of 'elite status' for both consultants and the firms. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) highlight that the conception of elite means a construction of self and the organisation as clearly superior to other organisations and a consequent recognition by clients. These signifiers are not pronounced in the narrative that participants shared here. My inquiry into the narratives shared by participants here reveal that the 'elite' imagery and rhetoric propagated by consulting firms is not reflected in the day-to-day experience of incumbent consultants. Reflecting on Shaun's narrative, it emerges that distinctive characteristics highlighted by elite consulting firms such as hiring exceptionally qualified staff, superior learning and development opportunities and variety in work assignments through engagement on multiple projects (Kitay and Wright 2007; Skovgaard Smith 2013; Alvesson and Robertson 2006) were mostly rhetorical. A one-project career, personal initiative to engage in relevant business education and getting first-mover advantage in a work project shaped the 'lived meaning' of being a consultant (Van Manen 2016), quite distinct from the taken-for-granted assumptions about work and career in a 'elite' consulting firm. Similarly, in the event of disagreement on project requirements, clients disputed the approach consultants used, challenging their expertise and seeking intervention from senior advisors, notwithstanding their 'elite' status as a big global consulting firm. This highlights that working in an elite consulting firm does not ensure fulfilment of the 'elite' signifiers that they may claim. Consultants' sensemaking of their working lives are informed by the reality of their day-to-day experience of working in projects and the frame these developing narratives afford.

It is evident that by dwelling on routine and mundane aspects of consultants' work, important sensemaking cues emerge about how narratives

of everyday experience bring out nuances of their practice. These narratives assist in foregrounding the issues that consultants' experience that may not subscribe to the organisationally reified narratives about their practice and status as a consultant.

Chapter 7 Making Sense: Using Metaphors as a Discursive Resource

7.1   Introduction

This chapter continues the discussion of the sensemaking processes of management consultants as discussed in the last two findings chapters. The sensemaking process elaborated here is informed by the discussion centred on the visuals[15] shared by research participants. As part of the life history interviews, these visuals complemented the interview conversations. Meyer *et al.* (2013) argue that incorporating the visual approach in organisational research contributes to a better understanding of how actors make sense and organise knowledge. During fieldwork, participants were encouraged to engage actively in exploring their lived experiences and share an image that resonates with them in the process of the life history interviews.

The process of participants' involvement in the research and their sharing of visuals have already been elaborated upon in the research methodology chapter (see Section 3.6.2). It is important to highlight the reasons for selecting the images/drawing that I elaborate upon in this chapter. The process of selecting the images for analysis required detailed reading of the interview transcripts and accompanying visuals. Not every participant was forthcoming in sharing the visuals, while some others were unable to engage in a dialogue about their visual, creating conflict between interview talk and visuals. Thus, based on a careful review of all the transcripts and images, I selected four participant images for discussion and presentation as part of the findings. The reasons for this selection are (a) a clear enunciation of the choice of the visuals shared by the participant, (b) an intimate engagement with the visual and reflective dialogue accompanying their selection and (c) a discernible connection between the interview talk and their image. So, the

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[15] The terms *visuals, image/s* and *photographs* have been used interchangeably in the text, referring to the photograph/s participants shared as part of the life history interview conversation.

visuals I present here are accompanied by well-developed participant narratives, based on careful selection by participants themselves as well as seeped in their reflections. Although each visual is unique, they share some commonalties, such as they (a) present a wider realm of consulting work, (b) are thoughtful and reflective and (c) seek metaphorical connection between self and practice. These qualities not only bring out the consultants' preferences in imagining their practice, but resonate with conversations and reflection of most research participants. As mentioned in the methodology chapter (see section 3.6.2), I depend on the interpretations that research participants made while sharing the visuals, on my understanding of these conversations with participants, and on how the visuals illuminated the discussion on their working lives. The 'sense' that this analysis brings here is a combination of participants' talk, their interpretations of the visuals, and, to some extent, my intervention in selecting and interpreting visuals and talk.

The visuals shared by participants brought out their individual reflections on work and self, allowing them make sense of their consulting practice. The simultaneous juxtaposition of the interview and the visual revealed the use of metaphors by research participants as a discursive sensemaking resource. In using metaphors, participants unlocked important dimensions of their consulting work. This 'generative potential' (Alvesson 1993b; Tietze, Cohen and Musson 2003) of metaphors allowed them to verbalise meaning and, at same time, contest taken-for-granted meanings. It is important to highlight that, although I use concepts like 'metaphors' and 'visual metaphors' in this chapter, I am not carrying out a metaphor analysis by following a specific analytical convention for the same, such as a five-step prescriptive method by Steen (1999) or a critical approach to metaphor analysis as per Charteris-Black (2004). Instead, the focus here is on how metaphors are embedded in the way participants shared their life histories. The approach to analysis is discussed in the methodology section (see Section 3.6.2).

This chapter is organised as follows. At the outset, I elaborate upon the use of visuals in organisational research, which includes a brief discussion on sensemaking from a wider 'sensory' perspective, specifically the 'seen', the visual. Then, I attend to the conversations with participants to understand the

'sense' that these visuals (shared) conveyed to them. Subsequently, the findings are discussed, based on both talk and visual/s, wherein metaphors assist in locating meaning. These metaphors emerge from an iterative cycle of 'seeing' the visuals participants shared, interpreting the meaning that they associated with them and allowing access to a context-specific understanding of the visuals and entwined metaphors. Finally, the insights drawn here convey the 'sense' participants make along with conventional meanings about consulting that are contested. Table 7-2 illustrates the metaphors and the sense they convey, highlighting the implications for consulting work.

7.2   Exploring the Visual Dimension and 'Visual' Sensemaking

While I have discussed about the use of photo-elicitation in the methodology section, in this section I make a larger point about the visuals in the context of sensemaking and metaphors. The visual mode of meaning construction has remained largely underdeveloped; however, it is gradually gaining wider acceptance (Meyer *et al.* 2013). While a number of academic disciplines follow the 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1992), attention is also shifting towards the visual dimension of social life, bringing the 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1994) and providing a wider choice in qualitative research (Warren 2005). For instance, Ray and Smith (2011) suggests that visual research[16] approaches in sociology have been utilised to explore different phenomena from traits and behaviour to social identity (Harper 1998), social class organisation (Steiger 1995) and family structure (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). In the management and organisation studies domain, there are growing examples of visual material-based research (Warren 2005), in consumer behaviour research, marketing/advertising (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008; Schroeder and Zwick 2004), and even in accounting (Davison 2002; Preston and Young 2000; Quattrone 2009; Warren, Davison and Davison 2009). As mentioned earlier, in this

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[16] The terms *visual research, visual methodology* and *visual studies* have been used interchangeably to refer to a range of broadly connected as well as diverse research practices that have some relationship with the visual presence of the world around.

research, photographs/images generated by participants during the process of interaction form the basis of visual inquiry. Visual approaches complement traditional qualitative research (Petermans, Kent and Van Cleempoel 2014), presenting many advantages, including opportunities for research participants to "express their subjectivities as – quite literally – their view of the world" (Warren 2005, p.865). In this research, photo-elicitation (Harper 2002) by participants assisted in developing an understanding of the lives of consultants working in the midst of complex organisational settings and client expectations.

I now turn to the theoretical perspective of sensemaking that runs through the thesis (see Chapter 4), exploring its wider dimensions that include the visual. Sensemaking has been regarded predominantly as a cognitive and intellectual process (Bingham and Kahl 2013; Fiss and Zajac 2006; Maitlis and Christianson 2014) that involves textual, conversational and narrative processes (Brown 2000). Also, s*ensemaking is considered to be constituted and revealed in the written and spoken descriptions of the world, with "sense" occurring when individuals act (Brown 2000).* However, to make sense is to know how to see in a meaningful way, and, when confronted with the task of making sense of an intricate issue, individuals often take recourse to a visual metaphor: "Oh, I see", which usually means "I understand" (Russell 2003). It conveys the idea that an initial process of making sense is often related to invoking a visual perception, and to "know how to see" issues in a coherent and understandable way is usually conveyed through expressions like "fitting into the picture" or "falling into place" (pp.1-2).

More recently, the sensemaking perspective has been expanded by drawing upon the work of phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, who have broadened the understanding of 'sense' and also provided alternative perspectives on 'sensemaking' by focusing on the interpretive as well as the embodied nature of sensemaking (Belova 2006; Cunliffe and Coupland 2012; Holt and Cornelissen 2014). Here, it is pertinent to discuss Belova's use of the phenomenological perspective as presented by Merleau-Ponty, where the objective and static nature of the 'visual' or 'seen' has been challenged (Belova 2006). As human beings, our visual contact with the world is "a lived-out, not a thought-out experience" (ibid.97). Brekhus (1998,

p.36) notes that "people's every day, practical, routine and mundane work aspects have all too often been left unmarked, unaccented, and taken for granted in the pursuit of more abstract, theoretical generalisations about social life." This everyday work, mundane aspects and routine "usually require a combination of complex sensory practices, and such sensory activity constitutes the phenomenological ground of doing work" (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009, p.7). Similarly, Cunliffe and Coupland (2012), by using the hermeneutic phenomenology and attending to Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, draws attention to the "feeling body" and its indivisibility from ourselves. The emphasis is on invoking all "sense perception" to sense meanings, "to sense through sight, sound and touch" (p.69).

It is important to elaborate that sensemaking here is understood as holistic (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015), where both visuals and narratives that come along with it are considered to 'sense' meaning; they are not assumed as separate from one another: rather, they complement and extend the possibilities of sensemaking in an 'actively responsive' way. Taking this understanding forward, the images shared by research participants are not treated as 'objects' of intellectual inquiry; instead, these visuals provide access to a much deeper understanding that arises and appeals to all senses. In addition, this prompts the question "Is it appropriate to use the terminologies like 'visual' sensemaking or embodied sensemaking?" While I raise this question, I am conscious that these terminologies are used in the service of making 'sensemaking' understood as inherently incorporating the presence of all senses and 'whole' being. Here, the visuals shared by participants are used along with the narrative—the talk—and none is privileged over the other. The visuals help participants make connections and visualise their working lives from a wider perspective that helps in understanding their process of making sense.

In the next section, I discuss the third process of consultants' sensemaking. The interpretive insights elaborated here are informed by presenting the participant-generated images.

7.3   Interpretive Sightings

All art is unstable. Its meaning is not necessarily that implied by the author. There is no authoritative voice. There are only multiple readings. – David Bowie

During the interview conversation that focused on visuals, contextual and personal perspectives on participants' working lives emerged as they shared their reflections; on some occasions, the conversation opened them up to reflect in the moment, and some new questions emerged for participants worthy of further personal inquiry. In this section, I discuss the metaphors that emerged as part of these specific conversations that centred on the visuals. Lakoff and Johnson (2008) observed that a metaphor is a way of seeing a thing as if it were something else, thereby creating a bridge between two dissimilar realms. So, metaphors simply mean that the terms that "originally apply to one domain are projected onto another domain in order to structure experience in a meaningful and new way" (Küpers 2013, p.496). A very convincing demonstration of metaphors' usefulness in making sense of organisational life is provided by Morgan (1986) in his book 'Images of Organization'. Later, Inkson (2004); Inkson, Dries and Arnold (2014) extended the work on how individuals make sense and conceptualise careers (El-Sawad 2005). I utilise the concept of metaphors as articulated by Merleau-Ponty (Gill 1991; Merleau-Ponty 1962), rejecting the cognitive conceptions and treating metaphors as 'genuine expression of lived experiences' (Küpers 2013). Similarly, Cunliffe (2002) conceptualises metaphors as 'implicit modes of speaking/writing that discursively shape meaning and experience in often tacit ways' rather than as conceptual frameworks for viewing the world.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the interview conversations, specifically with four research participants who engaged in an in-depth dialogue using their images. In these conversations, four visuals were shared, and, based on the description and interpretation of the visuals, metaphors became evident.

Metaphor	Emerging Sense	Visual
Water	Rhythm, Flow, Fluidity and naturalness in practice	Visual 1 - Sketch depicting work and life leitmotifs
Project	Work concepts occupying private lives, Attributes of work project pervade all life spheres	Visual 2 – A family photograph
Rice Field	Interconnectedness of work, Togetherness, Experience of 'wholeness', Relationships, Patterns	Visual 3 - Photograph of Bali rice fields
Evening Sky	Opportunity, Passion, Within work boundaries	Visual 4 - Photograph from office window

Table 7-1: Metaphors shared by participants based on visuals

Source: Based on analysis of the interview and visual data.

These metaphors resonate with as well as exemplify issues emerging for participants in their consulting work[17]. They are intricately linked to the participants' lived experiences and consulting context. Importantly, participants rely on *metaphors* to illustrate and make sense of the visuals and, through them, their experiences. Finally, these metaphors are accompanied by an emerging sense that illustrates the reflective experience of research participants informed by actively engaging with and using images in sharing their life histories. Table 7-1 above depicts the metaphors emerging in the conversations along with the sense they conveyed for participants.

In the following section, I present the metaphors that centre on the visuals used by research participants to share insights and discuss their lived experiences.

7.3.1 Metaphor # 1 Water

During the interview conversation, one of the participants, Emily, shared how she related to her work as a consultant. She expressed that a very important link for her in work is 'water', and she clarified that, instead of

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[17] I use select visuals and participant conversations for discussion here. The 'sense' conveyed through these visuals and metaphors associated therewith resonate with other participants. References are made wherever appropriate.

bringing a photograph of water, she chose to draw a visual starting with a sketch of a yacht in water, bringing together other important leitmotifs (sketched) for her life (see Figure 7-1). Emily works as a consultant in a mid-sized consulting firm in the UK, working in the change management practice. She explained that the narrative of her life as a consultant is painted by the rhythm and fluidity that she experiences every day in her work. Pointing to the yacht on the visual, she explained:

> for me, water is a hugely powerful metaphor in my work in so many different ways, one in terms of responding in the moment if I am sailing, and then the different way in which water works and interacts with what surrounds it. So, water can flow very slowly, very deeply or very steadily which sometimes reflects the way I work with my clients. Sometimes, I am slowing everything down, I am encouraging my clients to pause, and look more deeply. You know, water is a great medium for reflection and actually physically reflecting back and holding a mirror up to individuals or to a collective around. Let's just see what's actually going on and then water can carve through, over a period of time, rock (Emily).

Through her visual of a yacht in the water, Emily emphasised that, for her, finding a way of working with clients metaphorically relates to the "flow of water", highlighting the difference she brings to her practice of being aware of conscious actions she takes in the moment. The "flow of water" relates to her responsiveness in the moment, as she interacts with the clients. She explained that the flow of water and the form water takes are hugely reflective of the environment and the context that helps her make sense of what actions/response may be appropriate. She pays attention to the "flow of water" that conveys her malleability in making the required intervention with and through the clients, prompting a deeper engagement with them.

Related to that, another sense that she drew from the metaphor of water is by relating "water as a mirror", allowing clients to assess and reflect and to see themselves from a different perspective. Connecting her work with the metaphor of water and its flow allowed her to take a reflective stance in her practice and notice the 'fluidity' in her work along with the challenges it brings.

She elaborated further on the metaphor of water:

> in my work and in life, there is this nature of fluidity which runs through my work and if I look back at the patterns of my life then

there are those periods of intensity where the considerable number of hours I am working, the kind of intense work I am doing and then there is a period of breath, of stepping back, of relaxing, of really taking care of myself before I move into the next cycle of intensity. When I look back over pretty much everything I have done and this was one of the powerful reflections; noticing those patterns and cycles through different part of life and my career as a consultant (Emily).

Water relates to a sense of motion and change; it connects with fluidity in consulting work. It also informs a larger understanding of life patterns and career cycles for Emily.

Figure 7-1: Work and life leitmotifs in the visual created by Emily.

Fluidity may convey several meanings. Here it conveys the experience of a flowing, variable and non-static nature of consulting work; it brings out the entangled nature of work and life situations that she experiences. Most importantly, Emily shared her experience of noticing 'fluidity' while working with clients, as she reflected on her own approach to consulting.

In the consulting context, the 'performative ideal' (i.e. achieving maximum performance, meeting unrealistic expectations and stretching beyond

limit) is endorsed by both consultants and clients; it calls for embracing fluidity, complexity and instability (O'Mahoney 2007) that arise as a result of the fleeting nature of consulting assignments and the expectations from consultants to perform in spite of changing client priorities. This aspect is discussed in the literature review highlighting the contextual issues in management consulting. Emily's description also highlights the way in which she engages in a reflective conversation with clients, allowing them to notice issues emerging in the background. There are subtle references to a deeper awareness of herself and her responsibility within the context and the nature of the consulting environment, articulated in the form of either stillness or a swift flow of water. The fluidity of this environment invites a response and a different way of interacting with clients, encouraging them to reflect. It comes across as flowing in the moment in terms of the demands of relationships rather than the substantive technical expertise underpinning her consulting approach. By using the metaphor of water, Emily is connecting the need when skippering yachts in negotiating the flow of water, with her work as a consultant that focuses on helping clients navigate difficult organisational issues. Additionally, it challenges the idea that 'consultants help clients reduce uncertainty by translating uncertain situations into a clear and manageable situation' (Sturdy, Werr and Buono 2009). In contrast to this understanding of the role of management consultants, Emily is asking questions, challenging meanings and encouraging clients to slow down and hold on to the uncertainties they are experiencing.

Similarly, Emily brought out key issues intertwined with 'self', work and family; she acknowledged the symbiotic nature of her work and private life in the visual she shared. She put herself at the centre of the image; upon being asked, she explained that 'self' is central to her work and determines how her consulting work takes shape. She elaborated that finding a voice at work and in her relationships holds profound meaning for her and is one of her foundational principles:

> my work happens through me. I am in it rather than being separate
> from it. So you know, if I put myself into the frame (while pointing to
> the frame and stick image she drew to depict herself) then you know
> my work and my life is around it (Emily).

There are important issues that Emily brings out through this visual making sense of her experiences. She engaged personally and passionately with her image (that she preferred to draw), and it is evident that it allowed her to narrate her experiences in an artistic manner, interweaving various strands of her lived experience. Through this visual, she brought diverse episodes, people and experiences to life, none of which means much on its own, as they all intertwine and relate to each other. By putting together all the named organisations, such as The Body Shop, NTL and Raleigh International, depicted on the right-hand corner of the visual frame that she associated with during the course of her working life, she interlinked each of them indirectly yet significantly, influencing the experiences shared in the whole image and the narrative interpretation. By creating and drawing on the visual, Emily reflected upon and verbalised her experiences and knowledge, in the process sharing detailed, more comprehensive responses, as this visual provided her space for self-reflection and the subjective positioning of her experiences (Scarles 2010). To recapitulate, Emily makes sense of her working life by exploring the nature of the fluidity she experiences in various facets of her consulting work. One of the main things that struck me was the versatility of the metaphor. Emily discusses multiple uses and meanings. Sometimes she uses the metaphor of 'water' to make sense of herself in relation to work and sometimes to make sense of herself in relation to clients. There is a lot going on here in this conversation and probably difficult to unpeel multiple layers that are evident.

A second metaphor shared by another research participant provides the opportunity to explore a different set of metaphors and sensemaking, as I consider in the next section.

7.3.2 Metaphor # 2 Project

Dave interprets work and home events in a manner in that every important assignment at work is accompanied by an equally significant development at home. He works in a mid-sized strategy-consulting firm in the Strategy (Finance Design) practice. During the conversation, he shared an image of a dinner at home with family members (see Figure **7-2**); he specified that this is how he likes to come home to a dinner together and raised the issue about his work that allows him and his family to usually come together in the

evening. He specified that, "Home and work appear similar to me, just as I have 'projects' at work I have some project going at home too".

Figure 7-2: A family photograph at dinnertime.[18]

Dave spoke about a strange coincidence that he notices between unexpected events at work and simultaneously at home. He described how his work involvement was increasing (at the time of interview) due to a planned expansion in a client's business, referring to that expansion in his work as a "big growth project". His description got confusing when he simultaneously talked about another project – a "big home project". Subsequently, he clarified that this was about his simultaneous involvement at home. He chose to refer to building a summerhouse as a key project he was involved with at home. He acknowledged that he visualises all home-related tasks as work projects and

[18] This photograph is reproduced with prior participant consent.

tries to manage them as he would manage consulting projects at work. He elaborates on this further:

> having a new house or a new kid is like a new project at work, it all means that you have a lot of things to do. (Laughs) Invariably, when I am doing some manual work for my home, I get some of the best ideas and solutions regarding my work (Dave).

Dave connected important projects at work with urgent personal assignments at home and was able to see a close relationship between the two where one invariably leads to the other. In addition, he acknowledged how working on household tasks triggers cues for work-related assignments. Remarkably, he drew a similarity between a new work project and his newly born baby a few years ago, suggesting their impact as being similar.

Additionally, he constructed an unusual connection between a burst of activity at work and a similar intensification of activities at home as well:

> very often in my professional life I experience when new things are going on, I can always be sure that something unexpected shows up that I have to take care of at home... If I am planning to go out on vacation or maybe I have to take some extra training or boot camp ... I can be sure that just before that particular training starts, there comes a new assignment that I have to take care of and so on (Dave).

The consulting work centres around varied assignments, and consultants are involved in ensuring the successful completion of projects, which provides success in their role and career as a consultant. As discussed earlier, working and private lives intertwine, such that finding points of separation between the two may be perplexing.

During the discussion, he emphasised that "as a household we need to be very good at planning, to help me manage my consulting projects". He focuses on flexibility, specifically negotiating work and non-work time in order to attend to priorities in different spheres of life that are intertwined. He argued that the notion of flexibility is misunderstood in consulting. Consulting work requires long hours; at the same time, prioritising work means negotiating time with the clients and between projects (Meriläinen *et al.* 2004). The sense of flexibility moves beyond the issue of establishing a temporal balance at work; it is more about managing consulting projects while continuing to attend to

emergent personal priorities, essentially a work–nonwork balance (Inkson, Dries and Arnold 2014). He specified further that "altering work and home routine requires planning, prioritising and negotiating with each one of them (pointing to family members in the photograph)". The subjective nature of the work-nonwork balance and the experiences of conflict and balance are not fixed, but 'fluctuate as result of changing circumstances and coping strategies' (Wattis, Standing and Yerkes 2013).

Noticeably, planning, prioritisation and negotiation are foundational issues in managing a consulting work (Kipping and Clark 2012a). The acceptance of consulting's unique work context, wherein a consultant one needs to make sense and construct 'flexibility' as suited to the consulting firm and the clients, underlines his focus. Here, three significant issues arose from the conversation with Dave regarding his experiences as a consultant. Firstly, work's primacy for him requires negotiating with family and moulding life at home around his work engagements. Secondly, it hints at the construction of an identity of an 'ideal employee' (Reid 2015), such that he is fully committed to and totally available for work, where other non-work commitments are unlikely to limit this devotion. As highlighted above, he tries to negotiate his availability with family members to be available for work as much as possible. Thirdly, the devotion to work may make visible a way of enacting and signalling a privileged status (Williams 2010). By referring to the extreme demands of the work, he may be attempting to establish "how important they are—and possibly how virtuous, given how very, very hard they work" (p.28).

During my conversation with Dave, I realised that he was trying to convince me and possibly himself that negotiating balance in his work and life is probably a non-issue. Yet, he gave it away by arguing, "I have to wake up at five in the morning to review a report that has to be delivered the same day, but I have also been able to take a summer vacation for a few weeks for the last five years".

As shared earlier, working and private lives intertwine; for Dave, finding points of separation between the two was quite unfruitful. A new consulting project or having a new baby both conveyed a sense of activity and tasks to manage that require common skills of planning, prioritisation and negotiation.

Dave is applying norms of work behaviour on his family life too, he is painting a pastiche of what is important to him (his family at home) whilst his spoken words are reinforcing the centrality of work in his life to the extent that 'managerialist' language infuses his life beyond work too.

In the following section, the emphasis is on discussing another metaphor presenting a divergent view that engages with a wider dimension of connection and relationship between consulting projects and practice.

7.3.3   Metaphor # 3 Rice Field

In this section, I share the image and narrative presented by Leon who works in a senior advisory role for a large management consulting firm. Leon started the conversation about his life history by reflecting on where he finds himself now in his life and his consulting work. He is approaching the end of a long and active professional career and this makes him think about the future. He is experiencing a sense of potential future freedom, and he sees his personal background and life experiences informing his choices about the future. Leon articulated that the red thread that connects the experiences of his working life is his desire to constantly "continue" to explore.

Leon used a photograph to talk about his consulting work, and the connection he finds between his practice and the vast open 'rice fields' in Bali. He used the image to talk about the separateness and togetherness of various projects he led and the interconnections. He experienced: "When I reflect back I find that learning and exploration was a very strong driver in what I have been doing all the way and the patterns I find".

Figure 7-3: Thinking about work and making wider connections

Along with the photograph, Leon wrote down his thoughts as they emerged when he engaged in the visual inquiry and reflections. Therefore, the visual comes with his own perspective articulated in a short paragraph, which is followed by conversation on how and why he finds this image calling him:

> Bali rice fields spaces of intensity, in which to grow and create. Enhancing sustainable processes linking nature and culture. The life of each field or platform is unique but they are all connected. The approach matured by experiences: I shall treat the soil gentle hoping it shall embrace me, when I die. The actions – always look for the verbs: Investigating and supporting, what has already started. To spot and to form patterns at all levels. Respectfully relating to, and co-creating with. The man in the person, the core of life in the context and the shared yearning for important knowledge. Together exploring potentials – creating results (Leon).

As evident from the image and his brief write-up, Leon engaged in a deep reflection about his own personal choices and professional self and, in the process, located links to his context. Moreover, in reflecting about his personal and work context, he questioned what drives him personally and what patterns emerge in his professional life. Leon depicted his experiences and reflections

on his work through this image (see Figure **7-3**). He associated his consulting practice with the visual metaphor of a 'rice field':

> when you asked me to share an image, this is the visual [19] I was drawn towards. Just as vast rice field encloses small interconnected farms with bunds, my work embodies various projects; and these projects have boundaries that are interconnected in a pattern just as depicted in this paddy field (Leon).

Through this image, he tries to see his work in a wider context where consulting assignments appear as distinct pieces of work at the outset, but they are invariably connected in a pattern. He elaborated further that, as a consultant, he finds there are potential opportunities to disrupt the boundaries existing in practice and habitual patterns of relating. This draws attention towards the sense Leon makes of his approach to consulting practice, as he seeks to uncover shared patterns across the myriad disciplines of consultancy work:

> to me in this firm which is engineering-focused, we have a science-based approach from the engineers, and the social science approach from the management. To add to that there are philosophical, dialogical, pedagogical, psychological, ethnological approaches from some of our other consultants around. Therefore, the mingling of these all I think is the key issue. What is important to me within these areas is what is happening between these areas and that is where I strive to 'be' – noticing patterns (Leon).

Leon does not refer to any specific approach towards consulting that he prefers, and, in adopting this stance, there is striking resonance with the approach of Nevis. Nevis (2013) offers an interesting distinction between two consulting approaches: "the Sherlock Holmes approach, i.e., the ability to take limited data, add analytical reasoning, and quickly form a workable hypothesis that he contrasts with the Columbo approach, i.e., faltering and stumbling through, soaking up information like a sponge until the pieces form a pattern" (pp.108-110). The image shared by Leon brings attention to the patterns of the

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[19] A photograph shared by my ever-inspiring and challenging colleague, from Skovshoved, Copenhagen.

interconnection between consulting projects and praxis. It opens up to the boundaries of the projects and connects to the expanse of consulting work. The mosaic of different projects with their boundaries signify both their "separateness" and "togetherness"; it relates to formation of a 'Gestalt' (Nevis 2013), a process through which we see the whole first and then break it into parts, where the whole is more than the sum of parts.

The conversation with Leon in the moment helped both of us notice more connections. Here, I share the brief excerpts from the interview conversation that brings out the connections for both of us drawing links to Gregory Bateson[20]:

Leon: I look at this image and find connections.

Me: This reminds me of the phrase "noticing patterns that connect" – probably Gregory Bateson's words; he held that we live in a world that is only made of relationships.

Leon: It is a very kind remark. Thank you for bringing this up, and for giving me the option of reflecting and expressing vague strings of thoughts growing in quiet corners of the mind. It was great to be given a task (sharing and discussing an image) of this kind at this stage of life.

Me: In this image, I find the ability to see more than one could ordinarily imagine, an invitation to see patterns and ecologies of relationships.

Leon: I am so happy to hear your reflections and to be reminded of the Bateson link, another unforeseen gift. You are most welcome to use the image.

Bateson focuses on the relationships between things and the importance of context. As I mentioned in the conversation above, he holds that we live in a world that is only made of relationships. In addition, without context, our words and actions have no meaning (Boeckel 2011). Though this may seem self-evident, when practised thoroughly, it may lead to a dramatic and surprising

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[20] Gregory Bateson was an English visual anthropologist and not only an outstanding scientist but also a highly original philosopher. One of his central messages was that relationships are the essence of the living world, and that we need a language of relationships to understand and describe it.

shift of focus, as comes across compellingly in his following statement that Boeckel (2011) recreates from Bateson's work:

> You have probably been taught that you have five fingers. That is, on the whole, incorrect. It is the way language subdivides things into things. Probably the biological truth is that in the growth of this thing – in your embryology, which you scarcely remember – what was important was not five, but four relations between pairs of fingers.

It is evident that Leon refers to relatedness between different consulting assignments and different areas of practice that belong to different disciplines. He does not atomise his practice by talking about his own work assignments; in a large firm with varied foci, he visualises his work at the intersection of these multiple domains. It became evident in the discussion that he is looking for leaving a legacy. He is hoping that the work he has done will help to make the practice of consulting richer and through that he will leave something of himself in the professional field when he retires.

In the following section, similar shades of this metaphor and the sense that Leon makes are shared by another participant reflecting on the expanse of consulting work and the experience of working within work boundaries.

7.3.4   Metaphor # 4 Evening Sky

Here, I discuss another metaphor that emerged in my interaction with Jessica. Jessica works in a mid-sized consulting firm where she interacts with a large number of clients from public-sector organisations. Her work involves advising groups of managers as well as individual organisational leaders. During the discussion, Jessica shared the image that depicts the beautiful imagery of the evening sky. She took this picture (see Figure 7-4) from the fifth floor of her office premises. The conversation with Jessica subsequently revealed her intentions behind choosing this image and the sense she made with this visual. She clarified that her practice is informed by immersion in life experiences and events that unfold around her; she received inspiration from life and what is happening on a day-to-day basis. She urges her clients to be responsible and to commit to doing well, working on what they have agreed to.

In the conversation, she revealed that, for her, the sky represents passion and opportunity:

this image of 'evening sky' reverberates with my consulting work. The sky has limitlessness yet there is a structure around it, which signifies some boundaries. In my work there is sight but still boundaries (Jessica).

She believes that this image draws her towards her orientation in her practice.

Figure 7-4*: **Freedom and boundaries – A portico into the working life of Jessica**

She further stated:

> I am very excited about my work, look for new opportunities new clients and new tenders all the time, there is always something that I can do better, different or more. Yet I hate it sometimes, again a new tender, client meeting that is hard work, being in the business all the time, budgets to meet and boundaries to respect (Jessica).

The duality of unboundedness and constraints that boundaries impose is evident in her orientation towards her projects, both in her practice broadly and life in general. This draws attention to the tension between the possibilities and constraints of consulting practice. The organisational context and client requirements dictate the boundaries within which consultants work. Similarly, prevailing organisational/client discourse creates both opportunity and constraints for consultants. The relationship with clients is in a state of constant indeterminacy, within which boundaries are constantly negotiated and reframed as the consulting assignment unfolds (Heusinkveld and Visscher 2012).

She further elaborated that she finds herself urging clients to be responsible about what they are doing and how they are doing it. She believes it is important that clients raise their level of awareness and become mindful of their context. She clarified that her purpose is to question and assist in enhancing her clients' capabilities to be reflexive:

> the way I look at my practice is that it has a lot to do with how do you perceive the world; the relationship between people is the most interesting thing, the language we use and how we connect with and create our reality, the pictures, the memos, the letters and the language we use. The idea of having the appreciation and recognition of people's way of being in the world, trying to understand their intentions and logics. Asking questions more rather than giving answers, working with the context and seeing the context as important for what is possible to do for people. Knowing, how do they influence the context and vice-versa, the circular way of looking upon things instead of looking at the cause–effect way of looking at the world ... so a different way of looking upon the world, perceiving the world, seeing the world that has really changed a lot (Jessica).

The similarity between what Jessica mentioned here and what Leon shared is profound. Bateson (1979) suggests that, without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. Moreover, the way context is interpreted by both Leon and Jessica points towards their approach to work as something emergent in their practice with the clients. Interestingly, they point towards their

approach to their practice; however, their reflection sheds more light on the role they both think they need to play in the client organisation and with client managers and who they are becoming in the process.

The polyvalence of their consulting role and their identities is evident in the sense participants make of their lives when sharing images and talking about their working lives. In the extant literature, the debate focuses on understanding whether consultants are agents of change or agents of stability (Furusten 2009). However, taking the lived experience of participants seriously, it may be argued that, at best, they are disrupting the boundaries that may either lead to change or stability.

7.3.5 Making sense of 'how' and the use of metaphors

The metaphors embedded in the visuals elicited by the participants in the interview conversation have been discussed in the previous sections. These metaphors represent the sense they make of their work, and it is evident that, when participants reflect on 'self' and practice, they make sense of their experience by using metaphors, taking assistance from the visuals they bring into consideration. As mentioned in the beginning, the visuals helped participants to convey the sense they make of their working lives, and, in the process, they used metaphors discursively to highlight how they make sense and construct sensemaking accounts retrospectively. Metaphors provided a compelling language by which to articulate the sense research participants made. Metaphors work by bringing different domains into contact, typically via using familiar terms to categorise not-so-familiar experience (Nicholson and Anderson 2005). Consequently, metaphors open up new avenues for meaning and understanding and, as such, cannot be dismissed as simply embellishment or rhetorical devices (Weick 1995).

The extant literature has focused almost exclusively on verbal metaphor, with some studies making the distinction between concept-based and image-based metaphor (Emrich *et al.* 2001), as metaphor can manifest itself in other modalities than language alone (Forceville 2002; Forceville 2006; Heracleous and Jacobs 2008).

Table 7-2: Metaphors, sensemaking and implications for consulting

Metaphors	Emerging Sense	Meanings contested	Implications
Water	Rhythm, Flow, Fluidity and naturalness in practice, 'Reflective ideal'	Deterministic, Cerebral, Planned, Performative ideal	Reflective, responsive practice
Rice Field	Interconnectedness of work, Mosaic of projects, Togetherness, Experience of 'wholeness', Relationships, Patterns	Distinctiveness of project and practice, Segregation of clients, Experience of 'outsider/insider',	Whole system sensibilities
'Project'	Work concepts occupying private, lives, Attributes of 'project' pervade all life spheres, Integration of work and nonwork aspects (Staying on the cusp)	Segregation of work and non-work aspects	Using knowledge from across domains (specifically non-work)
Evening Sky	Opportunity, Passion, Within work boundaries	Work-non-work boundaries	Circularity

Source: Based on analysis of the interview and visual data.

At the start of this chapter, I built on the idea of considering sensemaking from wider sensory perspectives. Similarly, recent research and theory point to how metaphors also rely on interactions between auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, and the entire human body in the physical–cultural world (Cienki and Müller 2008). In this study, through the use of talk and visuals, participants identified metaphors that help in making sense of their working lives and, at the same time, inform their practice. In this, participants referred to specific elements of their work or their approach to consulting by using visuals and sharing meanings that were metaphorically compelled. For instance, through her imagery, Emily brought out the metaphor of water and its flow by suggesting how the nature of fluidity makes skippering a yacht challenging, and, in a similar way, she experiences fluidity in her work as a consultant. Undoubtedly, the significance of the photographs goes beyond the manifest elements. Burgin (1986, p.69) explains that

> the significance of the photograph goes beyond its literal signification by way of the routes of the primary processes in a succession of metonymies and metaphors which transpose the scene of the photograph to the spaces of the other scene of the unconscious.

Additionally, a metaphor is understood as any image which may be 'envisioned to occasion a metaphoric thought' (Refaie 2003) and the meaning/s can usually be negotiated by the producer and viewer. Hatch and Yanow (2008) argue that metaphors are framing devices, bringing certain things into focus and hiding others.

The participants shared the images they selected themselves; they were not instructed to either think metaphorically or present any image that conveys the sense of their working lives attuned to a metaphor. The process of using images helped in building a deeper understanding of the consultants' lives, the metaphorical understandings of their work/practice and the visual processes they use in sensemaking. This approach provided participants playful and creative attention to the act of imagining their working lives visually and then reflecting on it.

In allowing inquiry to flow into the visual realm of expression, the images helped in creating an understanding of consultants' experiences; the images simultaneously framed a process of knowledge production and reflection for the consultants in which metaphors play an important role. It is also clear that some participants were not fully accessing the meaning they made of their work and their lives until they accessed deeper awareness with images in the interview conversations. They used metaphors and found links by reflecting on their work, their environment and visuals around them. Intriguingly, these photographs are not from their immediate work setting but come from a wider range of connections, determined through finding metaphorical connections and reflecting on their practice. Cornelissen and Clarke (2010) argue that metaphors pervade sensemaking as ways of making circumstances understood, noting that metaphors "frequently organise or hold together a sensemaking account and simultaneously diagnose, evaluate and prescribe a course of action" (p.119).

7.4   Conclusion and implications

The participants here, by offering interpretations of their images and by using metaphorical language in particular, exhibit how, in the act of expressing their sensemaking accounts, understand the sense they are making, the conventional consulting meanings they are contesting and the goals they are determining for their practice. The metaphors while brining an organic appeal to their sensemaking also highlight the challenges it poses for differentiation that is manifested through 'elite status' of consultants. Skovgaard Smith (2013) emphasises that "consultants are active agents who position themselves in particular ways in the organisational context where they work" (p.219). By reflecting on the lived experiences of consultants, it is evident that consultants along with their clients mutually negotiate their status. Instead of falling back on the attributed status they focus on developing a relationship with their client counterparts, build consensus and aim for collaboration. Their status is thus determined and emerges through their roles in interaction.

Paying attention to the discussion on metaphors in the previous section, it shines through that by using metaphors of 'water', 'project', 'rice fields' and

'evening sky', research participants brought to attention traces of their sensemaking about the consulting work yet allowed some other unilluminated, although any such obscurity may only be speculative. Table 7-2 highlights the sense metaphors convey along with meanings that they challenge along with implications for their work that follow. Morgan (2006) specifies that "metaphors and ideas through which we 'see' and 'read' situations influence how we act [. . .] favoured metaphors tend to trap us in specific modes of action" (p.340). Taking the argument forward, it is imperative to discuss the metaphors research participants used and their implications for the consulting work and their lives as depicted in Table 7-2. These experiences expand the understanding of consultants' working lives and help us explore use related to their contribution, differentiation and elite status.

'Water' as a metaphor for the consulting practice conveys a sense of rhythm, flow and naturalness as opposed to the generally eulogised cerebral, planned and deterministic nature of the consulting work (Kubr 2005). The ability of water to reflect encourages a sense of propagating the 'reflective ideal' in consulting practice, as well as the advocated 'performative ideal' (O'Mahoney 2007). The conception of 'elite status and identity' signifies a distance between the consultants and clients, it is evident that it privileges a distinct status drawn in terms of relative positioning. The participant narrative here suggests a more egalitarian positioning that can help clients and consultants work more collaboratively. Based on the lived experience of participants, it is evident that in their practice they do not focus on attributed status differential as a means of either influencing clients or ascertaining their expertise. The usefulness of 'elite status' is thus put under reconsideration by a reflective and responsive ways of being with the clients.

The metaphor of the 'rice field' presents a sense of interconnectedness of work, togetherness of project and practice. It signifies connections, patterns and relationships, whereas consulting work traditionally conveys distinctions between projects, clients and practice. Such a comparison suggests an experience of 'wholeness' that challenges the traditional concept of consultants as simply organisational outsiders and clients as being insiders (Mohe and Seidl 2009). It prompts appreciation for a 'whole system' sensibility rather than

focusing on fragments. Similarly, the metaphor of 'project' draws the concepts of work to inhabit the personal and private sphere of participants' lives. At the same time, it suggests a merging or integration of work and non-work domains (Trefalt 2013), instead of keeping such aspects separate or segmented. Based on the lived experience of participants, I argue that both the integration (merging together) and segmentation (keeping separate) approaches, as discussed in the background of social constructionist approach to boundary work (Nippert-Eng 2008; Trefalt 2013) of employees, are inadequate. Such boundaries are negotiated constantly in the moment, ever staying on the cusp of integration and segregation. Finally, the metaphor of 'evening sky' suggests passion and unbounded opportunities as well as the restraint of boundaries within the work itself. The experience of consulting work is both enabling and constraining, blurring and mixing together the messiness of consulting work; hence, the 'within work' boundaries are highlighted instead of referring to the boundaries between work and non-work areas.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to suggest that the use of metaphors by consultants not only helps in contesting certain meanings that are conventionally associated with consulting work but also disputing the usefulness of status differentials via 'elite identification'. The participants' explanation of the images reveals their understanding of their work as well as their approach and sensibilities in their practice. With the use of metaphors, consultants were able to define their practice and open up ways of 'seeing' and intervening. Metaphors provide a means by which to substantiate actions and provide a window for reflexivity as well. Therefore, the images and the metaphors that come alive in the process of making sense here are not mere discursive devices; rather, they permeate the actions consultants take, priorities they hold and approaches they follow.

In the following chapter, I will present the discussion and conclusion of the thesis, highlighting the contributions to consulting and sensemaking literature as well as identify implications for future research.

Chapter 8 Discussion and Conclusion

8.1   Overview

This thesis set out to explore the working lives of management consultants with an emphasis on their processes of sensemaking that enables them to make sense of their working lives. In this chapter, the research findings elaborated upon in the last three findings chapter are connected to the key academic debates. The aim is to discuss the findings in light of the extant literature on management consulting and to draw out how the key research questions have been answered and how this thesis contributes to the understanding of the working lives of management consultants and specifically their processes of sensemaking.

The chapter is structured in three sections. The first summarises the findings of the study briefly, the second interprets the findings by presenting a framework of management consultants' sensemaking processes, and the third engages the current debates within the extant literature along with the research findings in order to bring out the implications of the findings for academic understanding of management consultants lived experiences and their working lives. Towards the end of the chapter, I reflect on the research and bring together arguments that substantiate the approach taken by this study with a discussion on the limitations of the study, forming the foundation for a discussion of future research.

8.2   Understanding Processes of Management Consultants' Sensemaking – A Summary of the Findings

The previous three chapters set out the research findings, which highlighted the discursive approaches employed by management consultants in making sense of their lives. Research studies in the management consulting discipline have rarely focused on the lived experience of consultants (Gill 2015) and their processes of sensemaking. Consequently, the literature on consulting

lacks both micro-level as well as empirical richness, specifically in understanding the consultants' experiences. The theoretical lens of the sensemaking perspective and the elements of individual sensemaking assisted in foregrounding the issues brought out by research participants in the life history interview conversations. Through the sensemaking perspective, the ways in which management consultants give meaning to, interact with and construct their working lives and what is 'sensible' to them are revealed. The analysis focused on how consultants understand and enact their practice amidst the dynamic context of their profession that is inherently infused with uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity (Sturdy 2009b; Sturdy 2012). As stated earlier, the emphasis of this study has been on understanding 'how' consultants locate meaning in their sensemaking endeavour. The different facets of work that they bring out during the research conversation also informed 'what' is significant to them and privileged. The consultants make sense of their lived experiences and, through the life history interview conversations, took up an "opportunity for retrospective sensemaking as well as an opportunity to name and account for what they focus on in their work" (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005, p.409).

Three prominent sensemaking processes that emerged as part of the research findings are summarised here. Firstly, management consultants use differentiation/comparison with other non-consulting professions (referred to as the 'outgroup') to make sense of their work. Consultants experience a lack of validation of their 'elite work identity', as their work is not easily comprehended by members of the 'outgroup' such as friends, family and non-consulting professionals. However, they highlight the attractiveness of their profession by making negative references to non-consulting roles and eulogise the relative dynamism of consulting work to glorify their profession. Secondly, consultants make sense of their working lives in their everyday engagement in consulting projects through narrative presentation. Although these project narratives are not detailed or well-structured, they emerge as discursive resources pointing towards iterative cycles of action and interpretation. Through project narratives that focus on managing client requirements (including conflict with clients), the relational aspects of consulting work are highlighted and explored. Thirdly, the

consultants use metaphors, thereby defining their practice and opening up ways of 'seeing' and intervening in client engagements. These metaphors also provide a means to substantiate reflections on their consulting practice and develop an emerging sense of their practice.

In the following section, I present a framework based on these findings, of sensemaking processes that consultants use and the implications of how an understanding of consultants' work may be developed. This interpretive framework is based on the findings of this study and brings together the three sensemaking processes described above. This framework helps in understanding the sensemaking processes, the approaches that inform these processes for management consultants and implications for the ways in which management consultancy is understood within an academic discourse.

8.3   An Interpretive representation of Sensemaking Processes

Understanding the discursive processes that consultants use to make sense of their working lives facilitates a deeper understanding of the subjective processes that foreground our understanding of how consultants approach consulting work.
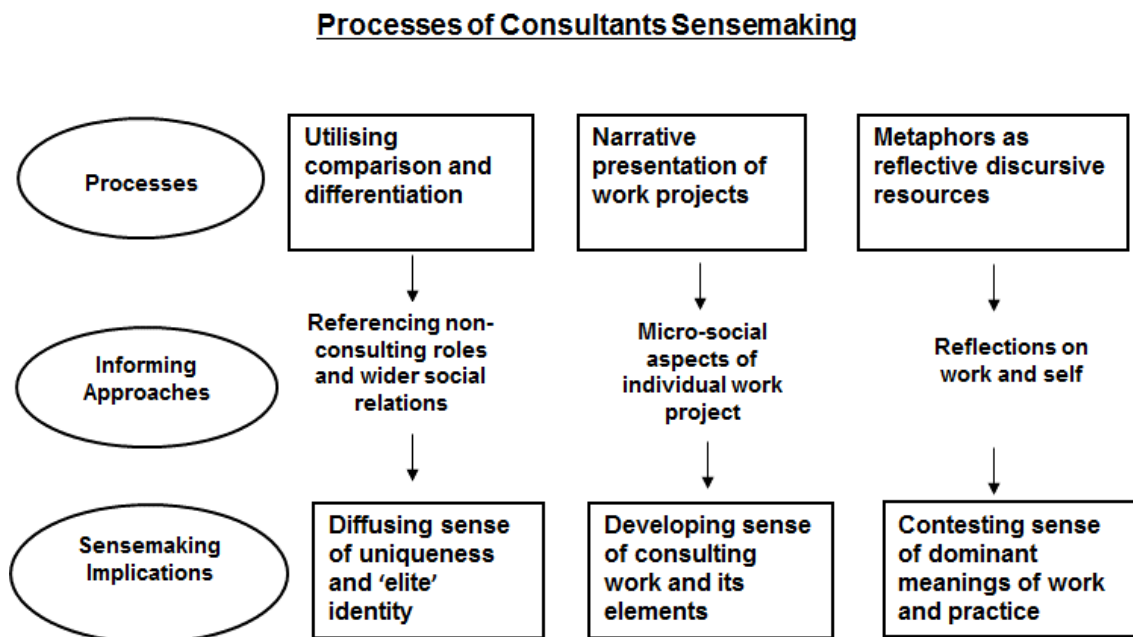
Processes of Consultants Sensemaking

Figure 8-1: Management Consultants' Sensemaking processes

These understandings help to substantiate some commonly held impressions about consulting work while contesting other taken-for-granted assumptions that relate to consultants' experience of their work. Figure **8-1** brings together the sensemaking processes identified for the consultants and its implication for understanding management consultants' work.

It is pertinent to elaborate upon the sensemaking processes highlighted here. As noted in the findings, broadly three significant aspects emerged in the analysis of accounts that developed as part of life history accounts of research participants: (a) utilising comparisons and differentiation, (b) narrative presentation of consulting 'projects' and (c) metaphors as reflective-discursive resource. These three processes and how consultants used them present interesting insights. Firstly, when asked about their experience of being a consultant, participants underplayed their contextual professional distinctions and highlighted challenges to identification, impression management and image. They compared themselves to non-consulting employees and downplayed the idiosyncrasies of their profession. In order to discuss the nuances of their practice, consultants relied on project narratives to highlight characteristics of their work, using the constraints of project requirements and client expectations to justify their actions and interpretations. When reflecting on practice and how they show up in their work, participants relied on metaphors to not only make sense of their experience but also contest taken-for-granted meanings about consulting work.

As highlighted earlier, these three processes have been elaborated upon in the findings chapter; in the following sections, the implications of these processes are discussed, thus constructing the understanding of the interpretive diagrammatic representation seen in Figure **8-1**.

8.3.1 Diffusing 'sense' of uniqueness and elite identity

Research participants revealed that they make sense of their working lives and characteristics of work not in isolation but by comparing and differentiating them with other occupations. The emphasis is on the relative understanding of their work and profession. The management consultants' sensemaking is informed by referencing other professions that include non-

advisory roles and work contexts, thus reinforcing differences based on their sensible environment (consultancy/ advice giving), as well as their role and identity as a consultant. The frame of reference for sensemaking and identity construction is not limited to their peers, consulting managers and members of the firm (the ingroup); instead, it includes a wider section of social relations, including family, friends, and other corporate workers including client counterparts (the outgroup).

Importantly, these comparisons do not arise in the event of any crisis or specific occasion. Rather, these happen in their day-to-day construction of their working lives as a result of experiencing the difference between expectations, impressions and their lived experience. It is often argued that sensemaking is invoked in encounters with crisis, triggered by unexpected events (Cornelissen 2012; Maitlis 2005). However, the experience of consultants (i.e. research participants) highlighted the ongoing nature of sensemaking and the influence of subtle prompts in day-to-day interactions. Although consultants face uncertainty and ambiguity in their day-to-day work, such a reality accentuates the argument that sensemaking is on-going. Extant sensemaking literature has found that the process of sensemaking is a social one; likewise, this study found that management consultants' sensemaking was informed by interactions with colleagues in the client organisation performing non-advisory roles and that plausible cues emerge from wider social interactions, extending beyond their own consulting firm. The relative nature of consultants' sensemaking presents implications for our understanding of identity construction, the legitimisation of work requirements and the nature of consulting work and the consulting profession alike.

As argued above based on the findings, the process of making sense is relative, and it contests the organisationally informed 'elite identity and status of consultants. How consulting firms identify consultants and how consultants identify themselves presents an interesting 'dialectic of identification' (Jenkins 2000). The organisational context wherein consultants work (client organisations) enables consultants to occupy a social position in relation to the organisational members (client counterparts) (Skovgaard Smith 2013). I have found that that consultants' understanding of their identity is not unilateral; it is

informed by an interplay of organisationally reified internal identifications (e.g. an elite identity), interactions with wider external social relations (presenting challenges to identity) and consultants' own experiences (a non-elite identity).

Although earlier studies had started to recognise the reciprocal nature of client-consultant relationships and a degree of mutuality in identity construction (Jackson 2002), the role of other social relations, differentiation and comparison with other professionals (outgroup) play remained unrecognised. (Weick 1995) argues that sensemaking is a complex mixture of proaction and reaction; people take cues for their identity from others while making an active effort themselves. Styhre *et al.* (2010) argue that "conceiving of identities as being mixed, relational and inventive, or as being assemblages or multiplicities is helpful when examining consultants' work" (p.163). This study has built on this assertion of Styhre *et al.* (2010) by using sensemaking to show how management consultants construct a professional non-elite identity.

This study found that consultants rely on the process of comparison and differentiation as a discursive approach to construct their working lives and an identity that distances itself from 'elitism' as well as the negative connotations surrounding the consulting profession. Through this process of sensemaking, management consultants sustain a positive 'non-elite' work identity for themselves. Used as informing approaches with the 'outgroup', referencing and comparing pose implications for the construction of identity for consultants. The experience of consultants (research participants) suggested that they used the 'outgroup' as a source of reference to make sense of 'who they are' and 'what they do'. Moreover, in their interactions with individuals in the 'outgroup', consultants encountered a lack of recognition and understanding for consultants and consulting, a struggle for identification which posed a threat to their organisationally reified 'elite identity and status'. Management consultants attempted to diffuse their elite identification and status by making references and comparisons with the 'outgroup', acknowledging the differentiation existing in their work compared to other non-consulting roles; however, in order to sustain a positive work identity, claims to 'eliteness' and uniqueness are mellowed. Thus, participants clearly downplayed impressions of elitism and uniqueness propagated by the consulting firms and in the extant literature.

While they downplay their elitist status, their focus is also on smoothing out the idiosyncratic aspects of consulting work, including the time they spend at work.

8.3.2 Developing a 'sense' of consulting work and its elements

The participants shared their experiences in the life history interview conversation by referring to the narratives of projects that they had undertaken. The narratives (often non-linear) of consulting projects indicate what goes on at work for consultants and reveal a microcosm of opportunities, issues and challenges encountered in their working lives. Here, these project narratives are available as a discursive resource to illustrate and locate meaning. I found that projects provide a sensemaking 'frame' (Worden and Benford, 1986 cited in Weick 1995) by which consultants understand, construct and negotiate meaning of their working lives.

The project narratives provide an intelligible source of understanding consultants' sensemaking, offering a window to understand the nuances of their work as well as the iterative cycles of action and interpretation. The social activities that consultants engage in as part of the project work bring out micro-level issues related to workplace relationships, conflict and organisation of work done by consultants. Consultants relate to their working life in their everyday engagement in projects through such narrative presentation, and, as stated earlier, these narratives are not detailed and well-structured. Instead, these narratives help consultants develop a sense of the 'work elements' of consulting and highlighting nuances of their day-to-day practice. Consulting projects are considered as 'sites' of knowledge production, "routinization and reuse of existing knowledge" (Ambos and Schlegelmilch 2009, p.429).

I found that consultants use narratives of projects to justify, legitimise and make choices and actions credible. Project narratives assist in providing cues and act as a source of sensemaking. In this study, consultants used project narratives to reinforce norms and beliefs about consulting such as 'primacy of selling, becoming a partner (career trajectory and growth), role of trust in conflict with client and creating client dependence'. Project narratives thus act as a pragmatic means of framing lived experiences in order to build a credible 'repertoires of understanding', accomplished retrospectively and

legitimising a set of consulting perspectives (Brown, Stacey and Nandhakumar 2008).

8.3.3 Contesting 'sense' of dominant meanings of work

Finally, metaphors emerged as another discursive resource that consultants employ in making sense of their work and selves. The process of sharing images as part of the interview conversation enabled participants to reflect on their practice; these reflections brought out four specific metaphors that illuminated how consultants' related with their practice. Küpers (2013) argues that "metaphors do not just rhetorically 'dress up' speech, but fundamentally direct and impact how people experience their world" (p.499). The use of metaphors in talking about their lived experiences enabled a more reflective understanding of how they construct their working lives and the deeper, more personal choices that inform their practice. In using these metaphors, participants not only assist in developing individual sensemaking, but also contest some taken-for-granted assumptions and dominant meanings associated with consulting. I also found that in using metaphors, consultants access the means to define their practice, thus opening up ways of 'seeing' and intervening. It also supports consultants in substantiating their actions and taking a reflexive stance towards their practice. The use of metaphors allowed management consultants to foreground contextual issues in consulting practice, specifically in (a) the experience of complexity and uncertainty in practice—negotiating fluidity in work, (b) the differentiation between project and practice—distinctions based on segregating projects, practice and clients, (c) how work occupies private lives—(work-speak and attributes of projects pervading private discourse) and (d) challenges of within-work boundaries (opportunity and constraints).

The management consultants' navigation of these challenges in their day-to-day work and metaphors allowed them to reflect on their practice, and the use of metaphors presented how consultants not only make sense of these complex issues but, through the use of metaphors, contest meanings, impressions and actions. Kirby and Harter (2003) argue that metaphors not only attract association, but they also act as "steering devices that guide both thinking and actions" (p.33). Research participants, through their narratives of

visuals and metaphors embedded in their description of life histories, contested the concept of consulting work by (a) privileging naturalness in practice, supporting the 'reflective ideal' while contesting a deterministic approach consumed with performative ideals (evaluation, activity orientation); (b) emphasising the interconnectedness of work, patterns emerging in practice and relational focus; (c) focusing on intertwinement of work and non-work aspects; and (d) acknowledging within-work boundaries rather than work and non-work boundaries.

By looking at these sensemaking processes, we therefore gain an insight into how consultants identify themselves, relate with micro activities and negotiate dominant meanings about practice. This also provides access to issues in their work that they deem relevant, and therefore worthy to act upon.

8.4   Contributions of the Research

In this section, I summarise the contributions of the study, emphasising and elaborating on its contributions to theory, methods and consulting practice. This is followed by an evaluation of the thesis. Here, I present a brief discussion on the limitations of this study and deliberate on the opportunities for future research.

This research provided participants (management consultants) an opportunity to share their lived experience and present their own interpretations of their working lives. Interest in management consulting has increased steadily over the last thirty years and especially in the last two decades (Kipping and Clark 2012b). The influence of consultants, one of the fastest-expanding groups of professionals (Sturdy *et al.* 2008), on businesses and society has been remarkable (O'Mahoney and Markham 2013). However, as scholars have argued, we know too little about the work of management consultants (Fincham and Clark 2002; Sturdy 2012). By exploring the experiences of management consultants in a way that focuses on their everyday work, this study adds to the limited base of scholarly knowledge available on management consultants. In the extant literature, consultants' perspectives, where available, incline to those shared by OD consultants who generally work in an individual capacity (Schein

1997), instead of the management consultants working in a consulting firm. In this study, participants were drawn from mid-sized to large management consulting firms, ensuring that the organisational, contextual and sociological influences on management consultants' lives are not excluded. Thus, the perspectives on management consultants' working lives as experienced by participants in the mainstream consultancy organisations have been researched.

8.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the critical consulting literature (Clark and Fincham 2002) and sensemaking literature (Weick 1995). Here the dominant scholarly understanding of consultancy and consultants' experience (Kipping and Clark 2012b) is contested via an emphasis on understanding consultants' lives from a sociological perspective but without the predisposition to contempt for consulting that critical consulting literature often subscribes to (Clark and Fincham 2002) (see section 2.2.3). The study also contributes significantly to the understanding of the experiences of management consultants by focusing on the processes of sensemaking of management consultants, an area that has lacked comprehensive and coherent research (Gill 2015; O'Mahoney 2007; Sturdy 2012). It also provides a contextual understanding of management consultants' lived experiences by exploring the context of their practice, their engagement with clients and their negotiation of work identity, especially their 'elite identity and status', emphasising the role of the 'outgroup' that has not been explored so far in the extant literature.

Identity construction is "at the root of sensemaking and influences other sensemaking processes as well" (Helms-Mills 2003, p.33). The research findings thus discuss 'elite identity', a specific aspect of consultants' identity as a multifaceted and contested phenomenon rather than as a consistent whole (Kitay and Wright 2007). In finding the links between sensemaking and identity construction, the thesis provides empirical support for Weick (1995); (Weick 2012) as related to the theoretical contribution highlighting the relationship between identity, specifically 'elite identity', and sensemaking.

Buono and Poulfelt (2013) argued that identities are constructed from both positive and negative imagery, and consultants must grapple with issues about their legitimacy and role in relation to clients. Within this context, this thesis examines the role that the 'outgroup' (i.e. family, friends, and non-consulting workers/client managers) plays in re-examining the 'elite identity' construction of management consultants. Brown and Coupland (2015) argued that "identities are often precarious and under threat, being subject not only to an 'individual employee's self-doubt and emotional instability" (p.1317), but also the judgements of others (Humphreys and Brown 2002). Similarly, Skovgaard Smith (2015) argued that "we can never assume or take elite identity or status for granted, and we similarly cannot rely solely on the self-representation" (p.219). The struggle for identification that participants highlighted while sharing their lived experience and how others in their wider social relations understand their work provided important cues for consultants' sensemaking and contestation of 'elite status and identity.

The consulting literature has thus far focused on the perpetuation of 'elite identity' by both consultants and the consulting firms; however, the empirical findings based on the lived experience of research participants here contest that claim. The strong focus on and use of elite identification may give the impression of a stable, enduring identity construction that consultants will invariably embrace, but, in fact, 'elite identity', like other identifications, is itself seemingly "subject to multiple and variable interpretations" (Gioia, Schultz and Corley 2000, p.75). By foregrounding the role of 'outgroup' in informing how consultants identify with their work, this study contests 'elite' identification, a unique contribution of this study.

By focusing on consultants' sensemaking in their everyday lives, this study responds to the call for the theorisation of sensemaking in everyday, moment-to-moment experience (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012). Current debates on sensemaking considered from a holistic perspective challenge the argument that sensemaking occurs only in encounters with unexpected, confusing or novel events (Brown, Colville and Pye 2015; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). The life history narratives of management consultants focusing on their day-to-day work highlight the ongoing nature of sensemaking, and the three

sensemaking processes discussed in the findings chapters illustrate how consultants try to make their lives intelligible. This study adds to the literature on sensemaking by illustrating how the process of comparison and referencing allows individuals to make sense of their own experiences. In addition, it highlights the relative nature of sensemaking, in that consultants reference non-consulting professionals to legitimise their actions, contextualise differentiation and find plausibility. This is one of the key contributions to the sensemaking literature and specifically to the processes of sensemaking that individuals in organisations employ.

The study also helps in developing the sensemaking literature by highlighting the role of 'totality of experience' (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012); research participants not only used language but also sight (by sharing the visuals), thus allowing consultants to reflect deeply on their practice, in making use of metaphors. For Merleau-Ponty, sensemaking through metaphors and narratives can be interpreted as "recursive, reciprocal and inter-depended" (Küpers 2013, p.495). The use of metaphors by consultants underlined the 'generative quality' (Schön 1993) of metaphors to develop new meanings and interpretations while disrupting existing logical understandings. Hogler *et al.* (2008) articulated how metaphors "offer common ground for dialogue while simultaneously opening new paths for consideration by offering direction through compelling visions" (p.405).

Additionally, the study supplements the sensemaking literature by highlighting the significance of narrative presentation in making sense of lived experiences. The consultants used narratives of projects to locate sense of their daily goings-on and how projects work as a 'frame' for their sensemaking. By sharing narratives of the projects, consultants draw on their past experiences and present challenges together, supplementing the evolving and on-going nature of sensemaking. I contribute to the literature on narrative sensemaking that relates to how people make sense of "who they are and where they are going in their everyday, coping lives" (Holt and Cornelissen 2014, p.529).

8.4.2 Methodological Contribution

The thesis makes a methodological contribution by responding to the call of using life history (biographical) methodology in understanding occupational/professional work (Wiseman and Whiteford 2007). The critical management consulting literature has rarely focused on studies concerning consultants rather than consultancy. Moreover, few studies have explored the potential of biographical methods in exploring the lived experience of consultants. Methodologically, this thesis thus occupies the space by bringing together life history research on management consultants' lived experiences and process of sensemaking, thereby enhancing life history methodology literature. The use of visual methods through participant-generated images together with 'guided life-history conversations' adds to the methodological diversity of the consulting literature by showcasing an interactive and reciprocal shaping of the text and the visuals shared by research participants. The use of visual methods in the study highlighted the ability to empower consultants to dwell in new narratives, exit the pre-conceived expectations and contest the dominant narratives about their lives. The visual methodological approach enabled the participants to access metaphors that arise from a wide spectrum of 'seeing', perceiving and engaging with practice.

Additionally, very few studies have explored 'narrative' and 'metaphors' together that helps in providing a 'binocular vision' to understanding people's lived experiences (Hanne 2011). In the consulting literature, mostly metaphors have been invoked to describe consultants, as in a 'professional helper' or even derogatorily as 'witch-doctors'. Such metaphors have been used for consultants working with clients (Clark and Mangham 2004; Clark and Salaman 1996c; Perren and Atkin 2000). Similarly, consultants have used metaphors in their practice as a resource for 'sensegiving'. However, this study focuses on the use of metaphors by consultants to make sense of their own lives, as such use is hardly evident in the extant literature.

I argue that a combination of multiplicity of methods on the one hand, and artful presentation on the other has enabled me to illustrate the multifaceted, personal and complex nature of consultants' sensemaking processes and identity construction.

8.4.3 Practical Implications

This study has practical relevance for management consultants, consulting firms and other important stakeholders in the consultancy business including clients. The study brings out work practices that consultants call to attention while making sense of their experiences at work. At the outset, the research highlights how consultants reference other non-consulting professionals in their sensemaking process. This suggests that, while it is important for the consulting firms to pay attention to the context of consultancy business, it is imperative that organisational processes such as the recruitment of consultants, their socialisation processes and development initiatives reference practices prevalent in other non-consulting organisations as well.

The experience of participants suggest that consultants seek identification with a broader set of professionals and often equate work practices and conditions that exist in other organisations, especially the client organisations that they work closely with. An appreciation of a wider, cross-sector practices is likely to enable the consulting firms to meet the requirements and aspirations of consultants. Related to that, based on the lived experiences of consultants, the 'elite identity' discourse that perpetuates an elite status for consultants requires reconsideration. The assumption that 'elite identity and status' is helpful and mitigates the challenges intangibility and ambiguity that consulting work brings has been contested. The experience of consultants suggests that consultants are likely to disappear socially even though the consulting organisations extol their 'elite status'. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) argue that consulting firms are heavily dependent on 'people' (consultants) where safe-guarding their loyalty through elite identification, and a specific orientation to work is required. However, in the light of this study's findings, corporate identity premised on elitism does not ensure strong identification from consultants as they reference identification from a broader set of social relations. This highlights the limitations of normative control consulting firms can exert on consultants through elite identification. More broadly, this has implications for 'symbolic functions' (Pellegrin-Boucher 2006a) that consulting firms rely on in presenting an image to prospective candidates, consultants within the firm as well as the clients.

This study also highlights that consulting projects are not only means of identifying and allocating work but also have a huge influence on how consultants perceive the day-to-day elements of their practice. These projects are a frame through which consultants often evaluate their career trajectory and the experiences they are acquiring over a period of time. The internal dynamics and competitiveness to get assigned to a marquee project suggests the meaning it holds for growth and antagonism that may exist. Thus, the stories and narratives that develop as a result of working on a consulting project inform the way they relate with their work and define their practice. Similarly, the four metaphors identified by research participants highlighted how consultants perceive their own practice metaphorically, drawing out the means by which 'sense' has implications for their practice and how they interact with and intervene in client organisations. The four metaphors (Water, Project, Rice Fields and Evening Sky) identified in this study add to a repertoire of metaphors that provide a new frame for consultants and others to re-imagine the consulting practice. The study therefore enables both consultants and clients to look beyond the usual stereotypes and metaphors in understanding consultants and their work.

8.5   Evaluation of the Thesis

8.5.1   Limitations

The life histories of management consultants that I have illuminated here are based on my interpretations of the narratives shared by research participants. These life histories are extremely rich and complex, touching upon a very wide range of issues. I could have selected different accounts to develop and issues to foreground. While writing the findings chapter on the use of metaphors by research participants as a discursive resource, I noticed multiple layers of meaning in the participant response, visuals and reflections. Unpeeling every layer of meaning in life histories is implausible, since narratives "are not just enactments of different people's opinions or perspectives, but rather they are part of an unknowable web of meaning that is always in flux and can never be captured and finalised in a written text" (Rhodes 2001, p.31). As a researcher, I have made my choices and assumptions known, as my positionality and subjectivities as a former management consultant have influenced this research as well. Hence, the idiosyncratic nature of my approach and, to an extent, of the methodology itself is one of the limitations, yet it is also an inherent strength. The space for reflexivity it allowed research participants and me (researcher) has helped in gaining deeper insights and reflections. The vivid description of consultants' lives here and their involvement in the research process providing detailed description of their challenges, identities and daily goings-on in their practice was immensely insightful. However, the biographic and idiographic nature of this thesis limits the claims about consultants' sensemaking to a smaller number of research participants.

Recent research on management consulting has revealed the limitations of management consulting research and emphasised the significance of researching consultants and clients simultaneously (Faust 2012; Sturdy *et al.* 2009), although the emphasis of this thesis is on understanding consultants' lived experience, and client perspectives are presented based on accounts of the consultants themselves.

This study, being idiographic in nature and based on a small number of participants, does not aim for empirical generalisability but resonance (Tracy 2010). Similarly, Cole and Knowles (2001) argue that life history studies such as this are principally about depth of understanding, rather than empirical generalisation, and I tend to agree.

With further depth and description, other researchers and practitioners in professional services firms might locate similar features in their own context, and use findings to inform their research. In this thesis, I have identified three processes of consultants' sensemaking, and it would be naïve to believe that the scope of identifying more processes is fully exhausted. There are more processes of sensemaking that can potentially be explored with more time and analysis, possibly extending the findings to new contexts as well as exploring options for subsequent scholarly publications.

8.5.2 Future research

The research here, despite its limited scale, makes an important contribution to 'elite' identity construction and consultants' sensemaking specifically by exploring how the sensemaking processes lead to iterative meaning construction, action and interpretation. Research on the working lives of management consultants, their sensemaking and narratives merit further scholarly attention. The narratives of management consultants focused on issues related to their consulting practice with specific attention to micro-social aspects of their day-to-day work, such activities have a profound influence on clients and consultancy business, an area of ample research potential.

Further research on consultants' lives and sensemaking can address some of the limitations of this study by extending and elaborating the framework of consultants' sensemaking described here. Based on the findings of this research, the 'elite identity and status' of management consultants calls for further research. In this study, participant responses highlighted the contestation of elite status by consultants; a detailed study focusing specifically on elite identity may be undertaken to develop an argument that further challenges the taken-for-granted beliefs about a broad based acceptance by

consultants. The extant literature treats consultants at various levels in the consultancy firms as a homogeneous group when propagating the elite identity discourse. Elite identification across practice areas, professional groups (within firm) and senior as well as frontline consultants is likely to be distinct, an area worth exploring.

Taking a cue from this thesis, future research can also focus on the sensemaking process of senior partners in other professional services firm (PSFs), as the role and contribution of senior partners in PSFs has remained ambiguous and worthy of research (Kornberger, Justesen and Mouritsen 2011). O'Mahoney and Sturdy (2016) highlighted the precariousness of consulting in general apart from a large consulting firm they used as a case example to highlight the growing sophistication of client managers and challenges to consultants' power and status. In light of these developments, it is imperative to assess the elite identity and status accorded to consultants.

8.6   Concluding thoughts

I shared my personal background in the introduction. Prior to this doctoral research I worked as management consultant in an international consulting firm. During the course of developing this topic and then exploring the management consultants lived experience and their process of sensemaking, I have gained insights at both theoretical and at practical level. The thesis makes a significant contribution to the existing knowledge about the consulting practice, consultants' identity and sensemaking. The social processes of sensemaking rooted in consultants' identity construction and re-construction that assists consultants to find legitimacy, narrative rationality and finding self in context of practice. This study helps in building a comprehensive understanding of how consultants make sense at an individual level within the context of their work with clients, co-workers and wider social relations. The interpretive representation of distinct processes of consultants' sensemaking provides a useful frame to understand the influence of informing approaches and how our understanding of consulting and consultants can be shaped (see section 8.3). Although not a prescriptive representation, it has potential to resonate with the experiences of workers in other professional services firms as

well. I acknowledge that multiple readings of these sensemaking processes are possible and there is potential for exploring more processes as highlighted earlier.

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Appendix A

Interviewee (Pseudonym)	Data from transcripts	Initial theme	Final theme	Overarching theme
Shaun	We had a cash cow, a big international organisation, this project was sustainable. Of course we had to be competitive, but we still had (earlier I said five but is was three years) a major opportunity to have a stable cash cow in three years. What we did was to make it a centre of excellence in Copenhagen and we had an extremely good foothold in these 21 postal organisation. We delivered a monthly report to them saying your quality is up or whatever and you have to do something here and we had a fantastic door open to do some more work and keep earning more.	Milking the client	Client Dependence	Working the client
Ryan	The first day we worked the simple regression model for the client and I suggested we add a few more variables. My manager commented that, no it's going too advanced, the client won't understand that. Clients rely on you to comprehend problems.	Relying on consultants	Client Dependence	Working the client
Dave	I have spoken to the partners that if we have to spend more time then we have to spend more time to finalise and give the project we promised. The response usually is that make sure that the client manager leans on you for getting the work executed and recognises your support	Giving client support	Client Dependence	Working the client

Joshua	I am much more into re-defining and re-inventing and doing something new...the way my firm is going I disagree with that. I don't see them running the organisation as a knowledge community of highly skilled people...but more as a machine...that has to work with precision...doing knowledge work is not about precision...it's more about commitment and skill.	Personal reflections on firm and practice	Being Authentic	Self and practice in relation
Mathew	I started with being very honest with people telling them what I can contribute with and what I cannot. I have been very careful about not getting in anyone to believe that I am able to assist them with a hard core technical stuff because I do not have any competence in that area. So I spend a lot of energy on what I am not able to do and on trying to make that seem very clear that when we start off.	Openness about own incompetence -laying bare the expertise	Being Authentic	Self and practice in relation
Joshua	I started on 1st Sep 2014, I haven't regretted even a bit of it and its been phenomenal to come back and start something new, but the sense that I have been through this before and I have a choice of how I want to do it now. I am not just tied to what my clients say or want me to do, I can actually also position myself in relation to clients and say whatever I feel. I have been selling projects for 15 years, so I can actually sometimes engage with clients in informing and shaping the projects to become something that makes it interesting. They would listen	Change and conviction in approach	Being Authentic	Self and practice in relation

	because they know that I would speak from a position of knowing about this stuff and that I see is the huge difference from where I started 15 yrs.			
Mathew	Being honest about things is not telling that it cannot be done, or that I will not recommend any colleague for that, it's more at a personal level. I am also...when I was recruited for this job, very straightforward about my approach when meeting clients. So it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. I don't think I can remember any client feeling uncomfortable about that approach, actually clients are very happy about having someone that honest...because they have met too many of the opposite kind of consultants who promise to solve every problem for them.	Personal values in practice	Being Authentic	Self and practice in relation
Tyler	I believe that we should do everything that we can to be allocated at the client...we always argue whether it's going to be half a year or year or two whatever...but you learn a lot from sitting with the client both in terms of the professional way but also the organisation and actually do better service because you know more and	Presence as justification	Client perception and positioning	Working the client

	you hear more when you are there, so we always prefer that and there is nothing worse than just sending an invoice for 500 hrs and they have seen you for 2 weeks			
Dave	The clients want me, if you are on an assignment then the client wants me to do something, help him solve a problem. I have a very close dialogue with the client and when I start. Clients are very different and also the person that is the decision maker...think how he wants to be handled...should we go out for lunch and discuss. Just be present around them	Building visibility with client	Client perception and positioning	Working the client
Albert	Well at a very practical level it means that I am not home much....normally home from Thursday evening to Monday morning and then away till Thursday…that means a lot of prioritisation and also focusing on home when I am home…I am a weekend husband (laughs).	Prioritising work	Negotiating trade-offs	Contextualising experience
Dave	When you are in the consulting profession and have kids. You need a wife who understand and there has to be a very big interaction about the way you are working in consulting. People who are working in a 8-5 PM job struggle to understand how can you be so flexible...but you have to wake up at 5 in the morning to review a report that has to be delivered....they can't understand	Conforming to work norms - regulating life	Embracing Flexibility	Contextualising experience

	because when sometimes I leave my office at 4PM then I am leaving and then I am off.			
Edward	I have always been able to have certain amount of flexibility. So that I could still come home at a reasonable hour...but then when my family went to bed and I could sit down and work. I work at night so it fits with the way I am and fits well with our family It is also something that you sometimes talk to the client about, Ok I am willing to go the extra mile for you, but I need to be able to place some of the hours at certain time of the day.	Conforming to work norms	Embracing Flexibility	Contextualising experience
Albert	I think they are probably lot of people who don't understand what drives people like me to spend so much time on my work, even my close friends don't understand why people like me put so much effort into my work and spend so much time on it…miss other things I like. You know I have grown up sailing along the coast. Not sure I can do much of it.	Excessive commitment to work	Negotiating trade-offs	Contextualising experience

Joshua	I am writing up a proposal for a municipality with 2000-2200 employees for three years. How do you totally change your practice from classical delivery thinking that we deliver services to our cities into a collaborative approach where we create the services together with our citizens, so it is becoming a collaborative role and they show their work delivery rather than a packaged delivery and that's...it's a shift in practice - a whole different way of thinking about it.	Abandoning the script	Adding value	Practice distinctiveness
Jessica	I have a very solid theoretical platform to work with, but the way I use it is not lecturing, but working all the time with client situation. Now, for me the ambition is to lift the clients' reflexive ways of looking at the things not just staying in the content but helping them lifting themselves up in a broader perspective and looking after themselves. I am not satisfied if my clients tell me that they did this and that. I would like them to say why they did it and how come they chose this kind of path and what kind of reflections are there. I want to lift them to another level of thinking.	Building client competence	Adding value	Practice distinctiveness
Shaun	You know the technical stuff, but you can also sell a perfect combination in consultancy and other jobs as everything begins with selling no matter what. You could be very clever technically, but if you don't get it over the table it doesn't matter. As a consultant I had to be good salesperson, just like the sales and	Consulting as Selling	Interrelating multiple identities	Identity in Relation

	marketing people in other companies, but also a management expert.			
Ryan	The thing about my previous firm was that I loved the professional part of the business, really top notch knowledge, and high quality projects. What I didn't like about the firm was that it would take me at least 5-7 years to get to the top level, so I started my own consulting company in 2004 along with a colleague from the first company I worked with. Even when I worked as a consultant I identified myself as an entrepreneur, which is who you need to be I suppose.	Being entrepreneurial	Interrelating multiple identities	Identity in Relation
Logan	They don't ask, but they don't get it. I mean anybody can be a consultant...what is a consultant? So that's I think that there are a lot of good consultants but there are also not so good ones. If you are an engineer you have your blueprint, your standards, you know when you are on or off the track. As a consultant we give you a value proposition and new segmentation model...but what does that mean...it makes it difficult to say what you are doing and deliver because these words mean different things. So do you know who you really are as a consultant?	Exploring/Challenging Consulting self	Interrelating multiple identities	Identity in Relation

Tyler	Another thing that I would suggest that be aware that if you are going to consider being a management consultant and have a career in management consulting you need to involve yourself in sales opportunities. You will never get a solid career or be promoted if you are not into networking, client relations and sales because that is the key to progressing in the system so that's very important.	Playing the game - consulting career	Primacy of Selling	Contextualising experience
Jessica	I can't take that responsibility only, if people don't take that responsibility then my energy drops. This needs cooperation between us and you have to take responsibility as I too take the responsibility but I can't just take it all alone. People if they go in that pact with me then I get energized.	Becoming mutually responsible	Relational dynamics	Working the client
Joshua	We hardly wrote any offers, even when we undertook huge projects we clarified it through dialogue and we hardly ever wrote any contracts with people...you don't need the contact because if we end up in a situation where there is disapproval of something we are doing let's talk about it and we work it out and do something different.	Willingness to alter and dialogue	Relational dynamics	Working the client

Jessica	Our main clients are from the public sector. A lot of our clients know what our approaches are, so they want actually to work like the way I am talking about my work, reflective, relationship-focused. I want to work in cooperation with them because they know their own organisation, we can help them to be more explicit about their own competencies and we can challenge them in their views and so we see it as very important for us like we work together with our clients, we don't work for them.	Relating and collaborating	Relational dynamics	Working the client

Appendix B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	
Research Title: Working Lives of Management Consultants	

Researcher: Navneet Agnihotri
University of Leeds

Please mark Y (Yes) or N (No) in the box provided.

I confirm that I have been duly informed about the purpose and aims of this study, and an email dated < ------ > for the above study has been shared with me. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, seek clarification and my questions have been satisfactorily answered. ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I have a choice to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason whatsoever. I understand that I may withdraw from the study during the interview/observation phase, without giving any reason, but not after the interview transcripts have been anonymised and all identifying data removed. ☐

I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview/discussion, I have the right to decline to answer any question or request to end the discussion. ☐

I understand that any information given by me may be used in future research reports, journal articles or presentations by the researcher while maintaining confidentiality, following ethical practices and subject to standard data use policies. ☐

I understand that my name will not appear in any research reports, articles or presentations without my prior and explicit consent. ☐

I agree to take part in this study. ☐

Please provide a response to all the statements mentioned above and feel free to seek any clarification.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Researcher   Date   Signature

Participant Reference: