

**AN EXPLORATION OF PROCESSES OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN  
ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES FROM THE  
STANDPOINT OF A PRACTISING CONSULTANT**

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## ABSTRACT

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**Key words:** Organization Development (OD); Consulting; Complex responsive processes of relating; Recognition; Power; Leadership development; Systems thinking; Organizational politics; Hegelian dialectics; Conflict; Violence in organizations; Neo-pragmatism

**Key authors:** Bernstein; Cockman; Elias; Forst; Gadamer; Griffin; Honneth; Kearney; Kotter; Laclau; Mead; Mouffe; Ricoeur; Rosenberg; Peters; Schein; Shaw; Stacey; Taylor; Ulrich; Waterman; Willmott

What usually goes unaddressed in the consultancy literature is an exploration of how consultants make sense of their contributions in particular when they come to work in politically laden contexts. Resulting conflictual debates with clients and colleagues severely influence how their advice is responded to. Against this background, consultants' ability to determine and predict future outcomes of their work is hardly problematized. Additionally, consultants are mutually dependent on both colleagues and clients. This dependency underpins power differentials and the struggle which arises when these are contested can often take violent forms, such as misrecognition, humiliation or public shaming. The central argument put forward in this thesis is that tolerating (the potential for) misrecognition and/or for violence when goals are not met or when power fluctuates is an important, yet rarely mentioned, aspect for being recognized as a consultant.

These aspects deserve as much attention as the often ideal-typical forms management consulting is said to take in the mainstream management literature because they speak to the irremediably incomplete and rather probabilistic nature of consultants' advice, and the multiplicity of (often not anticipated or undesired) meanings their work evokes.

In order to make sense of the flux and flow of organizational activity, the plethora of responses such activity calls out and its attendant ambiguities are considered and critically reflected upon. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey,

2007, 2010; Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002), theories of recognition, (Honneth, 1994, 2008; Kearney, 2003; Ricoeur, 2005), Hegelian dialectics and neo-pragmatist thought (Bernstein, 1983, 1991) are provided as non-orthodox views on human organizing. A perspective is proffered which pays attention to the inchoate, ambivalent and indeterminate dimensions of organizing as a way to make sense of how these simultaneously and paradoxically order, regularize, and normalize human activity.

Particular attention will be paid to negotiations which take place in micro-interactions to exemplify that it is not pre-planned human cooperation but the intermingling of intentions of people who are mutually dependent on one another which paradoxically gives rise to regular population-wide patterns and spontaneous change. To make sense of what these insights mean for a practising consultant a view is offered where our reflections (thought) on our interactions (practice) at once form and are being formed by one another. An attempt is made to move beyond the practice/theory dualism by taking a pragmatist view which claims that thought and action only ever arise together, thus rendering an understanding of consultative intervention in which thought comes *before* action idealized and rather dubious. It will be argued that the most important contribution consultants can make is to try to stay radically open, and to try to keep on exploring as long as possible the multiplicity of narratives which constitute the differing perspectives of organizational reality.



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## INTRODUCTION

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**Reflection ... is a profound discipline, ...  
a dialectical method of never being  
satisfied with answers that would  
close off further questioning ...  
In reflecting with others we are using our  
conscious and self-conscious capacity  
which is what most distinguishes  
us as being human ...**

**(Chris Mowles, 2011: 265)**

THIS THESIS SEEKS to offer a critical exploration of my practice as a consultant in leadership and organization development (OD). It is spurred by the repeated experience that programs and initiatives I am involved in rarely produce the results clients and I determine in the beginning. Despite this, I find myself being invited back regularly, and I have come to wonder what it is that I am recognized for if it is not the explicit outcomes that clients and I define. In order to make sense of this somewhat precarious insight I have explored both dominant management literature (e.g. Kotter, 1996; Cockman et al., 1999; Schein, 1999/ 2009; Kofman, 2006; Gostick and Elton, 2007) and non-orthodox authors, particularly those who have contributed to the body of work of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2007; Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2000), theories of recognition (Taylor, 1995; Forst, 2003; Ricoeur, 2005; Honneth, 2008), ideas from neo-pragmatism (Bernstein, 1983, 1991), and also Hegelian dialectics.

What the reader will find on the following pages are accounts of different aspects of the life of a consultant: joining a consulting firm, working on client assignments, and being the member of a management team. Inevitably accounts from these different contexts present a minor fraction of the multiplicity of potential situations a consultant may find oneself in. Yet, I have presented these and not others because I believe that one can infer from them insights for OD consulting more generally. I am convinced that practising consultants will recognize and feel resonance with my accounts since, contrary

to the often idealized notions presented in the dominant literature on management consulting, I have also pointed to the political, conflictual and violent elements of this work. In doing so I talked about how my interaction with others often led us into indissoluble contradictions, i.e. paradox, how we found ways to carry on despite the experience of paradox, its affects on how we made sense together, and how potentially insightful but also painful such sense making could be.

In Project 1 I began to realize the importance of the notion of mutual recognition in order to make sense of my intellectual journey up until I came on the DMan. It led to my research question: How does the exploration of processes of mutual recognition inform my understanding of organization development initiatives as a practising consultant? In Projects 2, 3, and 4 I talked about different real-life experiences I had as a consultant, and I have used these to give an unadulterated view also on the enervating and problematic dimensions of this work. In doing so I have drawn on the work of sociologists and philosophers who have written on recognition, power relating and violence (in organizations). Their views were then contrasted with what I have begun to see as highly idealized notions of management consultancy in the standard management discourse.

*The standard discourse in OD: systems thinking*

Systems approaches to OD are common in the dominant discourse. This tradition of thought holds that human agents are parts within an organization (considered as a whole), and that the organization has an existence of its own at the same time. To underpin this idea systems thinkers usually draw on the Gestalt notion that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts.” Such understanding actually reifies the organization. Thus, even though it is quite obvious that there would be no organization if there were no people, the two are conceptualized as different entities.

Consequently, it is held that people and organizations require different forms of consultative intervention. As regards the organization part, it is believed that senior managers and consultants somehow have the ability to determine organizational future states, and to offer a frame for reaching such states in the form of strategic guidelines, and

values which are, for example, expressed through specific leadership behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Once this is done managers return “into” the organization to implement their visions and ideas. That senior managers are now subject to their own design is neither problematized nor seen as difficulty in its own right. These considerations seem trivial but they are not. In fact I will argue that it is through the dualist splits between people and organizations, and between thought and implementation/action that managers and consultants come to believe that they can control complex social phenomena; despite the repeated experience that they actually cannot.

I will develop an argument which takes seriously some of those factors which I think play an important role in organizing and which normally only figure as domains of strategic resource or control, if at all: relations of power and recognition. I will present power after Stacey (2007, 2010) and Elias (1970) as a way to think about our interdependence and how this serves to make possible and restrict our movements at the same time. In talking about recognition I will draw on social theorists and philosophers (e.g. Honneth, 1994; Kearney, 2003) to propose that recognition is a process through which we come to realize our identities continuously in the sometimes conflictual exchange with others. I will argue that relations of recognition pose a way to understand how power fluctuates, what role this plays in ubiquitous political manoeuvring or resistance to change, and, ultimately, for the contributions I as OD consultant can make.

### *Implications for my practice*

What do these reflections mean for my work as OD consultant? It is actually quite difficult to understand my contribution to be something different from applying the latest management tools, sharing generic “best practices” or bringing expert knowledge. Part of this difficulty seems to arise from the way clients present and talk about their needs. Most of such needs are couched in terms which are being derived from the currently

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<sup>1</sup> Even if systems thinkers acknowledge that the organizational system can only be “disturbed” and no single person can determine the organization’s fate (see Johnson, 2005 for a critical appraisal) there is still a belief that the use of proper tools and procedures will bring about some future states more likely than others.

dominating managerial discourse of efficiency, purposefulness, harmonized leadership and transparent communication. In reflecting this discourse it does not come as a surprise that client demands often gravitate towards alignment of procedures and leadership behaviors, long-term change programs through which more effective modes of cooperation can be planned and introduced, or the management of conflict once seemingly rational advice from executives is responded to with resistance or hostility by the workforce. Consultants feel obliged to respond to these needs in order to participate in the practice of organization consulting.

Nevertheless, in my experience managers often find it extraordinarily difficult to work in accordance with advice consultants bring as they are beset by many contingencies. Daily predicaments and unforeseeable obstacles serve to complicate implementation of consultants' expertise in many ways. A question which seems to naturally arise from these observations is this: what can consultants and managers do to put plans to action more effectively? In the simplest sense the answer usually given in the dominant management discourse is to engage in better planning through employing new tools or methods, and this is how I made sense of my contribution as consultant prior to joining the DMan. However, in taking my experience seriously I understood that new tools or methods do not make human interaction more predictable, harmonious or necessarily successful. Still, I am often invited back by my clients, so even though it seems I often do not accomplish the pre-determined goals of the contract, I must nevertheless be doing something that clients value. In order to make sense of this contradictory experience I am proposing with this thesis first of all a different question: what is it that managers and consultants are *actually* doing when they try to realize goals and how can their activities be accounted for? The short answer as it occurs to me at the end of the DMan is this: they are continuously realizing their identities through processes of mutual (mis)recognition in struggling with others over their position of power. People realize who they and others are when they recognize one another through negotiating their differing intentions. In these processes a variety of responses may be called out in those involved, and nobody can anticipate what the outcome of such interaction will be, no matter how powerful they are. As Stacey et al. (2000) have pointed out it is the process of interweaving intentions that gives rise to orderly global patterns, and, paradoxically, at



the same time to reiteration of these patterns and spontaneous change. In other words, it remains unpredictable if and when our negotiations with others lead to perpetuation or breakdown of modes of cooperation. Following this train of thought has important consequences for me as a consultant. If behaviour cannot be planned and change not managed then the best contribution I can make is to engage clients in discussions around what it is they find themselves doing against the background of set agendas, and how they think about their interaction. In this way, opportunities might arise in which people can become more reflexive and detached about their interaction, an activity which, as Mowles says in the introductory quote, distinguishes us most as being human. In supporting people to come to a more complex understanding, they may—sometimes painfully—incorporate more perspectives and produce multiple narratives about what they understand to be going on, thus renegotiating their notion of reality. This is of course not guaranteed; it is also possible that patterns of interaction remain stable.

I could not have possibly engaged in this critical reflection if I had not repeatedly found myself in situations where neither clients nor I had wanted to end up in, despite all my “expert knowledge.” It is this lived experience which spurred me on to further investigation through the DMan, and which makes my thesis an undertaking at once credible and inevitable. I will now turn to my first project in which I will pursue my intellectual journey as regards my understanding of my practice up until I came on the DMan.



## PROJECT 1

### HOW EARLY INFLUENCES SHAPED MY UNDERSTANDING OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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**The foundations of our lives  
never cease being contested.**

**(John Shotter, 1993: 29)**

#### ***Introduction***

WHEN I DECIDED to pursue a professional doctorate, it was out of a feeling of deep dissatisfaction with the way I had tried to make sense of my practice as a management consultant. I was looking back on ten years of experience in the arena of Human Resources consulting, and I found myself at a point where I had started to question underlying beliefs of the services I was offering which deeply challenged assumptions I had taken for granted over the years. Once I started to reflect upon what it was that I was contributing to the organizations which had brought me in as an external expert, I found that it remained rather elusive to me and that it was certainly not what I was said I was contributing.

It was in particular the fact that I had repeatedly been involved in year-long organization development projects that made me think about my practice. These programs normally followed the same pattern: at the outset a strategy determined what interventions were to be carried out at a given point in the future. Success was measured along the way by meeting milestones set in advance. Interventions were planned in such a way as if I could foresee what was going to happen, which suggested I had an anticipatory power that I was thought to have through my experience. Once projects started, it became clear, however, that all my experience had not equipped me with the

ability to look into the future. Instead, usually after a few weeks' time, projects would take on their own dynamics that neither clients nor I had intended.

I often experienced the phenomenon that we would deviate from the strategies we had set, yet setting out the strategies in such a way was unquestioned. If deviation from strategies aroused discomfort in my clients, it is about the fact that milestones have not been met, but not from thinking that long-term planning and the quality of inherent foresight is questionable in the first place.

Interestingly, I still find myself pursuing this type of approach, taking it for granted that this is the right path, and this is partly because it maintains my identity as a consultant. My justification for being there as a consultant requires me to perpetuate an image of myself that constantly fuels the illusion of being in control over the outcomes of my interventions. Furthermore, clients seem to expect exactly this from me.

Accepting the anxiety these insights provoked was one thing; to make sense of them and to find ways of dealing with them was another. Finding myself in a position where I had to accept that the contribution I made was very different from what it was said I was contributing put beliefs at risk that I had chosen to be the very basis from which an important part of my identity emerged. Nevertheless, my efforts to overcome those beliefs also spurred my curiosity. In my intellectual quest I came across the ideas of Ralph Stacey, Douglas Griffin and Patricia Shaw which immediately resonated with me. They offered a paradigm that was completely different from what I had hitherto encountered. Most importantly, they offered me relief to the extent that my sense of being unable to predict the future despite my experience was nothing that should necessarily deprive me of my *raison d'être*. Instead, they offered a view that, if I accepted it, demanded fundamental rethinking of my practice. Prior to encountering Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, Norbert Elias had been the one to help me explain my experience, and I was fascinated to find that he had been an inspirational source to the aforementioned thinkers as well.

Over a long time-span, social sequences proceed blindly, without guidance—just like the course of a game. . . ., the view in which society seems to be centred on oneself or the group with which one identifies has to give way to a view in which oneself or one's own

group is no longer the focal point. ... The detachment is the difficult part here. Even today, this distinction between such sociological detachment and ideological involvement ... is beyond the grasp of many people, either in thought or action.

(Elias, 1970: 153-154)

Stacey's thinking and the doctoral program he and his colleagues are offering to me has the quality of a catharsis. In my case, it takes me back to childhood and the issue of parental performance expectations to understand how these ultimately shaped a drive to rely on starkly formalized approaches in my current consultative work and how either instance would lead me to accept practices that were valued by those from whom I sought to gain recognition.

In verbalizing my experience and intermingling it with concrete examples from my work, I started to realize that a dynamic process had taken over that seemed to underlie both my professional practice and my identity as a consultant: a constant urge to excel had interfaced with the wish to meet expectations of others and the desire to be recognized by those people. These expectations that I hold of myself have over the years formed an intellectual pattern that made me become ever more convinced that what I was doing was the right thing to do. This pattern is highly repetitive up to the point that I have never questioned its dynamics. Only when I permitted the thought that a large part of my assumptions called for fundamental questioning and basically that much of my planning for and strategizing with clients was underpinned by a way of thinking which would not take into consideration what people *really* experienced when acting out their jobs did I find myself in a position to break the pattern and to start to re-form my professional identity. This doctoral thesis is part of this discovery process.

~

### ***Childhood: recognition, confidence, and independence***

My parents were deeply entrenched in the Protestant work ethic which in turn fundamentally formed their educational practices. While in their case this would not imply regular attendance at church services, it was expressed by their constantly reinforcing a certain attitude towards me and what I would achieve in my life, achieving exceptional results at school being amongst them.

The Protestant work ethic is a concept developed by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930/ 2002) where he points to the Calvinist and Lutheran idea that wealth in this life—achieved through hard work—would signal deliverance in the hereafter, an idea that runs counter the Catholic belief that being agreeable to God is understood to require adhering to specific religious practices. At its core, the difference in Protestantism means that salvation is not sought through prayer alone, but through hard work in different forms. In my case, it materialized in my parents' urging me to learn to play the piano and in their constant efforts to improve my performance at school. Both of these paths led to years of struggle for my parents and me, eventually yielding rather mediocre results in the latter and complete failure in the former domain.

My parents' efforts were in all likelihood well intended, constantly trying to pave the way towards the final goal—a university degree—that in their minds was a necessary precondition for the kind of life they deemed adequate for their children. This would then provide a lifestyle that would equal their own and which they, working as commercial clerks, had attained only through decades of working and saving, but not through themselves having a high-paying job, which would have required a university degree. It was this latter attribute, having a degree, that in their perception had made life easier for those with whom they compared themselves in terms of material prosperity.

Nevertheless, my constant grappling with their demands had far-reaching consequences. It was only long after I had left high school, after I had begun but not completed a university degree, and after a two-year apprenticeship with a Hanseatic trading firm to become a foreign trade merchant that I eventually received recognition from my parents for having at least achieved the minimum goal of being equipped to lead a life on my own.

### ***Entering the corporate world***

My experience at school, at university and during the apprenticeship had left me with feelings of boredom and frustration, little self-esteem and even less confidence with regard to the outlook for my future, despite or perhaps because of my parents' intense efforts.

It was only during my first job as an assistant to the General Manager (GM) of a small trading firm that light appeared at the end of the tunnel. I was being groomed by the GM to become the head of procurement and often found myself in his office; it was here I became acquainted with the specific buying practices of the company's core business, the import-export of industrial screws. It turned out that those times we spent together provided an experience for me that impacted my self-esteem in the most positive way.

The GM saw himself as being solely responsible for the well-being of the company. He was certainly not a charismatic leader who was admired by the staff. Instead, they made fun of him for not being a strong manager and implied that he had no understanding of their daily struggles. In addition, his facial eczema seemed to prove in the most obvious way for staff members that he was not even able to cope with his own day-to-day pressures.

Our regular conversations were marked by his repeatedly drifting away from passing on to me the knowledge necessary to be a procurement manager and towards those issues that hindered him from gaining a deeper understanding of his staff's needs. He offered his views on what was necessary for the overall prosperity of the company in most general terms and described how he felt in a sense remote from the people who tried to achieve the goals he set. In turn, I added my perspective from the staff side, opening a world of practices, beliefs and understandings that hitherto had been unknown to him.

After only a few weeks' time, everybody experienced small, but significant, changes in the overall cooperation. While I was spending one or two hours with the GM almost every day, for the remainder of the time I found myself experiencing a different reality together with my colleagues; a reality that consisted of coming to terms with set goals which they previously neither fully understood nor felt helped them solve the day-to-day struggles with suppliers and customers. Once I had gained a deeper understanding of the GM's intentions, I immersed myself in more and more conversations with my

colleagues during which I tried to translate and put across the GM's ideas which made perfect sense to me and that gradually became more comprehensible through our on-going conversations for my colleagues as well.

Stacey (2007) writes about how people constantly try to translate general guidelines into actionable advice, generalized tendencies to act requiring an on-going process of negotiation and persuasion:

We cannot simply, directly apply the generalisations because ... in each contingent situation, we will find it necessary to make the general particular ... This will inevitably lead to conflict in that we will differ from each other on just how to make the generalisation particular ... Such conflict requires us to carry on exploring with each other just what our differences are and negotiating the meaning of the generalisation.

(Stacey, 2007: 307)

It was in particular during our weekly plenary meetings where we did not just touch on business topics, but also on those things that produced the meaning of our overall interaction. It also became a regular habit to discuss those areas where my colleagues and I felt neglected by the GM, e.g. dealing with the sales director, whom staff did not accept as belonging to the top management nor to the larger team in which I worked. While his formal role was clearly defined, what he truly contributed remained elusive to almost everyone else. We spent time repeatedly talking over the GM's intentions, how these intentions gave direction to the sales director's activities and what this meant subsequently for the rest of the team. These were times when everyone involved felt challenged in one way or another, particularly the sales director, who found it odd to be at the center of discussion and whose activities had never been scrutinized like this before. For the GM, it was an opportunity to make himself clear in such a way that all staff members understood his intentions, which turned out to be a hard task because he was an introverted person. Finally, it was the first time for the team to speak up and openly address those issues that up until then had remained below the surface.

In these meetings, I found myself asking questions that helped others and also helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the three parties into which staff felt the company was split. In Stacey's sense, we were actively negotiating traditional practices of our organizational interaction, which consequently allowed for new ways of cooperation to emerge. With the novelty this experience provided, marginal changes occurred. It appeared to be a relief for all of us when we felt mental barriers starting to crumble, though it was a process that required all of us to try out new forms of communal conversing. We needed to rethink our ways of interaction, which was not an easy thing to do, as it appeared that we all experienced our usual patterns of interaction as being rather static. What was different, however, was the ability of all of us to feel we could make changes in this pattern and that it was not as static as we had assumed it to be. This meant letting go of long-held beliefs as well as trying out new forms of interaction.

While our meetings rarely produced solutions in a straightforward manner, what they did was provide all of the company staff with a deeper understanding of one other's viewpoints and even fostered in some the desire to inquire more actively into the tasks and ideas of others. It was during that time that I became aware of an ability that up until then had never appeared: recognizing views of others and mediating between them. It was a dimension of my personality that had never previously been brought to light, which meant that I had never had a chance to recognize it, much less to develop it further.





### ***A new career path: an unanticipated turn***

I worked for this company for only a short while, and yet this experience encouraged me to be more active in planning my future. While the events described above enhanced my self-esteem, they did not relieve me of the boredom that my dealing in industrial screws made me feel. I started realizing that I needed to pursue a completely different career path, one which neither my parents nor I had ever contemplated: I wanted to become a trainer. My hope was that in such a role I could best foster my talents and, by the same token, help people in their personal development. Moreover, I hoped to learn about frameworks, approaches and theories that would help me come to terms with my recent experiences. Although I had no idea what being a trainer truly meant, I started collecting information, conducting discussions and having initial interviews, activities which all helped me become clearer about the ideal profile of a trainer. Admittedly, my understanding of this profile at that time deviated markedly from what I had to offer.

One interview in particular encouraged me to pursue becoming a trainer despite my lack of skills and experiences. The founder of a small training firm appeared to be strongly convinced of my abilities after two hours of intense discussion. To my surprise, our conversation had rather gravitated towards my values, aspirations and indeed my own history than it had towards my lack of knowledge. While I did not end up going to his company, this discussion reinforced my desire to carry on and to try to start a career in the training business.

One of my interviews brought me in front of the CEO of a larger boutique consulting firm that focused on sales and leadership trainings as well as on recruitment and diagnostics. I was offered a traineeship that was to last for two years. I accepted their offer for several reasons. First, I hoped that by means of a thorough, structured program I could get some deeper insights into the business in which I had no real experience. Second, I was intrigued by the opportunity to immerse myself into the two different fields of training and recruiting, hoping for theoretical and practical input to develop my capabilities.

It was only after six months that the CEO asked me to have a longer discussion with him. He mentioned that from the feedback he had received so far there were several recruiting consultants who wanted to work with me more closely. They seemed to see

something in me which I did not. He suggested I quit the traineeship and instead become an assistant to the most senior recruiting consultant. I was proud to learn that she was one of the ones to express an interest in working with me, and I sensed that this opportunity in itself entailed a great learning experience. I decided to postpone the training career. During the following one and a half years, I was constantly spurred on to learn, and I had finally found a domain that did not bore me. In contrast, this was an environment where I could cultivate and refine some of the skills that I had started to discover in my previous job.

When my boss decided to leave, I took over her clients and for the coming two and a half years developed client relationships as well as placed numerous candidates in other people's firms. In addition, I acted as a trainer, but only on rare occasions. In sum, during this assignment I received tremendous recognition from the different parties I interacted with, both for the skills I developed and for my success, as well as gained some of the knowledge that I deemed necessary for my future.



### ***Return to academia***

After four years, it felt like I had reached the limits of what I could learn under the conditions the role as a recruiting consultant offered. I decided that I needed some more theoretical background knowledge if I ever wanted to pursue a career in the field of Human Resources (HR) related consulting services. I took an interest in studying psychology via distance learning and inquired into various university programs. I finally opted for the Open University in Milton Keynes/UK. The course matched my desire for a degree that would be recognized internationally (in contrast to German university degrees) without having to move, and that could be obtained in reasonable time. I quit my job and took on a part-time position with a large international consulting firm.

I dedicated the following three years to full-time studies via distance learning, an experience that turned out to be intense and at the same time enormously enriching. After my work experience in the consulting business, I knew what it meant to work long hours and I was convinced that I could handle the enormous workload that I was told I would have to deal with. Against all odds, I graduated within the shortest possible time with a first-class degree.

This was an enormously important experience for me because I eventually obtained an excellent university degree while all my previous efforts had been to no avail. By this time, I had lived away from home for seven years. Yet even then, I had not lost hope that this achievement would finally give me some sort of parental recognition going beyond what I had experienced up until then in this respect. While I was not clear about what kind of recognition I had longed for, it was definitely something more than a conversation over the phone.

### ***Professional recognition***

Upon graduation I found myself in a position where people considered me to be an expert in a way I had never experienced before. By becoming a “psychologist” I was seen to have acquired an expertise that those in my professional environment appreciated. While this was a formal side-effect of my studies, in terms of the curriculum, they had introduced me to a very thought-provoking strand of psychological research that I have

admired ever since in theoretical terms, but found hard to put in practice: social constructionism.

In social constructionism, individuals and their social surroundings are understood to be never fully separated. On the contrary, these two domains are regarded as being intermingled where one impacts the other in an ongoing process. In this sense, in contrast to people's physical boundaries, their psychological ones are seen to be rather blurred. Consciousness, mind and the concept of self are socially constructed, meaning that "the experience of our "self" is taken to be a continuously changing and fluid history of relationships" (Gergen, 1991, 1994, in Stevens, 1996: 222).

In addition, social constructionists take into account cultural and in particular linguistic influences that not only affect the sense of self, but also the way relationships with others are formed and lived out. For instance, Harré and Gillet (1994, in Stevens, 1996: 232) point to the fact that in English, as in many Western languages, there is a very limited selection of personal pronouns (e.g., "I", "you", "we"), while other languages such as Japanese, Vietnamese or Thai make use of a plethora of pronominal devices, depending on the relationship one has with the interlocutor. It has been argued that the idea of a pronoun like "I" (and its correspondents in other Western languages) allows for a limited conception of the self merely because it is seen to be the same over a range of different social encounters. In contrast, the vast number of personal pronouns in many Asian languages points to the circumstance that the Western idea of personhood overlooks the subtle eliciting of rather diverse aspects of the "I", as required in different social circumstances (Kondo, 1990, in Stevens 1996: 232).

Two authors who strongly impacted this strand of psychology have been influential on me: Lev Vygotsky and George H. Mead. Vygotsky puts forward the view that children take in dialogues from their environment to apply them to their own mental and practical actions later on. This is a process that is in constant flux even in later life. Cognitive development does not take place internally (only), but is preceded by social encounters in which the child plays an active part. She is formed by her encounters and likewise forms these encounters through her participation. If seen from this angle, it becomes difficult to speak of a fully separated individual mind. Instead, "mind" is a

rather distributed phenomenon where interaction is a necessary prerequisite for cognitive and conceptual development.

Mead agrees with Vygotsky in that he thinks of children internalizing dialogues from the outside world. However, Mead does not find this process to be as direct as Vygotsky does. Mead conceives of cognitive development in terms of a gradually growing understanding of what others think and the repeated trying out of these acquired understandings in the form of role plays. He speaks of identity as being simultaneously informed by an “I” by which he refers to rather impulsive and intuitive aspects of the self and the “me” that is formed by the sum of internalized beliefs of others which he terms the “generalized other.” For Mead, there is a constant negotiation between “I” and “me” organizing our daily behavior, not only when interacting with others, but also when being in silent conversation (with others) in our mind. Again, the “I” and the “me” cannot be separated.

Those points of view (i.e. social constructionism) provided a social and complementary understanding of humans in contrast to rather cognitive approaches to human (inter)action towards which I had started to feel a growing discomfort throughout my studies. In particular, the brain-computer metaphor postulated by connectionism did not resonate with me as it did not account for the social elements of embodied human interaction. In contrast, social constructionism went beyond rather individually-centered approaches where people were understood to be active agents in a co-constructed and constant process of becoming, where “the other” is needed to realize oneself. So individual cognizing has a distributed quality to it which makes it hard to discern between the individual and the social. How I would put these insights into practice or find practitioners that used this understanding in any kind of consulting approach sent me on a year-long journey. It was only in the writings of Douglas Griffin, Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw that I found an equivalent of this thinking in consultative terms.

Up until then, I grappled with approaches that were of a rather different kind, influenced mainly by systems thinking which seemed to be much more readily applicable to the consultative work I intended to do in future.

### ***Becoming a professional specialist***

When I left my position as a recruiting consultant to work on a part-time basis with another consulting firm, it had been my intention to work for this firm after completing my studies. Indeed, six months prior to graduation, the GM of this latter firm offered me the position of a “Regional Leadership Specialist”, a position that was completely new to the German organization.

It posed an enormous challenge to me: to build the German leadership consulting practice for this company from scratch. I was excited by the trust placed in me as well as by the complexity of the task. At the same time, it seemed to be a daunting endeavor as well. I had no idea of what leadership consulting was. Still, I had to produce a business plan that would detail my strategy for the coming three years. That was not an easy thing to do, and when I mentioned to my GM that my studies in psychology had not equipped me with the knowledge of how to build a business, let alone the specialist knowledge I was now said to have according to my title, she did not care. She forced me to define a line of services I intended to offer, to recruit a pool of external consultants, and to build client relationships. As we had been offering leadership consulting services in the USA for the past years, I spent time on the phone and physically in the country to become acquainted with our service offerings and to determine which were generic and could be transferred to Germany, which to leave aside and what services needed to be developed for the German market specifically.

I truly enjoyed the freedom. I started reading books that were completely new to me, I entered professional organizations whose members had a stake in leadership and management and I started attending subject matter conferences. I amassed knowledge so that after a few months I was in a position to speak competently with high-ranking HR managers about how to attract, engage, develop and retain leaders.

In terms of recognition, the first year of my new role in particular was enormously important to me. I found myself part of a global network that welcomed me as a new member. At the same time, I sensed that I was expected to gain subject matter expertise very quickly. To compensate for my lack of knowledge, I clung to an approach to leadership consulting that provided an almost mechanistic understanding of organizations and humans working in them. Firstly, I did this because those thinkers I understood to be

thought leaders were almost all taking such approaches. Secondly, these approaches followed a logical rationale that I found potential clients valued and even expected from me.

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### ***From practice to theory***

My understanding of leadership consulting was marked by my struggle to cover a broad range of services that were all interlinked and to deploy a reasonable story line which could be presented to customers. In designing a portfolio of services, I was deeply influenced by some seminal thinkers in the field, most prominently by David Ulrich. He offers a fairly systemic view similar to the one I longed for at the time when I was asked to define a service portfolio. Ulrich was and still is deemed to be one of the most forward-thinking management gurus. He is Professor of Business at the University of Michigan and an author, and he runs his own consulting practice. In 2001, he was ranked by *BusinessWeek* as the Number One management educator. These indicators left me without a doubt that with my approach I was on the right track. Indeed, I was glad to find that his writings ideally complemented my lack of knowledge as well as satisfied my desire to structure my ideas in such a way that they could be applied by potential customers readily.

Ulrich has published over ten books throughout the years, among them *The HR Value Proposition* (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) which propounds his latest views on cutting-edge HR practices. It gives clear hints of how HR professionals can make themselves heard in an organization as well as offers a huge range of questionnaires, tables and very concrete techniques of how to interlink HR's work with the overall company strategy. At the same time, it offered to me both an intellectual and a practical guideline as to how to build my identity as a consultant.

The service portfolio I deployed started with HR strategy consulting where we would support customers in aligning their HR strategy with the overall strategy of their company. To help HR members bridge the gap between their work and superordinate company goals, Ulrich and Brockbank propose that they need to comprehend trends in the business environment and what the sources of competitive advantage of their company are. HR then has to infer from those insights cultural capabilities and suitable behaviors for the organization at large (ibid.: 152-153). Consulting in this field is comprised of services that support HR leaders in becoming clearer in this context, resulting in a fleshed-out implementation plan.



Once the HR strategy is in place, the workforce needs to be screened to provide clarity, in particular for the upper echelons, as to who is well prepared to support the overall strategy with individual capabilities and skills, who needs further development, who has expertise critical for the company's success and needs to be retained, and who is possibly not seen to be a potential contributor in future anymore. For this reason, I started offering management appraisals as a second service by which we sought to apply various diagnostic tools and methods as a means of identifying whom to group in which way according to the ideas I have described above. When the goals are clear and it has been assessed what capabilities the workforce has, developmental measures can be deduced. Among the most popular ones are customized management development programs and individual coaching, ideally when received together as part of larger developmental initiatives. In sum, those measures are said to lead to the identification, education and binding of "competent employees":

Competent employees have the skills they need for today and tomorrow. Committed employees deploy those skills regularly and predictably. Ensuring employee competence is possible when HR helps leaders buy (bring in new talent), build (develop existing talent), . . . , bounce (remove poor talent), bind (retain the best talent), and boost (promote the right talent).

(ibid.: 75-76)

All these activities must be commensurate with the performance management system. That is to say, company goals need to be cascaded down through the organization in such a way that managers are in a position to define concrete goals with every member of their team. In this way employees are held accountable, and it is believed that they understand that "they must meet their targets" (ibid.: 77). This is said to lead to team members identifying with their roles and developing an understanding of how important they are for the overall well-being of their organization. Consulting services in this field will help with both implementing processes that serve to support HR's efforts in this respect and

educating line managers in terms of setting targets with their staff and motivating people to meet these targets.

Re-reading Ulrich today, I sense a strong rationalist understanding of how people act as individuals, teams or as larger groups. Indeed, it generates understanding of where external consultants like me bring an objective truth to client organizations. The overall purpose, of course, is that, by aspiring to this unequivocal “truth”, organizations will move towards a desired future state.

Inevitably, people do what they are rewarded for and leaders get what they reward, but not always what they expect. Without clear standards, measured against expected results and linked to the rewards people want employee behaviour may seem very strange. On the other hand, when standards and incentives align with company goals, the goals generally come within reach.

(Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005: 110)

I can hardly resist feeling delight when reading these lines. They are only one example, but give an idea of how the whole book aims to provide straightforward advice that can be grasped easily and, even more importantly, promises far-reaching results. In my role as a consultant I am expected to bring exactly this kind of thinking to my clients. It seems that together we are producing dynamics that reinforce an underlying relationship in which I am seen to be in a position of possessing knowledge that can help my clients to resolve current problems—hence my delight when reading these authors.

In retrospect, leaving behind the idea that only by adhering to a systemic approach as laid out in my service cascade above would I automatically receive the recognition of my clients has caused enormous intellectual upheaval. I needed to let go of some of my most dearly held assumptions that had shaped my identity as a practitioner over the years. Long-cherished beliefs die hard, and as I write these lines, I still sense how strongly attached I am to the understanding of my work as a fairly complex, but predictable, endeavor and how this seems to fulfil my desire to appear as knowledgeable and trustworthy interlocutor for my clients.

The systemic approach appears to be effective because it rests on assumptions that convey the idea that human interaction is a manageable affair. First, systems thinking gives rise to the idea that organizations can be thought of as physically bounded entities that can be acted upon as if they had the quality of material existence. From this follows, second, that this “acting upon” can become a purposeful enterprise by steering the organization in a desired “direction” if a sufficiently competent person or a dominant coalition understands the mechanics underlying this steering process well enough. Third, it is assumed that people working in an organization will follow the given direction of those in power, provided the latter a) design processes and goals in such a way that the combined action of all members yield a desired outcome for the whole organization and b) communicate goals and processes and engage people in such a way that employees feel motivated to contribute to the larger purpose of the organization. In this sense, members of an organization easily come to understand “it” as a thing that can—as a whole—be directed according to the will of those in power. So the systemic discourse can yield a sense of identity for members of an organization which unites them in their striving to create a desirable future for this larger whole of which they form a part. In addition, it reduces complexity when considering organizing processes. What this thinking glosses over, however, is that much human activity is unforeseeable and irrational and that outcomes are often unintended, marked by complex interaction patterns that can be understood in systemic terms through considerable simplification only.

John Shotter is a Professor Emeritus of Communication, at University of New Hampshire, who focuses sharply on participatory modes of life and inquiry. He traces the widely shared understanding of human cooperation described in systems terms back to century-old Western traditions:

..., why are we so passionately convinced that there must be a single, well-ordered ‘reality’ to be discovered...? There are ... at least two main reasons, both to do with our concern with systems inherited from the Enlightenment ...

(Shotter, 1993: 24)

The first reason, in Shotter's view, comes from the ancient Greek thinking that an underlying order is the force behind all human organizing. In this sense, a strong formative element resides in our thinking that is revealed in a constant struggle to make the world a place that can be described and understood as if there were one "objective" reality. Secondly, he finds that to be a recognized member of those who theorize about human organizing in such a world one has to produce

... systematic texts; we run the risk of being accounted incompetent if we do not.

(ibid.: 25)

The production of "systematic texts" in the Shotterian sense leads to an inherent belief in a formative order underlying human cooperation which not only goes unquestioned, but is even perpetuated. Challenging this point of view may easily lead one to be excluded from the professional community of those who take part in the discourse of making sense of how humans interact.

Apparently, this latter comment reflects my concern about remaining a member of the community of my professional domain. This wish grew to be so strong that it ultimately led me away from my fascination with social constructionist understandings of human interaction. Although I felt discomfort, I embraced systems thinking as I found logical and practical advice there from such writers as Ulrich and Brockbank.

Efforts to be recognized will often have to do with the fact that recognition is not given, or given only partly, by those we desire to gain it from. If this desire is not met, an individual might put even more effort into winning recognition. In such a situation, power inevitably tilts away from the person seeking recognition and an imbalance of power arises. In this sense, my desire to become an acknowledged member of the HR consulting community may ironically have led me into a practice I am suspicious of. This may well be an explanation for why I championed writers who had generated enthusiasm among the people I sought to gain recognition from. This may have subsequently generated enthusiasm in me as well. This may seem quite a simple as well as subtle process. In my

case, however, it had far-reaching consequences. In giving in to the desires at the heart of my sense of belonging, I had to give up parts of myself. By the same token, I gave others power over my own thinking and consequently my identity formation. It has been reflections of this nature that have led me to rethink my methods fundamentally.



### ***From theory to practice***

To illustrate this aspect, I will give a brief account of how I collaborated with two senior consultant colleagues to conduct a twelve-month leadership development program for midlevel managers in a medium-sized German investment company. Tim, the Head of HR, had called us in to discuss our views on how best to develop this group of nearly thirty people. This experience provided an encounter at the end of the program that will form a direct connection with the line of inquiry I will be pursuing throughout my whole dissertation: the concept of recognition and how this is intermingled with my experience of acting as a practicing consultant.

After completion of the program, we met up to discuss the impact from the program. At some point, the discussion started to turn into an argument between Tim and me during which he tried to identify a direct link between the program and participants' performance which I doubted could exist. Eventually, he declared that if I was right the program would have no truly measurable impact and essentially our work had been worthless. I immediately had the feeling that it was not our consultants' work he feared to have been senseless. Something more profound seemed to be at stake here, mirrored by his emotionally charged reaction. I theorized that it was HR's idea in the first place to set up such a program; if it was not possible to argue logically for a link between the program and increased leadership capabilities on the side of the participants, HR's practice was questionable in the most obvious way. In this sense, it appeared that Tim's identity had been challenged profoundly by my remarks.

### ***Recognition and power in practice***

Axel Honneth has addressed those kinds of phenomena in his book *Kampf um Anerkennung* (1994) [Struggle for Recognition]. Honneth is Professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt where he also serves as Managing Director of the "Institut für Sozialforschung" [Institute for Social Research].

For Honneth, developing a sense of morality requires people to go through three stages that will ultimately lead to inter-subjective recognition. Honneth, in drawing on Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory (1994: 159-171), suggests that this process begins upon a child's birth when mother and baby form the first bond. This connection is marked

by love which in the further development of personhood is officially complemented for the individual by receiving legal recognition as a member of society with certain rights, once they become of age. Eventually, recognition in adult life comes about when in specific instances a person can contribute to an existing community by participating in ongoing and possibly controversial discourses within this community. This participation will lead to a struggle over issues in which people exchange opinions and debate their meaning; being an accepted member of this group will result in the experience that one's contribution is important and is valued by others; in turn this is said to foster a feeling of recognition and so raises a person's self-esteem which Honneth regards as the primary motivation for taking part in these conflict processes in the first place (Honneth, 1994: 151-152).

Understood in this way, the ongoing development of current discourses in certain areas of practice will likely entail conflict, and my discussion with Tim offers a good example of how humans negotiate in their struggle to become recognized members of their communities of practice.

In addition, the struggle for recognition is always a struggle for power as well. Pierre Bourdieu (1980) has coined the term "social capital" by which he means that people have a social investment in the "game" they play. If this game is fundamentally called into question, as I did in this case, there will be resistance from other "players":

... the group ... binds itself by a public profession which sanctions and imposes what it utters, tacitly defining the limits of the thinkable and the unthinkable from which it derives its power. It follows that the intrinsic difficulty of any explicit statement of the logic of practice is intensified by the obstacle of the whole set of authorized representations in which the group is willing to recognize itself.

(Bourdieu, 1980: 108)

If, furthermore, the power balance is an unequal one (and in Tim's and my case it tilted towards him as I was a contracted consultant who was paid for turning Tim's ideas into practice), it does not take a crystal ball to predict that challenging ideas taken for granted

and putting a person in power at risk by questioning the game being played will lead to a predicament such as this one in which Tim strongly expressed skepticism about my opinions. In Bourdieu's sense, his reaction defined the "limits of the thinkable" as an effort to maintain both his power in this situation and his identity as a practitioner.

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### ***Paradigm shift***

In retrospect, I cannot point out any one single stimulus that triggered a shift in my thinking. It was rather a growing and compelling desire to gain a deeper understanding of experiences like the ones described above. Knowing of my quest, a colleague recommended a book to me: *Emergence of Leadership* by Douglas Griffin (2002).

Reading Griffin was an enlightening experience for me. His thinking not only offered an approach that put into words the unease I had started to feel, but Griffin also put across his ideas in a very thought-provoking manner. Nevertheless, his writing criticized ideas I had chosen to serve as the very basis of my practice, a situation that provoked both resistance and anxiety in me. Still, it seemed to bear a closer resemblance to my experience than did Ulrich's practical advice. In particular, Griffin elaborated on two different concepts that made me contemplate my understanding of my practice in the most profound way. First, Griffin holds that modern systems thinking, when applied to understanding organizations, has its roots in a distorted application of Kantian theorizing (2002: 92). He criticizes the view of organizations as entities having an existence and behavior of their own. It was conducive for Kant's thought to conceive of humans *as if* they were forming systems. However, he was wary of conceptualizing human cooperation in terms of actual systems.

Second, in order to deal with the fact that humans still have the quality of being autonomous decision makers, a mode of thinking has emerged that Griffin terms "both ... and" thinking. He explains this as meaning that humans in corporate settings are usually seen as both members of organizations to which they are contributing and individuals acting independently who make decisions to influence that larger whole of which they are a part. This implies that humans can stand back from their organization to look at it and make rational decisions to steer it in an essentially formative way. To Griffin this is a simplified way of theorizing about human organizing that does not adequately address what it is people are *really* doing when cooperating in organizations.

Instead, he proposes conceiving of organizations as social objects where every single member makes decisions which in turn yield a blend of ideas, fantasies and actions which through their multitude alone will often lead to paradoxical situations, and so must leave any sort of steering in an Ulrichian sense questionable. For Griffin, organizations

are not reified things out there that can be acted upon as if they had the quality of material existence. The fact that a large body of modern management theory implicitly assumes just that has produced a practice of strategizing and understanding of the role of leaders where a few people in power will understand organizations as formative systems through which their rational ideas can be cascaded in a way such as I described it in my application of David Ulrich's approach. Unintended deviations from plans and strategic surprise can, however, not be accounted for in this framework. They can only be seen as the result of poorly managed processes.

In putting forth an alternative approach, Griffin and his colleagues draw on Hegelian thinking and particularly the way it has been taken up by Mead where humans are understood as shaping their environment and being shaped by it, both at the same time, exactly like the feeling in the debriefing session with Tim mentioned above. By taking into account Ralph Stacey's views, Griffin argues for upholding this paradoxical nature of human acting into the unknown through

... continuous, spontaneous action in which patterns are reproduced in repetitive forms as continuity of identity and, at the same time, as potential transformation of that identity.

(Griffin, 2002: 20)

Griffin and Stacey do not try to solve this paradox. They propose an approach they term "complex responsive processes" by which they try to understand what it is people are really doing when working in organizations, constantly acting into the unknown consciously and negotiating power imbalances in efforts to maintain their identities, sometimes despite a given strategy.

As in Tim's case, this kind of thinking can arouse anxiety and resistance in the most profound sense. Letting go of power officially that one thought one had over both processes and humans is exactly the kind of intellectual upheaval I encountered as well when I began questioning my own practice.

Relations of power are critical to understanding relations of mutual recognition. The concept of recognition figures prominently in the writings of Hegel (see Wood: 1990) as taken up by Honneth (1994) and Ricoeur (2005). It is rarely found in literature on OD work where acknowledging people for their efforts has a rather manipulative connotation of leading people through change according to the will of managers, not reflecting the potential repercussions of OD work on the latter. In my research, I will investigate the processes of mutual recognition and misrecognition in OD initiatives to explore how these affect my consultancy practice. By applying the implications of the concept of recognition for my own OD practice, I will determine how far it can influence my understanding of how processes of recognition and power relating impact the dynamics at play in OD work.

I have come to see that there are valid assumptions in the paradigms I have accepted in the past. Besides giving me a language which helps me to make contact easily with client organizations, they make up a substantial part of my identity as well. While those are important aspects, it seems that they have not made me feel I am a recognized member in my own area of practice. In my struggle for recognition, I have not allowed myself to apply ideas that felt rather natural to me.

In addition, taking the concept of recognition seriously would imply that managers and consultants like me would not have full power over the outcomes of the processes they design as the concept of recognition entails the idea of mutuality which in turn signals an element of unpredictability. Personally, that means that in my practice I have constantly denied that interaction with clients affects both our professional identity with this mutuality impacting the whole project and what this means in terms of how little its success can be planned. This insight left me with the question of how the practical conduct of OD initiatives would have to be rethought if the implications offered by the concept of recognition were taken into consideration and how my own practice would change in due course.

It was only when I started to take my experiences seriously that I became able to delve into a new kind of thinking. I think that investigating the theory of complex responsive processes will be a useful way of continuing to explore how processes of mutual recognition in relationship between others and myself can be instrumental in the

development of leaders in organizations. It is this matter which I intend to pursue over the course of this doctorate.

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## PROJECT 2

### RELATIONS OF RECOGNITION AND POWER IN AN INTERNAL ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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**The atavistic demon we disinherit is also  
the double we never fully leave behind.**

**(Richard Kearney, 2003: 117)**

#### ***Introduction***

IN THE COURSE of different merger processes, the company I am working for at the time of writing has become part of a globally active Human Resources (HR) services firm which employs different HR consultancies in one business line, some of which work at a local level while others act on a global scale. I worked for the German branch of the largest of these consultancies when those merging activities started to dominate German operations. Ultimately, this resulted in the fusion with a rather small German HR consulting company, and it is this company which I am working for while writing this Project. Counter-intuitively and for reasons not fully disclosed by the senior management, it was decided that this latter firm's brand name as well as its management team would be maintained while the more famous brand name of the firm I had been working for was not used. Still, close bonds have been retained with operations in other countries of my former employer, officially designated an affiliated company. In the course of those activities, I found myself as a member of a completely new team while at the same time many of my old colleagues were laid off after conversations with the new Managing Director (MD). Ultimately, I was the only one who was elected to become a member of the German management board of this smaller firm for which I head the leadership

consulting unit. I was assigned this position since I had built up this unit for my former employer over the last few years in Germany.

Conversations on how to position ourselves on our local market and within the international conglomerate of business units caused different struggles between me and others. For me personally, being a subject matter expert in my role—as I understood it at that time—this meant fostering the ongoing internal organization development activities. That is to say, I understood my role to include providing support to colleagues in coming to terms with the new organization structures that were produced in the course of the merger process. For example, I found myself in discussions where we tried to fuse the services I oversaw with those of the existing services of my new employer that were not located around leadership consulting, but around restructuring services. How far my early understanding of my task changed throughout the following months and what this meant in terms of my relationship with both my boss and colleagues will be the focus of my Project 2. Particular focus will be on the exploration of how my boss and I tried to enter into a fruitful relationship, how this process failed and how far the underlying dynamics can be accounted for by applying the Hegelian concept of recognition and an understanding of power relations as offered by complex responsive processes theory and other theorists.



### ***A new role: good intentions and unexpected consequences***

The years I had spent building the German leadership consulting unit for my former employer were both challenging and enriching. They were challenging in terms of a virtually non-existent infrastructure that needed to be established, implying no existing clarity about what leadership consulting meant for us, and no consultants that could be engaged for client assignments, let alone customers who would buy the services we now had on offer. Those years were enriching because building up the unit was a great learning experience and because colleagues valued my efforts to enlarge our market offerings substantially.

I was invited to internal meetings in Germany and abroad to present what I had been working on, to learn how colleagues ran their businesses, and to discuss how we would present ourselves on the different markets. These activities were highly appreciated by the MD I worked for at that time and by my colleagues. Likewise my efforts were acknowledged by international executives in our firm. Ultimately, my activities culminated in being awarded the company's "President's Award" for the acquisition and management of one of the largest leadership consulting projects this company had seen in its existence. This honor had never been granted to a German employee before and aroused even more curiosity in my work by colleagues and managers.

When we went through the aforementioned merger activities, the new MD found himself caught up in a process where he could not fully assess whom he would bring on board. When he made me the offer to become a management team member, he relied on the stories he was told about me as well as my own accounts of my work to make the assessment that I would be a valuable hire for the company.

### ***First experiences of cooperation***

My first invitation to a management team meeting was an awkward experience from many points of view. I had to travel to a small town in the back of beyond that had been chosen by the MD to be the company's headquarters since he lived in the rural area nearby. The gates opened to reveal a century-old school of the Jesuit order which had been beautifully refurbished. The MD's pretentious company car was parked in front of a

rose patch next to a fountain that oversaw the garden. The whole setting made the premises look rather more like a monastery than a consulting firm's head office. The MD greeted me warmly, and my future colleagues welcomed me as if I had always been a member of their team.

The meeting went smoothly, yet I sensed an underlying tension that I could not fully grasp at that time. What struck me was the way the MD spoke about the state of the company, current client assignments and internal projects. His views went totally unquestioned by anyone and seemed to follow a logic that could have just as easily been rejected, but nobody did. In addition, he was the one doing most of the speaking, and I realized that when colleagues had something to add they tended to hold back their opinions, exchanging glances instead. At times the MD would lean over the table and confront opposing views directly in an almost offensive manner as if he wanted to make sure that nobody would dispute his views. At one point he was called out to a telephone conversation, and the interaction changed dramatically. All of a sudden, people started to talk to one another as if they wanted to make up in a few minutes for all those things they had had no chance to address previously. A conversation emerged during which people freely shared their views, contested those of others and negotiated current issues. As soon as the MD returned, people fell silent again and he continued to give his views.

This brief account serves as a good example of how interaction in the workplace takes place against the background of power relations. The mere presence or absence of a person who is perceived to be the most powerful member of a group of people has an enormous impact on people's behaviors and speech acts. James C. Scott is Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University and has extensively researched how politics of power play out in human interaction. Drawing on insights of his research of how peasants in South-East Asia resist their dominators, he argued that subordinate groups generally showed the same behaviors as the peasants he had researched. His interest has not only been in understanding the way people are dominated by others, but also what strategies the dominated apply as a way to preserve their identities in the face of domination. In this context, he draws our attention to how subordinates behave in their dominators' absence, a phenomenon Scott refers to as living out of hidden transcripts. I



see clear parallels between Scott's insights on societal power relationships and those in my own and other organizations. Scott holds that:

Every encounter that brings together people of different statuses in such societies is designed to underline and reinforce those [power] differences by rules about language, gesture, tone, and dress.

(Scott, 1990: 31)

In our particular meeting, it appeared like the MD used the encounter to reassure himself and others of his position within the group. The mere proportion of speaking time clearly demonstrated who was in charge. In addition, his tone and the non-verbal cues he employed to underscore his points can be understood as a means of maintaining the power differences in the way Scott described it. Yet another interaction pattern emerged once he left the room, shaped by a transcript hidden to the MD. How the MD dominated the group and also how the remainder of the people accepted being dominated spurred my curiosity. What was everybody's part in this play in which we all were participating? Moreover, I wondered what all this meant for me and my role in this meeting setting which I was to experience once a month from now on.

In examining these questions, I want to consider a fundamental aspect of relations of power: their figurative patterning which paradoxically both enable and constrain at the same time us in our interactions as elaborated in complex responsive processes theory (Stacey, 2007; Stacey et al., 2000; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2002). In addition, I will explore how this understanding can be deepened if we take into consideration the interplay of relations of power with relations of recognition to illuminate how either aspect plays an important part in conceptualizing of human interaction in organizational settings.

### ***Hegelian dialectics and the notion of recognition***

In Hegel's conceptualization of how humans become self-conscious he emphasized the importance of social interaction (Wood, 1990: 84). Hegel sees changes in personality as an ongoing process fueled by a fundamental human desire to assert oneself against others and to gain self-certainty in overcoming the other. In this process the "I" is striving to establish itself in the other—the "I" tries to negate the other—and thereby to manifest itself in face of the other. This negation must, however, not annihilate the other since otherwise s/he would not sustain the experience of self-certainty.

In the interaction with another self-conscious human being, we experience a "certain mutuality, equality, even identity of ... desire and interest with that of the other ... that the other of which I am aware is myself—myself as other" (Wood, 1990: 86). Becoming aware of this mutually shared need for self-certainty is for Hegel the source from which self-consciousness arises, and he accounts for the underlying process with the shared desire to be recognized by the other: "Self-consciousness has an existence only through being recognized by another self-consciousness" (Hegel in Wood, 1990: 85). We want to be certain that the other recognizes us for what we are, but we do not want to meet this same need for recognition s/he has. As a consequence, we must engage in a struggle over recognition since without the other no recognition could be received, either, and this is why Hegel terms this specificity of human interaction a dialectic—paradoxically, the self and the other cannot exist without each other.

For Hegel, paradox is an ubiquitous phenomenon and he suggests that we cannot deny it. He instead proposes his dialectical method as a means to supersede paradoxes so that they become tolerable. This is important to Hegel because in his assessment we tend either to evade or to simplify any paradox confronting us, enabling us to believe that we can handle an otherwise unbearable situation. Nevertheless, for Hegel "... paradoxes cannot be avoided, done away with, or treated as mere illusions, as the understanding would wish" (Wood, 1990: 2).

Instead, Hegel proposes with his dialectical method to recognize the two opposing poles of a paradox as being equally valid at the same time depending on the individual standpoint. Thereby reconciling the opposition of two seemingly conflicting aspects is superseded (*aufgehoben*). The implication for our practical understanding of human

interaction is obvious: paradox and conflicting positions in human cooperation are unavoidable because perceiving reality is an interpretive act. Conflictual situations can be tolerated if we acknowledge that either party may be right in his/her conceptualization of reality. It then follows that there is no need to resolve conflict because it would necessarily mean that we simplified reality inappropriately. If we do not give in to the tendency to try to resolve paradox, but hold fast to the exploration of conflicting viewpoints, we supersede conflict and stay open for the paradoxical nature of our interaction. We can stop our efforts to oversimplify our understanding of our interaction and instead give full and due consideration to its richness.

Hegel's thinking adds important aspects to my line of inquiry. While management literature in the dominant discourse will normally view conflict as a sign of non-optimal cooperation that needs to be handled properly by conflict resolution techniques (e.g. Rosenberg, 2003; Glasl, 1999; zur Bensen and Maleh, 2001), Hegel views conflict as an essential prerequisite for the rise of human awareness. What is more, it is a characterizing element of our experience in organizational settings and, from a Hegelian standpoint, cannot be resolved by proper management. It needs to be acknowledged and be taken up in the organizational discourse so that we do not fall into static opposition. Moreover, conflict and ambiguity may provide a means by which novel practices emerge and can thus be both destructive and transformative.

If we contrast Hegel's understanding of processes of mutual recognition and their conflictual elements with how recognition is dealt with in the management literature of the dominant discourse, we find a rather one-sided view: namely, that leaders must recognize their subordinates for the good they have done in a fairly unspontaneous and rational manner. So Fred Kofman, a widely acclaimed management consultant, in his book *Conscious Business* (2006) sets out the rules for proper recognition of employees:

Effective recognition is direct. Rather than speaking about others in the third person ... recognize them in second person. ... Effective recognition is specific. Rather than using generalities, identify the specific consequences of the other's tangible actions. Effective

recognition is respectful. Rather than telling the person who she is, let her know how her actions affected you positively.

(Kofman, 2006: 237)

When presented to managers in this type of formula structure, recognition is reduced to a way of treating people correctly so that they “create a culture of impeccability” (ibid.: 238). Recognition is viewed as if it could be granted freely at the will of managers. There is no need for concern about ambiguity since it does not figure in this conceptualization of recognition. In fact, this represents exactly the sort of reductionism that Hegel was so wary of: the employee is not seen as an active agent, but rather as someone who can be directed according to leaders’ will. Since recognition is essentially seen to be a one-sided act, there is no need to acknowledge or work with and through paradox. So the idea of how humans cooperate is seen at its core as a rather manipulative action on the part of managers which they must master with the ultimate aim of controlling their staff. A culture of “impeccability” can be brought about if the manager sends the right messages and ensures that they are direct, specific and respectful so that they are received in the right spirit by employees. It is this one-dimensional view of how people should be led at work which leads me to another aspect: how the aspect of recognition is taken up in every day communication.

### *Hegel, Mead and communication*

George H. Mead draws on Hegel, and he has been particularly influential for authors in the tradition of complex responsive processes theory (e.g., Stacey et al., 2000; Griffin, 2002). Mead offers a unique understanding of human communication which complements my discussion in an important way. He pinpoints the fact that meaning in human communication arises in the process where one person makes a communicative gesture to another and the other responds to that gesture, resulting in a new response in the other and so on and so forth. Meaning arises in the ongoing processes of gesturing and responding *taken together*; they form one social act.

The person making the gesture may anticipate to some degree the response s/he will stimulate in the other. However, s/he can never fully determine that response. This is so because the responder will always be in a situation where his/her response is marked by his/her current emotional state, his own life history and by his cultural background, all of which the one making the gesture can only know in part.

Still, whenever we make a gesture we can experience what reactions and emotions our gesture evokes in ourselves in the form of internal role-play. This is by no means sufficient, however, to be in a position to fully determine the responder's reaction. Since our own life history and current emotional experience is significant for our internal role-play as well, "the possibility for miscommunication is substantial" (Stacey, 2007: 273).

Such understanding adds an important dimension to thinking about recognition in human interaction: the process of recognizing others and being recognized by them is always an ambiguous one because at the root of human interaction there will necessarily be communicative acts. If communication holds ready the potential for surprise and misunderstanding, the process of mutual recognition obviously calls for constant exploration and negotiation and can certainly never be managed comprehensively in one way or another.

Management literature in the dominant discourse, however, takes exactly such a stance. Here the idea prevails that communicative gestures can be sent in one right way so that they are received by a communicating partner in the same manner the sender of the message intended it. This thinking is known as the sender-receiver model (Stacey, 2007: 251). If we turn to one of the most prominent writers in management literature on how to bring about change in organizations, John Kotter, Professor Emeritus of Leadership, at Harvard Business School, we find that in talking about his experience of how managers perform when convincing employees to participate in change programs that:

Managers undercommunicate, and often not by small amount. Or they inadvertently send inconsistent messages. In either case, the net result is the same: a stalled information.

(Kotter, 1996: 85)

This is offered as an explanation as to why transmitting meaning does not go as planned. Kotter goes on to say that those responsible for communication, in his words “the guiding coalition” (ibid.: 21), need to present their message in different ways (meetings, memos, communication with direct supervisor, company newsletters, etc.) and make the message as simple and colorful as necessary so that people find it easier to comprehend the sent message.

Such understanding is in stark contrast to the standpoint described above. Current management literature deals with communication in much the same manner as it deals with recognition. There is a clear idea that managers are capable of practicing a form of adequate communication. In essence, managers are regarded as responsible for delivering results by manipulating employees so that they conform with top management’s strategy through mastering the sending part in the sender-receiver model. Furthermore, there is a rationale for communicating successfully similar to what we saw for recognizing employees properly: a rather mechanistic understanding of human cooperation prevails in either conceptualization. There is one right way of recognizing and communicating, and “getting it right” is viewed as a skill which managers can learn and apply when needed.



### ***The dialectics of recognition and power: an ongoing experience***

I want to propose a different understanding of recognition and communication reflecting an understanding of management which is not guided by a desire for emotional mastery or control over conflict, recognition or communication, but by the idea that our experience in the workplace is necessarily an emotionally laden interaction which can never be completely managed.

### ***The constancy of struggles over recognition and power***

Hegel's idea of the struggle for recognition and Mead's understanding of how we form our identities in communicative interaction as a never-ending process are appropriate for deepening the understanding of my own experience in my company. They reflect the ongoing struggle over recognition in organizational contexts, and they imply an element of ongoing rivalry and conflict which is necessary for people to maintain their sense of identity.

Stacey (2007: 356) has elaborated on how power dynamics are at the root of identity formation in organizational contexts by pointing to communicative interaction as their very basis. He refers to a study by Elias and Scotson (1965/ 1994 in Stacey, 2007: 352-357) in which they describe how newcomers in a British housing estate became caught up in dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in their interaction with an established group of inhabitants. One of Stacey's main conclusions from this research, and one that is akin to Hegel's notion of recognition, is that power can be seen as a "structural characteristic of all human relationships" (p. 353). Stacey stresses the qualities, simultaneously enabling and constraining, that power relationships wield over all involved parties. While a more powerful group may overtly be seen to exercise power over a less powerful group, the relationship will not function unless the less powerful group accepts the role of the dominated in the interaction. That is, each group needs the other in some way to sustain the power dynamics. This need for the other is constantly negotiated in everyday communication both within their own groups and with members of the other group.

Stacey's interpretation of Elias's notion of power shows parallels with the Hegelian dialectic of recognition. Both authors point to the never-ending process in

which we experience relationships of recognition and power when interacting with others. Both aspects are intertwined since in the process of domination both participants must recognize themselves and the other for what they are. As long as we are bound in power relationships, we carry on the struggle for recognition. As both Hegel and Stacey make plain, neither aspect ever ceases.

### *Dialectics of power and recognition in practice*

At the first management meeting described above, the MD seemingly used different strategies to gain recognition from his management team members, reflected in his spending money on a luxurious office and company car as well as in the way he forced people to pay attention and support his points of view continuously. In retrospect, I remember feeling uncomfortable at this public display of power.

I sensed that I had become part of a team which produced a specific dynamic when coming together, and I found it hard not to be caught up in it. We were bound together by both relationships of recognition and relationships of power. If we think about power relationships as a patterning principle which underlies human interaction, it becomes clear why I felt so immersed in this process. In complex responsive processes theory, power is understood as the condition of human interaction itself which enables and constrains at the same time all who are involved in that interaction. I argue that the constant struggle for recognition serves equally to support the enabling and constraining elements of our interaction. This is typically the case when in an organizational setting relationships between bosses and employees are formalized by means of a work contract which constitutes their membership with one organization and not another. Belonging to an organization triggers the experience of being included in a certain group from which others are excluded. Such experience simultaneously enables feelings of group cohesion while it constrains in terms of the perceived necessity to comply with the group's ideology (Stacey, 2007: 358-359).

### *Group cohesion, recognition and identity*

I felt uncomfortable because I was uncertain whether I, such a new member on this team, was in a position to offer my views as freely as I was accustomed to doing. At one point,



the MD started talking about my former employer which was now our affiliated company and with which I still closely identified. He made plain how useless their American approach would be to the German market and that in fact, through the merger in Germany, they would gain a lot more than his company would. He would transfer knowledge to them and not vice-versa. Now being a part of a much larger international conglomerate of consultancies seemed to him to be a burden since it required more administrative efforts on his part while he would not get anything such as consulting approaches to meet German clients' needs in return. To everybody's surprise, I confronted his views when I mentioned that the MD's firm was now in a position to compete with much larger competitors for potentially global assignments. I pointed this out as an obvious benefit for our consultancy which had historically approached German customers only. Furthermore, we could also readily apply many of the tools that had been developed in the USA and those had already been used in previous years in the German market by my former employer. He looked annoyed by my remarks before he strongly denied my point of view by repeating what he had said before in an even more forceful manner. It appeared he had to reiterate his viewpoint to demonstrate that his was the more valid opinion.

Although we were negotiating a practical issue, there was a struggle to be recognized by the other underlying the negotiation process. We both felt we could dominate the other (he because he was the boss, and I because I was the only one in this group who had worked for the company he now spoke so unfavorably about). During the course of this interaction, we had to discuss the issue at hand while constantly facing the risk of being negated by the other. While this is a struggle over recognition, Hegel makes us aware of the fact that this is how we construct our identities in interaction with others. It requires the other for us to understand the part we play in our interactions. This is nothing we can ever resolve, but is rather a constant process in which we must negotiate again and again in the potentially conflictual conversation with the other not only the overt topic of our discussion, but essentially our understanding of ourselves, and this process continues throughout our entire life.

***Overt struggle for cooperation and covert struggle for recognition***

Since a leadership consulting division had not been set up by my new employer prior to my being hired, my new boss and I were eager to find ways to interlink this area of business with the company's core business of supporting clients in restructuring efforts. As restructuring assignments tend to imply the laying off of larger parts of a client's workforce, service offerings in this field focus on supporting those who will be laid off in finding a new job. The idea behind such services is not only to reduce the workforce as deemed necessary by the client, but to do this as humanely as possible for those who will have to leave and not to demoralize those who will stay and possibly have to shoulder a higher workload while they are experiencing the loss of their colleagues.

One day the MD called me up to inform me that he had been in contact with a potential client. They had to reduce headcount, yet also wanted to make sure that some people whom they wanted to retain would not be overwhelmed by those activities and leave the company voluntarily. In addition, this would require a partial re-thinking of the organizational structure, and I should prepare ideas of how we could support the client in this endeavor. He proposed to discuss these at our next personal meeting. At the end of our telephone conversation and more as a marginal note than anything else, it became clear that the contacts with this company had not been as recent as I had believed. Indeed, my boss had already assigned a project manager, a colleague of mine (Martin) who was very knowledgeable in leading restructuring projects. Our next personal meeting would coincide with a meeting of the whole management team to which Martin belonged as well.

The next day, Martin and I had a conversation on the phone, and I was astonished to learn that he had been involved in activities with this client for several weeks. At that moment, we were facing a rather critical situation since another consulting firm which faced the termination of their contract now tried to offer services which overlapped with our service offerings to a considerable degree. They had proposed putting the managers the client wanted to retain through an assessment process in order to work out developmental needs and to offer programs to meet these needs consistently. I was glad to hear that our competitor had made such a proposition as I believed we could propose a

much better alternative that would give our company an advantage and build our reputation.

If managers have just been through a major restructuring process during which both peers and associates have to leave, it appears counter-productive to now put the remaining managers through the stressful experience of an assessment process. I mentioned to Martin that I thought it highly unlikely that any of those managers would find such a process credible. They were more likely to feel betrayed since assessments are usually conducted for selection purposes. In the context of laying off parts of their team in the first place, such an intervention could now easily create the impression that the process of reducing headcount had not come to an end; it was now entering the second phase aimed at the remaining managers.

During my remarks, Martin remained silent. I wondered why he was not as excited as I was. He indicated that he had not viewed the situation in this light when the client told him about this initiative of the competitor. On the contrary, this idea had made sense to him, and so he had suggested to the client that we had had the same thought and that this was exactly what he wanted to discuss with the client. The reason for his initial silence about my suggestion was now quite clear.

While I did not doubt his good intentions, I could feel my anger rising. I immediately began imagining my talking about services in areas where I saw myself as the expert as a way to explain Martin's inability to see the approach needed for this client. Furthermore, I could not understand why my boss had not at least made me part of the project team. Caught up as I was in the process of becoming a member of a new group, it seemed to me that I still played the role of an outsider. This project made me wonder whether I was a trusted partner for some of the management team members and I had to face the fact that, for some, I was not. Feeling neglected at this point stirred my emotions. Stacey offers one view of how one could account for my reaction:

... social relations ... are reflected in the private role-play of individual minds, conferring feelings of superiority on the powerful and feelings of inferiority on the weak. Eventually,

however, the weak or marginalized groups will probably retaliate with what may be thought by others to be unreasonable vigor.

(Stacey 2007: 355)

I wondered why Martin had not thought about bringing me in earlier. And if Martin had not had the idea, why hadn't my boss? I experienced a blend of different emotions: feelings of inferiority, powerlessness and hostility took over—I felt alienated and excluded.

I called a colleague, Jason, whom I deemed very competent in my field of business. He was also a member of the management team. I had previously felt that he was the only one I could speak to on how to merge the leadership consulting business line with our restructuring business as he was very competent in both domains. He shared my evaluation of the situation, and I asked him to join our meeting prior to the upcoming management meeting. He promised to give some thought to the situation and to describe his views at that time.

I felt relief after this conversation. I regained my self-confidence that Martin, Jason and I would together find a way to proceed. I was not sure what it was exactly that we would be working on, yet I sensed that this was the time when we could utilize intense discussions to negotiate how to fuse our different service lines while working on a concrete client project.

As the meeting neared, I spoke with a freelance consultant colleague of mine whom I knew had supported clients in very similar situations in the past on different occasions. We examined the situation and finally talked about a procedure he had successfully applied in such instances in the past. He proposed devising a process in which the remaining managers would not be assessed, but rather split into project teams that would collaborate on the future organization structure of the company. People would not only engage in the process of building a “new” organization but would identify with the new structure since they would have essentially worked it out themselves rather than

finding it imposed on them by the senior management. I liked the idea and thought that it could be developed into a much more reasonable intervention than the assessments.

When we met up, Martin and I spent some time together and we discussed the idea the consultant colleague and I had devised. Jason had planned to join us later, but he did not come. When our boss joined us, Martin and I felt we were in a good position to offer a service that not only made sense but would set us apart from the competition as well. Our boss listened carefully to our suggestions before he mentioned that a procedure like the one we had thought of would have a tremendous impact on the way we had positioned ourselves towards the client. I said that I thought such a procedure would not only be a very powerful intervention for this client, but that it also posed a unique way to service clients with restructuring needs in more general terms. He did not seem convinced and he said that we would not meet the client's present needs with this type of service and that it was much too laborious to install such a process now. I sensed his resistance and reassured him that such a process would only last a few weeks and that we could employ a consultant to help us with such a project who had exceptional experience of how to operate in such circumstances. My boss's answers became even curter. The time frame was too tight, such a service was not known to him and he doubted that anyone had ever done consulting in such a way.

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### *Strategies of domination*

At the heart of the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense is the idea that if in this struggle one proves more powerful than the other, the more powerful will negate the other in a sense that the dominated will be cancelled out dialectically—the dominator will subjugate the dominated in order to feel certain in the face of the other and to maintain the experience of a stable identity.

This account of my experience seems to be a good example of how this process can be experienced in practice. Although it felt bizarre since we both were trying to find a way to put ourselves in a position to further strengthen our relationship with the client, we both felt uncomfortable in our struggle to negate the other while not being negated ourselves. Seeking to bring our discussion for the moment to an acceptable end, I suggested inviting the consultant whom I knew would freely share his experience. My boss did not seem delighted and said, “Then there would be two strangers in our midst,” and left the room. I was shocked, as was Martin. This was the ultimate negation, and besides being perplexed I felt overwhelmed by his overt display of power.

Within our struggle for recognition, our boss—by means of the asymmetry in the power relations underlying our relationship—forced us to recognize him as the most powerful interlocutor who could even dare to have the last word and leave the room. Still, in the process of questioning their manager’s ability to lead, there is potential that subordinates cause feelings of anxiety and frustration and ultimately aggression in their managers. When my boss ended the discussion gruffly, it exemplified how power relationships in the workplace affect all involved. Such experience, it appears to me, resembles Stacey’s understanding of how managers and subordinates conjointly play a vital part in patterning the power dynamics which underlie their relationship.

This meeting was followed by the team meeting, a substantial part of which was devoted to the suggestions I had worked out. I presented what Martin and I had been working on and then mentioned that our boss, who was in the room as well, did not support this suggestion. He attacked the concept as he had done before and favored the assessment process, apparently not to put the client off, as he deemed it too daunting to confuse the client with a new approach. Jason remained rather quiet. At one point I asked him to give his view since I hoped to receive support from him. I knew that he did not

like the idea of assessments and I wondered why he did not add his point of view. It took a while until he started to stammer that he would have difficulty in offering an assessment procedure at this stage. Yet he also understood our boss's viewpoint and certainly would not want to undermine our relationship with the client, either. Without warning, our boss mentioned that a conference call with the client had been scheduled for the afternoon, so we would have to work out what we wanted to say within the next two hours. Even more surprisingly, our boss said that he wanted Jason to do most of the talking with the client while he suggested that I act as a listener only.

I felt humiliated. All my work over recent weeks had been in vain and, even worse, I had not managed to take advantage of this opportunity to become a trusted partner for my boss. Martin looked at me and I could see how perplexed he was. Jason stared at the floor and our boss decided to take a break. Jason approached me and said that he could not understand why things had developed the way they had. I replied that I was equally at a loss and that I would have wished him to state his conviction as clearly as he had done on the phone two weeks before. I went on to say that now we would still have to think about what he would say to the customer, and neither of us could think of a proper strategy for the conversation. When the time for the call neared, we gathered around our boss' desk and he rang the client's HR Director.

Sitting in silence and listening to Jason's explanations made me angry. He built an argument for why conducting assessments would not be helpful at this point in time, using mainly my arguments. He did not manage to make a single concrete suggestion, proposing instead another meeting to think things through. I was surprised to see that he rejected the assessment approach and even more so that our boss sat and listened quietly. When we finished the call, there was a great tension in the room. Everybody sensed that something had gone wrong, and none of us dared to explore the process at this moment. Later, Jason came to me and said that until he had started to talk on the phone, he had not been sure what it was what he wanted to say. While I appreciated his frankness, I sensed that he applied a different strategy than I did in building a more fruitful relationship with our boss. He never offered criticism of the MD's views in public and so apparently did not put him at risk of appearing powerless.

### ***Power, recognition and domination***

This day marked a major break in the relationship between my boss and me. From that point on, we avoided each other as much as possible. We rarely spoke on the phone and never had joint client calls. The only time we met was during the monthly management meetings, and even then I found myself not taking part in discussions most of the time.

### *Misrecognition as domination*

To make sense of what my boss and I experienced at that time, I want to scrutinize the way power and strategies of domination operate to constrain employees in organization settings. Steven Lukes has written one of the standard works in this field, *Power: A Radical View* (2005). He describes here how different forms of domination can be seen to influence people's identity and what they think about themselves (ibid.: 118-119). So domination can rest upon a strategy to weaken people's power of judgment, skewing people's perception of themselves. Lukes discerns different strategies dominators apply to sustain the experience of an asymmetrical power relationship; one of them is the misrecognition of otherness in such a way that the dominated find themselves in a group or society which perpetuates a "confining and contemptible picture of themselves, thereby imprisoning them in a ... distorted ... mode of being" (ibid.: 119).

Another strategy can be seen in what Lukes terms "unwanted recognition" (ibid.). He refers to those instances in which people are coerced into conforming to attitudes which are held by the group of dominators. This case can take an even more extreme form when those "in control of the means of interpretation" project their values and norms onto the dominated group, "simultaneously stereotyping them and marking them as 'other'" (ibid.: 120).

In all these various ways, domination can induce and sustain internal constraints upon self-determination—ways of undermining and distorting people's confidence ... and subverting their judgment as to how best to advance their interests.

(Lukes, 2005: 122)



As stated previously, power relationships underlie any relationship between humans; they are an intrinsic element of any kind of human interaction. Power relationships serve to enable and constrain us mutually, paradoxically at the same time, and hence power can never be assigned to one person only. However, power fluctuates depending on the relative need one has for the other. Lukes expands on this point by describing how a group of dominators uses strategies of misrecognition to impact the way we construe ourselves and how we come to think differently of how self-determined we are. Implicit in both my account and Lukes' conceptualization of domination and power is the notion of inherent conflict. I will now turn to how conflict is conceptualized in most of the current management literature and later offer an alternative view.



### ***Managing conflict***

In the prominent management literature, there are different examples of authors who give advice on how to deal with conflict, including circumstances such as those I have described. In this literature (e.g., Rosenberg, 2003; Glasl, 1999; Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1990), we will usually find a view that conflict can be dealt with constructively, i.e., in a way that will resolve the conflict and reconcile the parties involved. Normally in this literature there will be a proposed approach in formula form, including the idea that following this approach will make the resolution of conflict more likely. Parties are perceived as opponents, and having a conflict as such is seen as problematic. Implicit in this assumption is that conflict needs to be overcome. I will discuss here a very prominent concept in the field—Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication—so that I can later contrast it with the ideas I have developed so far throughout this project.

Marshall Rosenberg is an internationally recognized authority on dealing with conflict and is perhaps best known for his conflict resolution strategy known as “Nonviolent Communication” (Rosenberg, 2003). A disciple of Carl Rogers, he has been highly influenced by the latter’s humanistic ideas. Later on, he examined the ideas of Manfred Max-Neef, a German economist who developed a concept for understanding human economic behavior based on people’s needs. Having published over ten books, all based on his idea of Nonviolent Communication, Rosenberg today acts as a consultant in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and works with other war-torn states as well as with violent prisoners and pupils.

At the heart of his approach is the idea that psychologically or physically destructive action by people is an expression of their own unmet needs. In *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (2003), Rosenberg makes us aware of seven basic needs that every human being must fulfill: autonomy (choosing plans for one’s goals and values), physical nurturance (air, food, shelter, sexual expression etc.), celebration (celebrating fulfilled dreams, but also mourning), play (fun and laughter), integrity (authenticity, meaning and self-worth), interdependence (appreciation, community, acceptance, etc.) and spiritual communion (harmony, inspiration and peace) (ibid.: 210). If any of those needs are not met, the lack of fulfillment is likely to lead to some form of

aggressive expression. Since human beings in Western cultures in particular have been brought up with an understanding that unruly or even aggressive behavior will normally lead to some form of punishment, either emotional or physical, people will often show self-defensive behaviors when caught up in conflict. At the same time, they are left unable to express what they truly need in a manner acceptable to others. They will prefer to assert themselves by defending their position and blaming the others in order to avoid the anticipated experience of guilt and shame.

Rosenberg proposes a four-step strategy as a means of breaking this vicious circle: observing a situation without evaluating it, connecting this experience to one's rising emotions and unmet needs, expressing this experience, and linking it to a clear request (ibid.: 209). So instead of demanding that an employee accomplish a set goal by saying: "You never hand in the strategy documents on time. How can you be so ignorant?", an NVC way of saying this would look like this: "Greg, in these past two months, there have been four occasions on which you handed the strategy documents in late (observation without evaluation). I am annoyed (feeling aroused in me) because our department is being perceived by the senior management as unreliable in more general terms and yours and other colleagues' work is not duly appreciated (need for interdependence not being met). I would like you to tell me if you would be willing to hand in your strategy documents on time next week (clear request)." Importantly Rosenberg distinguishes a request from a demand. A demand in his view will be followed by some form of blame or punishment when it is not being fulfilled (ibid.: 85). A request, on the other hand, simply states what we would like the other to do that we see would help all involved.

Rosenberg acknowledges that this technique does not always work because we never know in advance if the receiver of the request will hear a request or a demand. This does not become clear until we receive the other's answer. So if the employee's answer is, "You always pick me when you are talking about who is not handing in their documents on time," he apparently heard a demand because he is defending his position. So when applying the NVC method, one needs to be patient with the other and keep on trying. For the above example, this might mean answering: "Greg, I sense you are frustrated by what I just said. What could I have done differently so you did not react so strongly?"

I find both interesting and confusing aspects in this understanding of how to deal with conflict. The idea of a concrete technique is appealing to me since it gives clear advice on how to act in a challenging situation. In addition, there is an understanding in this approach that goes beyond the rather mechanistic sender-receiver model of communication. While there is mention of a sender and a receiver, there is no promise that NVC message can be conveyed correctly since we can never predict the other's reaction. To this extent, Rosenberg admits to the ambiguous aspects of human communication.

The catch with such approaches, however, is that we can easily start to think that by application of a procedure or technique we can manipulate the interaction in a desired way, and it is exactly this kind of thinking which prevents us from trying to stay open and to comprehend what is at stake for all those involved. In fact, NVC is a way to close the conversation down and to bring it to an end where neither party seems to understand what was wrong with their interaction in the past and how to "get it right" now and in future. There is then a danger that human interaction will be perceived as something that can culminate in a way of communicating properly and by those means make our interactions flow more easily. Viewed from this angle, the idea of NVC conveys a highly idealized understanding of how techniques can help us "master" the possibly conflictual processes of interacting with others essentially to manipulate and control them.

Stacey (2007) offers a different understanding of how to make sense of conflicts. In drawing on Groot (in Stacey, 2007: 309), he distinguishes two forms of conflict: polarized and explorative. In polarized conflict, people are seen as two opposing forces and overcoming the opponent is understood to be the ultimate goal. From a complex responsive processes perspective, Stacey devotes equal attention to the explorative aspect of conflict, which is marked by a process in which people both act and challenge each other's acts at the same time. In the process of finding a way forward in our interactions, we constantly negate being negated by the other while the other does the same to us. Stacey points to the fact that when conflict arises in organizational settings, this will likely originate from the way people negotiate in local interaction broader guidelines set by senior managers, as was the case when my boss asked me to prepare an approach for moving forward with our client. Since such negotiation is at the heart of human

cooperation in organizations, the idea of possibly being able to solve conflicts may deprive people of a necessary element for turning a strategy into action. In Stacey's view, conflict is not something which can ever be resolved, as is proposed by NVC, for example. Instead, conflict is a necessary element of human cooperation through which our thought moves, power differences fluctuate, and through which we recognize or misrecognize others when experiencing ourselves in relation to others. While this carries the potential for polarized conflict, not considering conflict's explorative dimension may imply a fairly reduced understanding of what people are doing together when they cooperate in an organizational context.

To me, an approach to managing conflicts as proposed in NVC is a rather limited in understanding what people are experiencing in the process of turning managers' strategies into action since here people are understood as being divided among different parties, almost as if they were not interdependent. In contrast, Hegelianism or complex responsive processes theory not only postulates an understanding of co-constructed social reality, but stress its paradoxical elements, dialectics, (which can never be reconciled). NVC emphasizes instead the solving of conflicts and offers a technique that can be applied on any occasion where a conflict arises, as if the conflict was independent of the people who are taking part in it. So taking the ideas of Hegelian dialectics and complex responsive processes seriously allows a different understanding of what conflict is and the extent to which it necessarily underlies many instances of human interaction.

Two main points follow from this. First, conflict cannot be managed away, and, second, conflict is a necessary element when humans come together to negotiate how they want to work together. If conflict is an essential part of inter-human experience and has both an explorative and a polarized dimension, how could conflict be accounted for in a way that appreciates all its aspects? To me, ideas espoused by some researchers in the field of inter-subjective recognition appear to give promising hints on how to think about conflicts.

### ***Recognition and conflict: flow of the selves***

The basic idea behind the concept of recognition is an understanding of an ongoing exchange between self and other. When interacting with others, we inevitably open ourselves to engage in the process of establishing our self in the other. Since both interlocutors engage in this process, we must negate this activity of the other at the same time. While we try to become recognized by the other and open ourselves up, we still try to maintain a basic sense of self in order not to disintegrate and to remain able to negate the other. When engaged in this psychological process, we do not stay in the other, however, but we repeatedly return to ourselves only to reiterate the process. We come to recognize our self in and through the other.

Throughout this movement from our self through the other and back to our self, the described “flow of the self” may not be as smooth as it would appear initially, however. In this process, we constantly negotiate aspects of ourselves: what we think we are capable of doing and what not; what groups of people we identify with and how we feel accepted by such groups. In other words, we are negotiating aspects of our identity. Such processes carry high potential for conflict as we have seen. Complex responsive processes theory adds to that understanding the stress on explorative qualities of such conflict. It is in conflictual processes through which we explore the other and ourselves both at the same time, and again and again in any encounter with any interlocutor. Additionally, by exploring aspects of our own self in the other, we may be surprised since in the interaction with any new other we will likely discover very different aspects of our own self. This element of surprise can result in both pleasure and pain, and either experience may cause the flow of the self from our self through the other and back to our self to be blocked. I now want to turn to this aspect of how the flow of self may be brought to a halt.

### ***Tolerating anxiety and exploring conflict***

If I take this understanding of human interaction to make sense of the relationship with my boss, it makes two aspects of our relationship plain. First, it highlights how we have become stuck in our interaction, and, second, why we remain stuck to this point. In our interaction, we have come to a point where we do not engage in an ongoing explorative

process which constitutes the dynamics of inter-subjective recognition. We try to prevent any form of conflict. The ideas underlying the theory of inter-subjective recognition suggest that what we can do is continue to explore ourselves in our interaction to try to find new ways cooperating. If we do not engage in such a process, however, then we have to accept that our understanding of our self in the face of the other becomes rather static.

For Hegel, it was important to keep this process going so that we can return to our self with ever more opportunities for self-discovery. Since this process is marked by a continuous communicative interaction and because, as we have seen, communication processes bear much potential for misunderstanding, we may experience both explorative and polarized conflict at the same time. To fully acknowledge that this is so while not stopping the discovering process meant for Hegel to be self-aware and to attain personal freedom.

Hannah Arendt (1970) has made the point that once we find ourselves unable to engage with one another politically—which for her is the basis for the exercise of power—this makes violent action much more likely. In distinguishing between power and violence, she argues that power relationships are constituted as soon as human beings begin to form a group (*ibid.*: 44). Violence, in its most extreme form, can be seen when opposed by power. Arendt cites the case of unarmed Czech protestors who hindered Russian tanks from moving forward during the Prague Spring (*ibid.*: 52-53). Power balances began to fluctuate once the Czech people refused to grant their support to the Russian regime. The immediate response came in the form of military display of artifacts of violence because the lack of support signaled the disintegration of the current power structure.

By the same token, one could argue that leaders in organizations never have power over others only. Their power depends on the group of employees which supports the senior management. As soon as the senior management experiences a shift in power balances, as in my case when I began questioning the authority of my MD in public, this may provoke violent action to keep the power balance the way it is (*ibid.*: 49-50). So for Arendt the use of violence is essentially a sign of lessening power of a group of dominators. The question becomes how my boss and I could possibly re-engage in the

process of the flowing selves and how we could return to a less violent form of cooperation.

Richard Kearney, Professor of Philosophy at University College Boston, has concerned himself with such phenomena in his book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003). He notes here that all self-acknowledgement and understanding of the self requires an active engagement with the other.

If one closes off the other's passing in and out of the self, condemning the subject to a cloistered, autistic ego, then the other becomes so other as to remain utterly alienating – an absolutely separate alterity which ultimately ... paralyses.

(Kearney, 2003: 80)

It appears to me that it is exactly this paralysis which my boss and I are currently experiencing. Seeking to “resist this option of self-ruin” Kearney postulates an understanding where neither “[t]he other is so traumatically estranging as to hold me hostage. Nor is it so miserably abject as to make me imperious” (ibid.: 81). We should constantly reflect and be aware so that we not take a stance towards the other which would cause them to become so strange that there would not be a relational basis. Instead, we should aim to “retain a basic fluidity” (ibid.) in the process of the flowing selves. In my own experience, I have found myself caught up in a dynamic where I sense difficulty in opening up and enduring the possibility of fear and shame this might cause, even though an open exchange would mark a necessary precondition for a more engaging relationship with my boss. To what extent would Kearney's idea then help me in overcoming my fear of being rejected again? How would I make the other “that little less alien that we can tender (however provisionally) different interpretations of this or that other” (ibid.)?

Only later does Kearney address such issues in his book when he speaks about how we experience evil in others and how easy it is to close down any kind of emotional or cognitive, let alone communicative, interaction in the face of it. Kearney proposes a practice of “working-through” (ibid.: 103-104) and “pardoning” (ibid.: 105-106). By dint



of “working-through”, he alerts us to acknowledge otherness, and that such otherness will possibly contain an element of evil at least in our eyes. We need to take the time to experience the other in all their richness, and this includes negative aspects as well, especially because they may have “something to say or show us about ourselves” (p. 34). By such engagement, Kearney believes, we open up the possibility of overcoming our feelings of helplessness and see a chance for self-renewal.

... it is a way of learning to live with the monsters in our midst so that by revisiting and renaming them we might outlive them.

(Kearney, 2003: 104)

Kearney proposes a practice of “diacritical hermeneutics” in which the flow of the selves should neither be hindered by dismissing otherness prematurely to maintain a feeling of integrity nor should the other be welcomed uncritically because one could not discern immediately if the other brought good or bad. In taking a critical stance towards the other and oneself before that other, both at the same time, Kearney promotes dialogic exploration to make sense of one’s attitude and conduct in the face of the other. Through “pardoning” we transgress the seemingly rational calculus of “eye for an eye”. We give something for which we do not expect anything in return: we forgive. By forgiving, Kearney goes on to say with Ricoeur, “we give a future to the past” (ibid.: 105). Pardoning can break through the experience of a vicious circle and a deadlock as formerly perceived vanishes. Struggle and forgiveness are therefore at the heart of keeping the flow of selves alive. The act of recognition is more than acknowledgement of the other. It is a deep acceptance of the other in his/her right to be different. More importantly, it means accepting ourselves in and through the other. The other is both, different and the same. This may not do away with our anxieties. But it may help us to accept them as a necessary element of the conflictual dimension of human interrelating.

Staying actively engaged in empathically exploring the other’s otherness and what we have in common with that otherness is certainly at the very core of how to endure conflictual aspects of our relationships, either explorative or polarized. Moreover, the

ability to forgive may serve as a reminder that nobody is perfect. While we are quick to blame the other and expecting of him/her certain qualities, we are oftentimes less critical with ourselves. Moving from being critical to pardoning may—within those inter-relational terms in which we are thinking here—be a help for both the other and our self. Kearney by no means claims that this will be sufficient, but the stress in facing our anxieties and being indulgent with the other and subsequently with ourselves is for Kearney the foundation of staying actively engaged with the other despite any anxieties it may arouse in us.

The difference here to an approach like Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication is of course in the attitude. A technique like NVC by no means speaks to our anxieties, let alone helps us acknowledge them. It focuses instead on a solution which becomes highly likely through the application of NVC. Rosenberg reminds us to be patient with the other. I would want to add that at the same time we need be patient with ourselves as well. By practicing NVC we may likely fall prey to the illusion that we can manipulate the other for their and our own "well-intended" good, and it reflects the idea that in the end we are in control over the other and the result of our interaction.

In contrast, Kearney summons another form of engagement with the other which to me appears more practical: an equanimity which does not alienate us from our practical experience, but one which takes our anxieties and shortcomings seriously. We neither lock ourselves up, preventing the other from intruding, nor do we lose ourselves in the other since we maintain a grounding in our self through both our mindfulness and through our critical stance. We allow ourselves and the other this mutual experience of the flow of the selves which carries the potential for conflict and freedom, both at the same time.

We know there is no immediate access to a transparent, unitary ego. We acknowledge that there are only mediations and detours after which the self may, at best, return to itself enlarged and enriched. We accept that we are narrative beings because the shortest route from self to self is through the other. And that even the shortest route takes time.

(Kearney, 2003: 231)

In this sense there is no way to facilitate or manage conflict. Discussion and negotiation of the issues at hand are the things that deserve our attention. The challenge in this view does not lie in trying to accomplish a goal, but in keeping the discussion going, holding on to ambiguity and becoming conscious of those instances in which we try to close the discussion down “to start working now.” Understanding what we are experiencing together in the process of cooperation requires a fundamental recognition of the other and of ourselves. In other words, while we are all struggling to be recognized, and while we all have to find a way of coping with the anxieties interactions with others may evoke in us, we need to be aware of our tendencies to act in one way or another, to acknowledge these tendencies in ourselves and others and not to try to see them as by-products of interaction, but as their core.

Once I discovered Stacey, Kearney and Arendt’s ideas, I found that they gave me a sense of relief in many ways. First, I became aware that what I had perceived to be the greatest difference between my boss and myself, the desperate desire to be recognized in combination with a willingness to dominate me by psychologically violent means, actually signaled some sameness. Like him, I have refused to engage in a process of flowing selves, i.e., remaining open to the mutual exploration of the selves through the other, silently blaming him for not getting in contact with me. And like my boss, I use violent means when I feel powerless, such as attacking him in public.

Secondly, the idea of “working through” not only helps to accept the otherness of the other, but in addition serves as a mirror helping me to appreciate how other I may appear to my boss as well. Third, by combining the ideas of explorative conflict with the concept of flowing selves, I began taking a more relaxed stance because it became clear to me that conflict is a necessary element of human interaction if we are to understand who we are in relation to others and that the concept of the psychological processes underlying inter-subjective recognition helps me to make sense of how we are both struggling in our relationship to be seen for who we are.

## ***Conclusion***

In my discussion, I have presented theories of recognition and complex responsive processes theory to offer an unusual understanding of conflictual situations in an internal organization development process. While writers on management in the dominant discourse (e.g. Kofman, Kotter or Rosenberg) would normally advise strategies intended to help managers to deal adequately with conflicts, i.e., to “manage” and to “solve” conflict, I have offered a position from which this is not seen as inherently helpful.

First, I have emphasized the idea that any form of human interaction is marked by constant struggles over recognition and over power which will necessarily carry the potential for conflict; such struggles are at the heart of those processes through which we negotiate and form our sense of identity. In this light, identity formation is an iterative process and necessary for maintaining our concept of self. Trying to manage struggles over recognition or over power becomes a needless endeavor, and one that is hopeless besides because it would mean that we stopped the process of identity formation.

Second, I have argued that struggles over recognition and over power will be expressed in communicative interaction where meaning arises only if gestures and responses of all interlocutors involved are taken into account. Such understanding signals how limited our capacity is for predicting and ultimately managing communicative processes and that there is a broad canvas for misunderstanding and conflict. I presented conflict as one element of human interaction which carries potential for both destruction and creativity. Much of the literature on management and leadership will provide approaches and techniques which promise to help to overcome conflict’s destructive elements while relatively little attention has been paid to conflict’s creative sides and how to explore these. Taking my own experience as the background, I have used thinking in complex responsive processes terms to scrutinize those latter aspects more closely.

Finally, this has led me to argue for an attitude of not trying to overcome conflictual elements with others, but seeing them as necessary elements of what we experience when working together. While techniques for solving conflict may lend themselves to the idea that we can work more productively without conflict and that such a state can be reached, I have argued for a practice which takes conflictual aspects in our interaction seriously and through which we do not try to manage them away as if this

were easily possible. Instead, have I emphasized our responsibility to stay open to the ambiguity and possibly uneasy feelings conflicts may cause. This understanding neither promises productive results nor a route for successfully manipulating others. What it does do is draw our attention to the paradoxically co-existing possibilities for self-doubt and self-enrichment in and through processes of mutual recognition and indicate that it is these processes through which we constantly rehearse our sense of identity. This perspective demands critical involvement with others and with ourselves. We can face the atavistic demon, our double in the other, which may not haunt us in future anymore, but which may deepen our understanding of both the other and ourselves.



## PROJECT 3

### LEADERSHIP ALIGNMENT: CONFORMITY, CONFLICT AND THE PARADOX OF RECOGNITION

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**Subjects can forget or learn later to deny the elementary recognition that they generally grant to any other human being, if they continuously contribute to a highly one-sided form of praxis that necessitates abstraction from the “qualitative” characteristics of human beings.**

**(Axel Honneth, 2008: 155)**

#### *Introduction*

IN MY LAST project, I described instances of conflictual interaction between my boss and myself which led to a mode of cooperation in which we avoided one another in ways we experienced as both distressing and relieving. I argued that over a period of several months we maintained a rather static relationship in which we did not engage with one another critically to explore and develop our practice together. While such behavior may indeed prevent further conflict, it at the same time denies us what I have termed the experience of “flowing selves” through which we experience states of enlarged self which are at the core of processes of mutual recognition. Such processes carry the constant potential for conflict. Nevertheless, they are an inevitable dimension of human interrelating which contain the possibility for enriched and new ways of relating. Avoiding conflict by not engaging with the other may confine our anxieties to some extent, but it does not support an exchange with the other that is a precondition for a maturing self.

In the following project, I want to explore these ideas further. I will begin by giving an account of a project for management and organization development which a colleague of mine and I conducted recently for a client of ours. I will give examples of rather unplanned and conflictual instances with senior managers to elaborate my ideas on issues of human relations of recognition and power. I will outline the way we saw our own practice as based on ideas of dominant systemic thinking and I will use the “consulting cycle” (Cockman et al., 1999) and Edgar Schein’s (1999/ 2009) advice for successful culture change as the theoretical basis of such thinking. This will meet a critical review of our approach by contrasting it with Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* which I will use to put forward a different understanding of how change in organizations comes about, one which is not so much concerned with planning, but which embraces ideas of conflict and superseding (*Aufhebung*) of this conflict in order to make sense of my own experience differently.

From here I will suggest a second critique of the dominant management discourse: Hugh Willmott’s ideas related to “Corporate Culturism.” He explains corporate management practice by referring to Peters and Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and offers a stimulating counter-position. In turn, I will give my own critical appraisal of his ideas, explaining why I consider them justified, but falling short of what is needed. This will be followed by a reflection on the orthodox management literature as exemplified by Peters and Waterman’s stance. I will draw upon Stacey (2007) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) to argue that the dominant management discourse perpetuates a mode of thinking which alienates us from an essentially *relational* understanding of organizational practice. As such, most management literature prevents us from taking into consideration an understanding of a relational stance which in turn requires a deeper understanding of dynamics of recognition and power. In this respect, I will take up Axel Honneth again to propose application of his interpretation of Hegel’s concept of recognition—which I mark out as paradoxical—to the exploration of the often conflictual and paradoxical nature of the HR consulting practice. Finally, I will consider method and how my research is directly linked with to both my theoretical inquiry and my consulting practices.

### ***Management development in the automotive industry***

Recently I have been involved in an organization development initiative with a Japanese automobile supplier's (AAE) German organization. We (a senior consultant colleague, Gavin, and I) were called to have a conversation with representatives of the board and the German VP of Human Resources (HR) because the company had been facing a downturn in their business for over two years after 15 years of constant growth. The CEO (who, like most of the board members and the VP of HR) was Japanese, was very clear in his assessment of what developments had led to the current state of affairs: in his view most senior and middle managers did not live up to the clearly defined company values of "Creation", "Passion" and "Challenge." For him those values were at the core of the organization, and if the managers would take them to heart in their daily work, business would be impacted in the most positive way. When asked what those values actually meant and how one could determine whether a manager lived in accordance with them, the answer was rather unclear. Since the values were based on an essentially Japanese understanding of how to lead, there was a sense that only Japanese employees would ever be able to grasp their meaning in full.

The CEO's main goal was to use us to secure participation in a management development program, during which members would distill what he termed the company's "DNA." Such a notion is an example of the pseudo-scientific language which Stacey (e.g. 2007) calls the "dominant management discourse." He is alluding here to leadership principles based on company values which were expected to form a clear guideline for anybody in managerial authority so that they would know how to stay in alignment when cooperating with colleagues and clients.

#### *Setting the program up*

We thought that what the CEO meant by his interpretation of values would be unclear to other managers, and so we suggested designing the program content to incorporate the experience of the staff members and not simply to revolve around the board's views. Our proposal was to conduct interviews with representatives of different parts of the organization, managerial and non-managerial, summarize the main points we learned throughout these interviews, and compare and contrast them with the board's views. This



last step would be the subject of a workshop with the board members and HR representatives. Our suggestion was supported by the board.

The German organization was divided in three main departments (Original Equipment Manufacturer-OEM<sup>2</sup>, Aftermarket<sup>3</sup> and the European Research and Development team). In the various meetings we had with the CEO and the board at the beginning, we found that the representatives of the different groups had very distinct interests with the consequence that our program found widely differing degrees of support among them. The CEO, who had taken over responsibility for the European operations only recently and was expected by the Japanese HQ to “turn around” the business on the German market, found the program to be a key component of his strategy. The Aftermarket unit had been operating on a very challenging market for a long time and lacked ideas on how to position themselves in their highly competitive environment. They hoped to gain new insights through a training program and were consequently very open to it. In contrast, the OEM unit worked very closely with just two automobile companies for the most part and produced customized high-end electronic products for them. The staff in this department had responded poorly to growth in demand from the customer base and become chaotic in their organization. Nevertheless, leaders had managed to evade facing up to their structural problems and attempted to master the situation with ever greater workloads. The OEM board members’ aversion to contemplating new ways of cooperation was reflected in their resistance towards our program. Since managers were carrying a heavy workload, there were grave concerns about the efficacy of the time these associates would spend in the training sessions.

The R&D representative was equally reluctant to send his managers to the program, albeit for a different reason: his people were not affected by the business pressures that affected the OEM and the Aftermarket managers. Quite the opposite, R&D managers worked under much more moderate conditions which did not necessitate a change in current practices. This example clearly demonstrates Mead’s (1934) description

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<sup>2</sup> OEM business is marked by high volume business transactions with large key clients for whom customized products are designed.

<sup>3</sup> The Aftermarket business unit is responsible for the development and distribution of end-consumer products.

of how humans produce meaning through communicative acts in ongoing processes of gesture and response and how these can result in very different meanings for all involved.

Mead does not regard a gesture as a piece of information which can be accurately transmitted to an interlocutor. He theorizes instead that a gesture may stimulate a range of responses in those to whom it is directed. At the same time, through internal role-play, this gesture will trigger a response in the gesturer so that s/he can intuit what response their gesture may evoke in the other. Although we have the ability to anticipate others' responses, we can never predict them with any certainty. Since the meaning of a gesture crystallizes in the response, we can make sense of our interaction only when gesture and response are taken together, leading to Mead's idea that they form one social act (Mead, 1934). As these acts are conducted by embodied human beings, they are accompanied by emotions. So a gesture will inevitably also produce an affective response. The CEO's desire to conduct a management development program is a case in point as the plan gave rise to distinctly separate meanings when responded to by board members from the different company divisions. Stacey and his colleagues take up Mead's ideas to say that in such processes there is paradoxically at the same time potential for repeated patterns of interaction as well as for transformation of these patterns. This obliges us to

... carry on exploring. Just what it is we mean – this is the very nature of communication.  
... From this ... perspective on communication it is no use for a leader ... to imagine that they have sent a clear message ... Instead, one comes to see the activities of strategising as ongoing conversational processes, essentially involving emotion and fantasy, as well as reason and all the other aspects of conversation.

(Stacey, 2007: 274)

These ideas cause leadership alignment processes to appear in a new light. This has had important consequences for my understanding of how I make sense of conformity, conflict and paradox in organizational change, and I will elaborate on this understanding throughout this project.

*Starting slowly*

We had been working very closely with the VP of HR, Kubo san, and his German HR manager Christine, in the first three months to determine the concept of the program. We knew that Christine's role was an administrative one as any decision-making power lay in the hands of her Japanese boss. Nevertheless, we met a couple of times and had several conference calls throughout the first months of our engagement, mainly to hear about the latest rumors about the program. At one point, we needed Kubo san's opinion on how to move on, yet he was not available. He would neither answer phone calls nor e-mails. In addition, it was during this time that Christine decided to leave the company, so Gavin and I no longer had an unofficial informant. Surprisingly, after a month in which we had fruitlessly attempted to contact Kubo san, he called me up. He was very angry and complained about the way we had not taken any action in the interim. When I explained how diligently I had been trying (without success) to get in touch with him, things became even worse. He demanded a meeting to explore the situation.

When Gavin and I met Kubo san the following week, we found ourselves in a discussion which was very difficult for us to bear. I knew that I had tried to talk to him on several occasions and found myself being remonstrated for having failed to do exactly that. He was furious and doubted our ability to conduct a program of this kind; he repeatedly expressed his lack of understanding for our inactivity. This meeting was also used to introduce Christine's successor, Carla. Although she was German, Carla had lived in Japan for almost a decade. She had been hired for her knowledge of Japanese culture and her Japanese language skills. She realized how Gavin and I were suffering in this meeting, and at some point she gave us non-verbal cues to restrain ourselves. When we stopped defending ourselves, Kubo san became more relaxed. He opened the window, took a seat on the windowsill and lit a cigarette. It was at this point that he revealed that the board had decided to conduct the program, but that the costs should not be incurred in the current fiscal year. In a sense, he was doomed to wait until the end of the fiscal year while he wanted the program to begin immediately. Since there was almost no money to spend at the moment, however, he did not know what to do. We speculated that this was why he had made himself so scarce in recent weeks.

When Gavin and I left, we both felt exhausted. Aside from the fact that the program could not start as we had planned, we anticipated that overall cooperation could become very difficult when lack of knowledge of the Japanese culture on our part might complicate the program in an unusual way. We realized that during the meeting we had both been on the verge of abandoning our work for this client. As neither of us made a move to address our concerns, however, the other had remained quiet as well.

### *Reflection*

There are different points in this narrative which I want to explore in more depth. In my second project, I chose a narrative which demonstrated the conflicting nature of human interaction as people try to cooperate. This points directly to the problems inherent in programs of leadership and value alignment as we conducted it for AAE. As I described above, Mead has made us aware of how complex human interaction can be since one gesture gives rise to many different responses in interlocutors. A gesture intended to initiate the alignment of values is subject to interpretation by the recipient which may well diverge or even be fully disparate from the intention; such a situation became obvious in the differing responses from board members to the CEO's gesture to conduct a leadership alignment program. Again, my main concern is to explore such conflicts and how comprehending approaches to processes of mutual recognition may shed light on such circumstances in a novel way. I will begin by outlining Hegel's idea of *contradiction* as the basis for change which Richard J. Bernstein, Professor of Philosophy at The New School, discusses in his book *The New Constellation* (1991). My next step is the application of this idea to a fundamental form of contradictory experience when interacting with others, namely, the way we voluntarily confine ourselves in our own desires in the face of the other as a precondition for mutual recognition and, ultimately, yet paradoxically, as a precondition for the experience of self-determinacy (Honneth, 2001). In contrast to Hegel, but in line with Bernstein, I will not use these ideas to argue for an ever more idealized whole to be the consequence of the processes which underpins the concept of *Aufhebung*. Instead, I will take up the concepts of recognition and *Aufhebung* to argue with Stacey (e.g., 2007) that humans are both enabled and constrained by their need for mutual recognition. Equally, I will use Bernstein's idea of a

“new constellation”, which is new because, contrary to Hegel, he suggests the impossibility of reaching an ultimate point of agreement. His argument requires us to resist the search of a grand reconciliation which for him will always have “gaps, fissures and ruptures” (Bernstein, 1991: 225). In this sense, Bernstein argues against potentially leaving the idea of paradox behind and to valorize unity and harmony, a thought which appears to me to represent a rather idealized notion of human interaction. Beyond this theoretic implication of Hegel’s understanding, my reasons for following Stacey and Bernstein instead of Hegel have a practical side: their understanding reflects my own experience in organizations much better than does Hegel’s idealism.



### ***Our approach: a critical review***

When we started working with senior managers at AAE, Gavin and I had followed a model which has been termed the “Consulting Cycle” (Cockman et al., 1999: 15). Cockman and his colleagues are all respected consultants who have been in the industry for over 25 years. In their model, the consultant’s work is understood in terms of a seven-step approach, spanning from “Initial contact” through to “Disengaging.” In this sequential understanding of how a consultant should operate when interacting with a client, there is the clear conviction that the consultant can and should act in accordance with this process, regardless of the given context.

In following such a model, the authors subscribe to a particular view of what consulting should correctly be by thinking in terms of systems where time is linear and the causality is of an “if-then” nature. While the authors never make overtly clear in their book that their thinking is rooted in a systemic world-view, we find many instances that this is indeed the case. First, their language discloses their commitment to systems thinking. When there is discussion about finding those people within an organization who can be supporters of a management development program or a change initiative, we find the following:

Even when you have identified that there is more than one client or that there is a whole client system it is often quite difficult to know that you have reached the point where you are dealing with the real or total client system.

(Cockman et al., 1999: 13)

Shortly after this statement, the authors set forth how a consultant should act in helping a client to see how to deal with an identified problem, and they present the idea that

[w]ithout a detailed plan of action very little is likely to happen to solve the problem. It is your job to encourage the client to question every aspect of the plan, to try to foresee

what might go wrong and to anticipate the resources required . . . . You are also there to help the client get commitment from the whole client system before implementation.

(ibid.: 18)

While the authors never explain what they mean by the “client system” (in the first instance it appears to be a group of (possibly senior) decision makers, while in the second example they seem to be talking about those people who are directed by these senior managers), they nevertheless employ the term “system.” They seem to do so without explaining what they mean precisely; furthermore, they apparently take it for granted that it is universally understood and accepted and useful to think of people who work together in organizations as a system. Second, the most obvious example of thinking in systems terms in their book is the consulting cycle itself, and it is introduced as if human interaction could be orchestrated along the lines of this rather mechanistic, highly abstracted and idealized procedure. This view does not adequately consider the qualitative nature of human cooperation which has been so much at the center of my thesis up until now; ironically, Cockman and his fellows’ understanding also resembled Gavin’s and my understanding at the time when we worked for AAE. Now why is the consulting cycle consistent with systemic thinking, and what is problematic about it? As Honneth has made clear:

Subjects can forget or learn later to deny the elementary recognition that they generally grant to any other human being, *if they continuously contribute to a highly one-sided form of praxis that necessitates abstraction from the “qualitative” characteristics of human beings.*

(Honneth, 2008: 155, my emphasis)

Developing this quote further, one might criticize systemic thinking for the way it *quantifies* human interaction. The basic rationale that one will find with most systems

thinkers (e.g., Churchman, 1970; Ackoff, 1994) is one where time is linear and causality follows an if-then rationale borrowed from the natural sciences.

Systemic process thinking is built upon a linear notion of time in which the past is factually given, the future is yet to be unfolded and the present is simply a point dividing the two. It is based on linear phases or stages of development.

(Stacey, 2007: 263)

The leadership development practice as I describe it in this project resembles the linearity in thinking as to how action should be taken: first, a decision-maker (a CEO, for example) is understood to be able to exert free will to place him- or herself outside of the given context and make a rational assessment of a given situation. At that moment, he or she is not (so extensively) a part of the system for which they are making a decision. Next, the CEO will return into the system (i.e., the organization) to implement the decision, a process which is thought to emerge in a formative way. Putting it figuratively, the future plan the CEO has devised is thought to be predictable as it unfolds in the same way a tree unfolds from a seed. So the CEO appears to have been able to foresee the long-term impact of the decision.

This is the underlying rationale of the consulting cycle for diagnosis of a problem when consultants immerse themselves in the client organization (e.g., by conducting interviews or workshops with the board), then “step outside” the organization to make rational judgments about what the problem is, decide on a way to move on (in our case, for a period of over two years) and re-introduce their solution into the organization; the example here is the conduct of a training program believed to spur processes which lead towards better managerial practice in a planned way in those areas on which training content is focused. The assumption of being able to step into and out of the system at will has implications that authors like Cockman and others overlook, and they perpetuate an understanding that people can simultaneously be free (in making their assessments of intra-organizational problems as if they could observe the organizational status objectively like a natural scientist and infer the “right” action steps) and then again not



free because their return to the organizational context subjects them to their own proposed solutions. Stacey summarizes this dualistic thinking as follows:

... human interaction is first understood in terms of the rationalist causality of the decision maker/designer and then in terms of the formative causality of the conceptual and value systems they have designed. In the former they are free to choose the design of the system and in the latter they are not because they are subject to the formative causality of the system they have designed. This is not sensed as paradox and no explanation is offered of how people manage to live with alternating between being free and being not free.

(Stacey, 2007: 135)

Assuming that the individual can choose the system's developmental direction and the process of how it matures to the planned developmental end-point in a linear sequence serves to simplify thinking about human processes of interaction substantially. "Designing process" and "moving systems" follow each other in logical progression, and isolating one aspect from the other serves to eliminate paradox intellectually (Griffin, 2002); however, paradox continues to be an aspect of our experience in organizations.

So the first problem that arises in systemic thinking is that managers (or consultants) are understood to be in a position to have free choice regarding the systems they design and that they are unfree because they are subject to the workings of the systems which they consider themselves to have "designed." This thinking supports the notion of managers being in control of the complex phenomena they encounter in organizations. The second point Stacey poses as problematic in systems thinking is that the formative element in the thinking previously described causes novelty to appear as a rationally chosen mental act in which creativity is not implied. Our experience as consultants on this project, however, was the exact opposite. We had to revise our plans constantly because some board members did not support the program as anticipated, one of our main interlocutors left the company, or because the program was postponed to the next fiscal year.

As an alternative, Stacey proposes a different explanation for change which is not based on a combination of rationalist and formative causality, but on “transformative” causality (2007: 263). He draws on Hegel who presents an explanation of processes of human interaction which does not deny paradox as I will discuss in greater detail shortly.

Hegel’s notion of process is a social one, essentially involving the interaction of human persons in what I would call responsive processes of struggling for mutual recognition as participants. Here there is no external viewpoint and everything any of us does is as participant in some interaction with others.

(Stacey, 2007: 244)

Change is neither a planned and executed endeavor nor do managers have the capacity to direct organizational systems at will because the individual and the organization are not conceptualized as different, but as essentially relational. Managers form the organization through their participation as much as they are formed through that interaction, paradoxically both at the same time. In this view, it is only our patterns of interaction (to which the activity of planning is a contribution) which simultaneously cause continued reiteration of these patterns and potentially novel forms of our interaction. Novelty emerges in an often unintended manner only in and through the intermingling of intentions which we negotiate to decide on how to go on. Processes of gesture and response form social acts in which meaning arises, and the way we make sense of this meaning influences how we (re)tell past experiences as well as impacts our anticipation of the future; our reinterpretation of the past may change our anticipation of the future. Likewise, our changing intentions for the future reflect back on how we make sense of past experiences. The concept of time is not linear, but circular: change does not come about as an individually planned enterprise, but in the (potentially) conflicting negotiation as we struggle with others for mutual recognition in the “living present” (Stacey, 2007).

The CEO’s desire to “implement“ values in the organization which managers in Germany are expected to acknowledge and follow obviously reflects a systemic and

instrumental understanding of change in organizations; it presupposes that managers can predict and control. The organization is perceived of *as if* “it” had an existence of its own and could be directed towards a desired future state by managers. In this process, humans will show a tendency to extract from their actual experience and conceive of organizations as idealized “wholes” or systems. Mead says that in such processes a “cult” is formed. Being part of this cult brings about enlarged states of subjectivity where individuals easily subjugate their own values to the “cult values” of, say, an organization. Stacey points out that it is important to be aware that cult values are generalizations, and we are obliged to particularize them, in particular contexts and not adhere closely to their literal meaning as this will narrow down decision-making processes considerably. Indeed, it may lead to actions in which those who do not comply with the cult may be excluded because “[m]embers of ‘cult’ forget the ‘as if’ nature of their constructed unity of experience, the ‘whole’...” (Stacey, 2007: 342). Cult values represent idealizations which must be *functionalized* in daily interaction between people, that is, they need to be negotiated by those involved in their application to the situations people find themselves in. Otherwise, values will remain nothing more than highly abstract notions. If values need to be functionalized, which immediately requires negotiating their differing meanings, it is easy to see that this will likely entail conflict because every person will interpret values differently at the moment they are put into practice. Consequently, it appears rather unreasonable to conduct a leadership *alignment* program because such a program would prevent conflictual negotiation. If this process is not taken seriously, surprise such as the AAE managers or we the consultants experienced will be inevitable because it is impossible for people to behave in an aligned manner all the time.

As consultants, we did not question the process on the grounds mentioned above but instead tried to help the CEO by giving advice on how to communicate properly, i.e., what he should say in order to make people understand what the rationale behind his thinking was. By doing so, we hoped to overcome the resistance many managers within AAE seemed to feel. We repeatedly tried to convince the CEO that he would need to step up and be perceived as a strong leader by reiterating his vision and engaging in conversations with other staff members, ultimately correcting any unintended misunderstanding of his ideas on their part as if there were only one way to make sense of

his gesture. We believed that if employees did not share his vision and/or people interpreted this vision differently, bad communication was at the root of the problem. This attitude arose from our belief in the validity of the sender-receiver model and a simple if-then causality of action and reaction. In trying to apply an essentially natural scientific rationale to social phenomena, we were persuaded that if he only stated his vision clearly and “walked his talk”, he would be seen by others as a credible leader. We were no less certain that under these conditions our program would support the CEO’s initiative in the best possible way. The fact that, like in other programs of the same kind before, this procedure neither reduced employee’s resistance nor fostered the emergence of aligned leadership behaviors has made me review my practice fundamentally, and that is why I want to propose a different way of understanding change in organizations.



### ***Towards a new understanding of change in organizations***

Gavin and my understanding of how to align leaders has been shaped not only by the methodology of Cockman et al., but by prominent thinkers in the field of culture change as well such as Edgar Schein, Professor Emeritus of Management, at the MIT Sloan School of Management. In his book *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (1999/ 2009), he argues that corporate cultures should be divided into subcultures, very much like the structures we found it at AAE with its different departments (OEM, Aftermarket and R&D). In coming to terms with potentially conflicting viewpoints of these subcultures, Schein gives the following advice to corporate leaders:

In your role as a leader you have to understand that each of these subcultures is necessary for the total effectiveness of the organization and, therefore, *they must be aligned with each other*. ... Your job as a culture change agent is to develop meetings and events in which enough mutual understanding can arise among them to enable each to flourish and grow.

(Schein, 1999/ 2009: 140, my emphasis)

Schein does not explain how leaders should actually facilitate enough mutual understanding. He seems to think that successful senior managers simply have this ability or should at least cultivate it so that they can apply it whenever necessary. When I look back on the example given in the above narrative, I recognize that even a CEO who in this case had been working for AAE for decades and who would presumably be familiar with the organization's culture and sub-cultures was not able to bring about this state despite all his good intentions. Even the support of two consultants who had had long experience in working with clients in such circumstances could not help to facilitate this mutual understanding. What was happening here that all of us ignored?

One of the most common ideas in organization consulting practice is to think that a previously set goal can be reached by means of good managerial (and consulting) practice, and that upon reaching this goal, things will turn to good account. We find this rationale in my narrative above in the idea of the CEO that if managers only aligned

themselves with the company values, this would better the manager's leadership and consequently the economic situation of AAE. In the same way, Gavin and I shared the idea that if we brought AAE's board members together and presented them with our findings from our interviews, we would inevitably initiate a rational discussion taking us to the point where we would all agree on the next step, and this illusion falls into the same category. We neither achieved unequivocal consent at the end of our workshop on how to move forward with our program nor did AAE's "DNA" exist at the end of the program in the form of a shared guideline. This is exactly the kind of experience which I find explained more convincingly by Hegel's ideas than by the consulting cycle of Cockman et al.

Hegel proposed a threefold process of repetitive *rupture*, *reconciliation* and *Aufhebung* (superseding) to make sense of our experience when interacting with others. Superseding of one conflict may enrich our current understanding (though there is no promise of inevitability), but it will, undoubtedly lead to a new mental conflict requiring us again to break with (rupture), or to negate, the assumptions and "knowledge" we have taken for granted and to find ways to negate the negation, to integrate differing viewpoints (reconciliation) and, by doing so, find the path to supersede the conflict. I find important aspects in his thinking which I want to offer here as an alternative approach to making sense of organizational change. In particular, his idea of a constant need for grappling with conflicts and their *Aufhebungen* is appealing to me. Bernstein says about this concept:

At each stage ... we think we have achieved fulfillment and completion [we] experience apparently irreconcilable internal conflicts and contradictions. In this journey we are constantly deceived into thinking we have achieved a true reconciliation of ... oppositions only to discover that these are *false* unstable reconciliations. Otherness and estrangement are always bursting forth in this restless dialectical movement.

(Bernstein, 1991: 296, emphasis in original)

In this sense, it does not appear helpful to think of our actions as something that will yield an ideal end-state of affairs that the CEO or we as consultant team had defined at the outset of our program.

The threefold *process* which underlies the concept of *Aufhebung* and its implications for the ways we deal with conflict reflect my own experience in organizations very well. Looking at it this way, it is unreasonable to think that organizational goals are likely to be accomplished by means of well-planned procedures and well-intended consulting advice, so a model like the consulting cycle appears to have several shortcomings. First, the cycle is presented as a procedure which appears to be applicable in any context. Second, an abstract model like the consulting cycle seems to confirm the consultant's ability to anticipate which approach will work right from the start of any form of intervention, as well to foresee what the result of working along its lines will be in the unpredictable future. Again, this understanding does not reflect my actual experience in organizations where oftentimes unpredictable events thwart our plans. The board's decision to postpone our program to the next fiscal year is a good example here.

Bernstein's main criticism of the Hegelian concept is not his questioning of its underlying dialectical process, but Hegel's tendency towards an ultimate integration which makes him appear too optimistic (in Bernstein's view as well as my own) through his valorizing of unity, harmony and wholeness. The interesting point that I want to retain from Hegel is that change comes about in our encounter of repeated self-contradictory situations, and that resolving of such contradictions is already implied in this conflict—if we only resist our disposition to believe in a potentially ultimate understanding of our experience and accept instead its provisional, dialectical nature.

... in the *Science of Logic*, ... Hegel ... tells us “something is therefore alive only insofar as it contains contradiction within it”. The Concept (*Begriff*) is “inherently self contradictory, but it is no less *the contradiction resolved*.”

(Bernstein, 1991: 298-299, emphasis in original)

Bernstein goes on to postulate a “new constellation.” He borrows the term “constellation” from Adorno (Jay, 1984: 15), who described constellation as a “juxtaposed rather than an integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle” (Bernstein, 1991: 225). Experience opens the gates for more and more experience and “never completes itself” (ibid.: 307). The challenge of a progressive trend towards an increasingly integrated unity is denied. The impetus is on a “dynamic shifting relational interplay of attractions and aversions [where]... reconciliation/rupture are themselves irreducible elements of this new constellation... for it is ... tensed and unstable—never quite *aufgehoben* or reconciled” (ibid.: 309). Bernstein captures the notion of paradox which in his view cannot be dissolved and which is also at the core of Stacey and his colleagues’ theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

In terms of organizational change, this dialectical understanding comprises a process where a concept or opinion once reached is simultaneously the culmination of our best possible understanding of a given situation at a specific point in time and a critical confrontation of the prevailing thoughts and beliefs which underlie this understanding (ibid.: 301). Causality here represents a dialectical movement of thought which Stacey et al. (2000) have termed “transformative” causality. This thinking views change differently from the way a systems thinker would describe it. Change is not a phenomenon that is facilitated by a rationally acting person from outside the organization; it is the interaction of people itself that defines what happens.

We are arguing that organizing ... human experience [is] ... continual interaction between humans who are all forming intentions, choosing and acting in relation to each other as they go about their daily work together. This is not the kind of interaction between “entities” forming a system about which some humans make choices, on which they act as if the system, or the organization, were a tool they use ... . Instead, there is a process of interaction, or relating, which is itself a process of intending, choosing and acting. No one steps outside to arrange it, operate on it or use it, for there is simply no objectified “it”. There is only the responsive process *of relating itself*.

(Stacey et al., 2000: 187, my emphasis)



Another important point for me is the critical attitude which such thinking demands as it raises at once our awareness for our limited capacity for anticipation (our best understanding will be superseded), and that we should recognize the transformative potential of conflictual situations because they actually form the *basis* for renewal and change. This is what Stacey and colleagues mean by transformative causality: change, either positive or negative, only happens as a consequence of the very nature of exchange itself.

Stacey et al. draw on the complexity sciences as an analogy and on the work of sociologist Norbert Elias to support these points. Stacey (2007: 237) explains how complexity scientists (e.g., Gell-Mann, 1994; Holland, 1998) have shown in computer simulations that orderly conditions in these simulations come about without any blueprint or “strategy” which would guide the agents’ behavior. On the contrary, it is only the interaction between agents which gives rise to the emergence of orderly global patterns. In complexity terms, this phenomenon is referred to as “self-organization”, a notion that explains in its simplicity exactly what is going on: through—and only through—local interaction between agents larger (global) patterns emerge which display stability or which change only through the interaction itself. In this view, order emerges because agents cannot create infinite diversity as in the interaction with others some actions will be rendered impossible; in other words, order arises because agents impose conflicting constraints on one another. One interesting insight offered by such modeling is that the alternative to guided behavior is not complete anarchy, but an order which indeed arises in the absence of an overall plan. Stacey is careful not to equate the patterns of computer models with human behavior and for this reason he uses them as an analogy only. Still, he points out that Norbert Elias (1978) has elaborated a sociological understanding about the emergence of global patterns which shows great consistency with these insights. While agents on computer screens do not have distinct human capabilities (self-consciousness, forming of intentions, experiencing emotional involvement or some form of choice), Elias from his perspective pays attention to all these factors. His research into the roads taken by Western civilization as it has emerged over the centuries makes plain that what we experience today in terms of our society is not the result of some planning process which people conceived of a long time ago. Orderly societal forms have come into being

only in the intermingling of individual intentions. In this process, people put conflicting constraints on one another. What constrains people is the way they depend on one another when living together in organized forms. This inter-dependency constitutes relationships of power. Power relating forms a social order which is beyond anyone's plan or will, and it is the root cause for why we do not find ourselves in utter chaos even though nobody has decreed precisely the nature of societal order in which we find ourselves.

Global patterns arise from local interaction of many, many individuals under the constraining, conflicting, but also enabling patterns of power relationships which constitute any form of inter-dependence. It is immediately obvious how the work in the field of sciences of complexity and the work of Norbert Elias draw the same conclusions about the rise of global patterns from local interaction. Stacey makes the important point that it does not make sense to conceive of the local and the global, or the micro and the macro, as two distinct spheres; this differs substantially from the systemic models one normally encounters in the literature on (change) management such as Schein's idea of a corporate culture comprising different sub-cultures.

For Schein, this way of thinking leads to the idea that reaching organizational goals requires aligned conformity among corporate leaders (and AAE was no exception here) whose interaction should be free of conflict. Leaders' behavior is thought to be manageable by means of a corporate strategy based on values and leadership principles that every manager needs to grasp and "put into practice", often with the help of consultants like me. If we take the insights from the complexity sciences, Elias and Stacey into account, this presents a major challenge to this management practice. If order arises through self-organization, a phenomenon which requires conflictual debating of values and guidelines in local interaction between agents who impose conflicting constraints on one another, consultants should not seek to employ more and more sophisticated techniques of planning and managing to prevent organizational conflict; they should instead be aware that such conflict is an inevitable element of human co-operation. This does not mean that consultative intervention is arbitrary or deliberately conflictual. On the contrary, it invites into creative tension all interactions—those that are seen as "aligned" with the pre-determined end state and those that are not.

If I link those ideas back to my own experience, I can see how they help me to make better sense of the things that happened during the assignment described above. We consultants agreed to help to set up a program for which we could determine only probabilistically if it would be helpful for the managers. In actual fact, we had our doubts, but we saw no other way to incorporate opinions from AAE staff members than through interviews and to present a summary of our findings during our workshop. This even was in turn limited because only board members took part. There was a high level of ambiguity in this meeting, and we were confronted with one conflict following on the heels of the one before instead of the expected move in the direction of agreement. Experience of this nature is not explained by systemic models like the consulting cycle.

By the same token, the VP of HR, who had previously been a strong advocate of our program, turned out to be unexpectedly overwhelmed by his emotions in response to unforeseeable developments; we came close to terminating the assignment. Such phenomena—so frequently the experience of practicing consultants—are neither part of the theoretical model of the consulting cycle nor are they discussed in any great depth by Cockman, Schein and others. As a consequence of the theoretical foundation on which our understanding of the situation was based, we did not try to make sense of and explore the conflict we encountered. We felt frustrated, and we blamed ourselves for not having tried harder to meet the customer's needs.

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### ***Corporate Culturism: the seductive doublethink***

Why is it so easy to become paralyzed when confronting situations of high ambiguity? Hugh Willmott is Research Professor of Organization Studies at University of Cardiff. In his article *Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom: Managing Culture in Modern Organizations* (1993), he offers an interesting answer to this question. Willmott offers a standpoint from which he examines the perception of the discourse of “corporate culturism” and the way managers act in accordance with its underlying assumptions as an insidious way of dominating employees. He elucidates his criticism by taking a close look at one seminal work in the field, Peters and Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America’s Best-Run Companies* (1982). In this book, the authors maintain that employees’ values need to be managed appropriately by organization leaders and this will in turn lead to committed and self-disciplined employees. The theory here is that employees understand that agreeing voluntarily to support their company’s values as functional in a corporate environment will meet two seemingly contradictory human desires: the desire for self-determinacy and the desire for security (Willmott, 1993: 527). The conclusion is that employees will subjugate their own values to those of their employers because they experience a form of self-determination and acknowledgement which they otherwise will lack. Peters and Waterman see this as exactly the core of corporate culturism and an insight managers need to grasp because

there was hardly a more pervasive theme in the excellent companies than *respect for the individual*... These companies give people control over their destinies ... They turn the average Joe and the average Jane into winners. They let, even insist, that people stick out.

(Peters and Waterman, in Willmott, 1993: 526, emphasis in original)

Willmott makes the crucial point that this view predicated a deceitful form of “doublethink”, namely, that employees are constantly recognized for living in accordance with company values, not their own. People come to believe that they experience self-determinacy and autonomy while in actual fact they are being acknowledged for this self-

fulfillment only as long as they display behavior aligned with the *company's* culture and values. “That is the seductive doublethink of corporate culture: the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the condition of autonomy” (ibid.: 526). In this sense, the cultural management of the corporate environment offers a safe haven where human beings experience existential security as they seemingly do not have to cope with ambiguity or ambivalence. They receive ostensible acknowledgement for committing to the corporate culture. In turn, they provide labor which is in line with the systems and beliefs designed by the corporate engineers. In fact, Peters is very clear and straightforward about the technical rationale of their concept:

*These devices – vision, symbolic action, recognition – are a control system, in the truest sense of the term. The manager’s task is to conceive of them as such, and to consciously use them.*

(Peters, 1988, in Willmott, 1993: 530, emphasis in original)

All this is to say that employees in organizations which Peters and Waterman declare to be “America’s best-run companies” should *not* be encouraged to engage in processes of actively exploring new ways of understanding what they are doing as they search for ways to cope with the daily challenges they encounter. Willmott maintains that employees would experience real self-determinacy if they have

... the ability to develop a ‘self-conscious formulation’ of the values that orient our conduct [by] (i) access to knowledge of alternative standpoints and (ii) a social milieu in which their competing claims can be critically explored.

(Willmott, 1993: 533)

However, this is the line of thinking which corporate culturism rejects and actually prevents. As such, Willmott’s view offers a critique of Peters’ former advice. In

this light, the reason we consultants experienced a form of emotional paralysis could be said to stem from the fact that we did not operate under conditions in which we could experience self-determinacy. We were frustrated in our thinking since we were acting in a corporate environment where a rather mechanistic understanding of how people must “live” the company’s values prevailed. We had become entrapped in the seductive doublethink of corporate culturism.

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***Beyond the doublethink: self-determinacy and recognition rethought***

I ended my second project by proposing an understanding of inter-subjective recognition which is based on the idea of flowing selves. I stated at that time that recognizing the other is the experience of a psychological process by which both interlocutors undergo a phase of decentered subjectivity: a state of enlarged self which allows us to interact with the other in such a way as to experience both the sameness and the difference of the other. By applying this experience back to our own selves, we come to greater and greater understanding of both the other and our own selves which is the basis for a sensitive and empathic interaction with that other.

I want to elaborate on this point here as I see important parallels with the processes I described above. Change in human interaction comes about, I argued, in a process of rupture, reconciliation and superseding of this reconciliation. This may constantly enhance our understanding of what it is we are doing together. I went on to say that this process can easily come to a halt since it may provoke both the experience of ambiguity and potentially anxiety. So we might not pay attention to the dialectical movement of thought which underlies the superseding of the reconciliation and fall back instead on a rather mechanistic or systemic worldview which persuades us to believe that the conflicts and paradoxes we experience are manageable. As a consequence, we may remain trapped in our responses. We may well prefer this simplified view because it frees us from confronting our anxieties as well as from exploring those conflictual aspects of our work that cannot be managed away. We find a seductive environment in organizations which even reinforces these processes since we may find ourselves superficially acknowledged for pursuing self-directed projects although, ironically, they are not really our own; we experience them as self-directed only as long as they are in line with corporate guidelines.

In opposition to the dominant management discourse that the individual's experience of self-determinacy should be managed by corporate leaders, I want to suggest a different form of managerial discourse: one which understands the human desire for the experience of self-determinacy not as something manageable, but as a property based on "elementary recognition" (Honneth, 2008) which is both enabled and constrained by relationships of power. In doing so, I want to show that an alternative to a heteronomous

idea of determinacy, one where management tries to decide for employees what values should guide behavior, is not one of unrestricted individualism, but one where paradoxically people are understood to experience freedom and self-determinacy through self-restraint. I will do so by employing ideas taken from two works of Axel Honneth: *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit* (2001) [Suffering from Indeterminacy] and *Reification* (2008), and by applying Elias's notion of power as described by Stacey (2007).

These issues are important for Honneth because habitually clinging to a view which instrumentalizes our view of people, such as when senior managers at AAE expected mid-level managers to conform with corporate guidelines in order to generate higher revenues, may have severe consequences for how we relate to others in general:

Subjects can forget or learn later to deny the elementary recognition that they generally grant to any other human being, if they continuously contribute to a highly one-sided form of praxis that necessitates abstraction from the “qualitative” characteristics of human beings.

(Honneth, 2008: 155)

In contemplating how individuals might experience genuine self-determinacy Honneth discusses Hegel's ideas of how humans mature from childhood through late youth to adulthood and how these stages are marked by differing desires and correspondingly differing ways of relating with others. We find here again a structure which Honneth proposed in his *Struggle for Recognition* [Kampf um Anerkennung, 1994] which I discussed in a previous project. In both works he depicts an individual's progression through different phases, each of which is marked by needs of the individual that rest on their developing cognitive and emotional capacities. At the heart of Honneth's discussion about recognition is the gradually growing capacity of the individual to take into account others' positions and their desires. The individuation process coincides with an ever expanded capacity of the individual to decenter and, consequently, with experiences of states of enlarged subjectivity (Honneth, 2001: 100) (or as Mead would call it: an increased ability to take the attitude of the other to oneself) which Honneth



understands to be the precondition for the experience of self-determinacy. Paradoxically, the experience of self-determinacy in Honneth's argument comes about once individuals have learned to restrain themselves from pursuing mere ego-centered desires. Mature individuals have the capacity to hold back freely, postpone desires and develop a language which connects them with others in such a way that they "relate positively with others" (Honneth, 2001: 87) and recognize others' needs as well as their own. This postponing is not felt to be restrictive, however, "because if the other *reciprocates in the same positive way this is experienced as true freedom*" to act, that is self-determinacy (ibid., my emphasis).

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### ***The paradox of recognition***

To make this point a little clearer, I want to refer to another work by Honneth: *Reification* (2008). He explains here how the paradoxical dynamics of inter-subjective recognition have as a condition sine qua non a precognitive state that Honneth terms “elementary recognition” (2008: 151), expressed succinctly in the phrase: If I recognize the other, I recognize myself in that other. This means that I recognize in the other the fellow human, that other who is capable of conducting uniquely human operations, e.g., moral judgment, in the same way as I am. Elementary recognition, however, means more than that. It includes the simultaneous recognition of the other’s otherness, i.e., that their unique human capabilities may lead them to hold different attitudes and have opinions that vary from my own. Recognition in this sense means to see the other as human (like me) and at the same time to allow the other to be different (unlike me) because of that selfsame humanness; this is the paradox of recognition. Being able to associate with the other in this form represents for Honneth *the* important precondition for the maturing of humans as described in the previous paragraph.

What I mean by the “filling out” of the existential schema of recognition is that individuals learn in the process of their socialization to internalize culturally specific norms of recognition, thereby enriching the elementary conception of their fellow humans—a conception that they have as a habit from a very young age—step by step with the specific values embodied in the principles of recognition that prevail in their society.

(Honneth, 2008: 153)

While Honneth sees the process of mutual recognition at the heart of human relations, I have described in this and previous projects how this process may be hindered; I would suggest that it is relationships of power which encourage this constraining of relations of recognition. Stacey (2007) following Elias (1970) argues that when humans interrelate they have to justify their actions in some way or another to others which consequently can constrain as well as enable their actions. In this way,

power relations constitute our dependency on one another. Dependency signals that need is at the core of power relating. Often a power relationship is marked by an asymmetry in which need is greater in one direction than in the other. Yet this need is always open to fluctuation, and the less powerful are never completely powerless since “the power of the more powerful depends upon the recognition of the less powerful that this is indeed so” (ibid.: 352). Griffin (2002) explains the relationship between power and recognition. He speaks, in line with Mead (1934), about the ability of leaders to show a greater ability than others to foster interaction between group members by adopting their attitudes for themselves in a more sophisticated way than other group members. Leadership, including leadership of consultants in a project like I described above, cannot be fully comprehended in terms of individual leadership capabilities as “the leader is actually constructed in the recognition of others” (ibid.) It is immediately obvious that both leader and follower need one another, a circumstance pointing to the power dimension of their relationship. Once a group shares a goal, the person who can best support group processes on the way to that goal becomes the leader. As Griffin points out, such understanding could be “misread as an argument for ‘vision’” (2002: 161). What he is alluding to, however, is Mead’s view of leaders as persons who have “in the course of his/her life, ... acquired a greater spontaneity, a greater ability to deal with ... the on-going purpose ... that others are interacting for” (ibid.) In this view, the people who become leaders are those who have developed the ability to adopt the attitude of others to themselves at moments when people “deal with the unknown as it emerges from the known context” (ibid.: 204) more than others. They only become leaders because others recognize this ability of theirs to recognize them. If elementary recognition in the Honnethian sense is not experienced “the ... individual may *not* freely hold back, postpone desires and develop a language which connects him or her with others in such a way that they relate positively with others” which may lead to frustration or resistance. I suggest that when Gavin and I experienced how Kubo san denied our attempts to communicate with him, he misrecognized us, and so there was no way to relate with the other. While this avoided a conflictual encounter at that moment, it prevented a rupture which would have forced all of us to negotiate how to deal with the changed circumstances. This experience stirred our emotions; we felt frustrated and deprecated.

While we speculated that at that time we shared an experience which many of the AAE's employees had had in the past, we had no language to engage Kubo san in the reflection on this experience of ours.

Despite feeling misrecognized and rather disengaged, we found ourselves bound up in power relationships; their asymmetry was marked by the fact that our need for his goodwill was greater than his need for our expertise because he was in charge of the budget we depended upon. In this sense, power relations both enabled (we stayed involved in the program) and constrained (we felt misrecognized) us, paradoxically at the same time.

*Recognition, self-determinacy and language*

As Willmott has argued, gurus in corporate culturism like Peters and Waterman actively seek to undermine the experience of self-determinacy as understood by Honneth by employing a doublethink strategy leading employees to believe falsely that they can fulfill their desire to create conditions under which they can pursue personal goals. The experience of self-determinacy is supposed to be encouraged by managers by recognizing employees in their quest for self-fulfillment, however, only as long as this quest yields results which are in line with the corporate culture. The latter is understood by Willmott as marked by habitual practices which may constrain employees severely and which are actually at odds with their striving for self-fulfillment.

Willmott's view could be contested. First of all he sees managers as being in a position to direct employees consciously as if they were able to foresee any employee's response to managerial gestures. Second, one might question Willmott's understanding that managers are always consciously aware of the methods they are employing and can consciously trick employees into conformity-oriented modes of thinking.

Agreeing with Mead, I maintain that any gesture holds the potential for many responses, e.g., indifference, conformity or rebellion, and it is this aspect which Willmott does not adequately consider. As I said earlier in this project, any gesture can be interpreted differently by the recipient. It will produce a plethora of meanings of a complexity beyond the ability of any manager to anticipate. The claim that managers consciously trick their employees' thinking in one way or another seems a difficult one to

maintain. Believing that managers possess this capability, as we find in authors like Peters and Waterman, represents an idealized understanding of what managers can actually do. In addition, one might argue that, according to Bourdieu, people, including managers, have a “stake in the game” they play (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). Many managers’ interactions may be formed by tacit knowledge of how to act skillfully in the given circumstances in which they find themselves. They act according to regularities which are “neither explicit [nor] codified” (ibid.). They live in a context of practices—in Bourdieu’s terms a “field”—which they have not invented, but which they find worth pursuing and investing their skills and talents to master by acting as organization consultant or manager, for instance. They will acquire unquestioningly many practices which have emerged in this field over the course of history, and they are rarely invited to reflect upon those practices.

Players are taken in by the game ... [they] agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a “contract”, that the game is worth playing, ..., and this *collusion* is the very basis of their competition.

(ibid.: 98)

Finally, while Willmott advocates “a social milieu in which ... competing claims can be critically explored” (1993: 533), he remains rather unclear on how such opportunity should be generated.

One approach I have proposed throughout this project as a means of scrutinizing one’s own practice critically is to examine its *relational* aspects, most notably relations of power and recognition. Now, how could the practice of consulting be explored in a way that one takes these aspects into consideration and did not rely on such abstract models and advice as promoted by Peters and Waterman, Cockman et al., Schein or the rest? The extent to which one can grapple with organizational phenomena differently links directly to my discussion of ideas about method.

### ***On method I***

How can I as a practicing consultant work with clients differently in such a way that I take my insights seriously? I found Bourdieu and Wacquant very helpful in addressing these questions. They alert me to the fact that when I reflect on my own practice, I need to understand the act of reflection itself and not only my praxis as essentially relational.

In the first part of *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), which is sub-titled “Toward a Social Praxeology: The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu’s Sociology”, Wacquant sets out three factors which limit a researcher, or a consultant for that matter, from taking a reflexive stance: first the life history and the social origins (ethnicity, gender, class etc.) of the researcher/consultant; second the position a researcher/consultant takes within his/her own area of practice which would bias or limit his/her thinking and render some intellectual stances unthinkable; and third, the “intellectual bias”, by which Bourdieu refers to researchers’ tendency to intellectualize phenomena they find themselves involved in. This would lead to a dichotomy between thought and action so that the researcher does not immerse him- or herself in the actual situation, but one in which he or she “thinks the action” (1992: 39).

When I look back on my experience at AAE, I can see why it was difficult for us consultants to make sense of the complex processes we found ourselves caught up in. While we tried to come to grips with what was going on and even we took the time to reflect on our experience, we also acted as if we were somehow distinct from AAE’s employees. Although we did in a sense think of ourselves as parts of the AAE system which we had entered at some stage and now could not exit at will, the way we interacted with members of that organization reflected a different practice. We saw ourselves as external experts who would need to find a way to let AAE managers tap into our knowledge so they could understand the profound challenges they were facing in a different way. We wondered why it was so hard for the managers to adopt the concepts we discussed with them in the seminar room. Certainly we were not so naïve as to believe that it was easy for them to make sense of the theoretical ideas we were presenting or to apply without further ado the insights they had gained through the exercises we had put them through when back at their desks. What we understood to be limiting factors were communication problems and intercultural issues, especially between Japanese managers

and those from Europe. In the same way, our conversations blamed the CEO for not stepping up and playing his role, which as we understood it meant to state a clear vision and to communicate it properly, convincing managers to stand behind that vision and ensuring that their action was in conformity with the wider organizational goals.

On reflection, and in particular against the backdrop of the procession of my thoughts throughout this and previous projects, I now see we overlooked a crucial point: at the heart of the consulting practice there are relational processes between employees of the client organization and consultants and the essence of relating with others are relations of recognition and the enabling-constraining nature of power relationships which do not allow people to do exactly as they please, not even a CEO. The way he interacted with others gave rise to a pattern in which he was not perceived, especially by European managers, as a leader in authority whom they would recognize as such. This represents the Eliasian notion that people in interaction are always bound by power relationships, but never in such a way that one person has all the power and the other has none. The experience of power is that of a fluctuating nexus, and this fluctuation is fueled to a great extent, I would argue, by how we recognize one another. Since the CEO was not engaged in the organizational practice, making himself heard through highly abstracted notions of values and leadership principles, he and other managers had no chance of mutually exploring what functionalizing of these values meant in practice. People felt they were being treated as mere instruments and were not elementarily recognized. At the same time, they had no language to explore with others the conflicts and paradoxes they encountered while immersed in the game they found themselves caught up in, a situation which presented them constantly with conflict and paradox. I would maintain that an unquestioned aspect of this game is a continuous contribution to a highly one-sided form of praxis which we extract from the qualitative characteristics of human beings (Honneth, 2008). So leaders do not recognize employees for who they are, but for not examining their practice critically because this might call the game into question. This could lead to shifts in the power relationships which are feared by those in authority. Ironically, power ultimately shifted away from the CEO since fewer managers recognized him as their leader.

Thinking in these terms points right to the center of ideas important for the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2007; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2001), and the way I am trying to make sense of my own experience reflects the wider intellectual tradition in which such thinking is rooted. My reflection is based on a specific method (see Stacey and Griffin, 2005, for example), one which calls exactly for the critical exploration (often denied in organizations) to become aware of the interactions in which one finds oneself participating. The idea of critical reflection is important, not the question of how to find ways of bettering the organizational practice.

The purpose [of this method] is not to solve a problem or make an improvement to the organization but to develop the practitioner's skill in paying attention to the complexity of the local, micro interactions he or she is engaged in because it is in these that wider organizational patterns emerge. However, the movement of thought is not an abstract matter because the practitioner-researchers are making sense of their own current experience of what they do and others are doing in their organization and, as they do so, their practice inevitably evolves, hopefully for the better, although there can be no guarantee of this.

(Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 24)

In this method, narrative plays an important role in which a real-life example is used by the researcher to reflect on their own practice and scrutinize interactions with those who were part of that experience. Scrutiny takes place, first, by critical reflection upon the experience, and, second, by reference to literature from the dominant discourse and alternative strands which helps to make sense of those micro-interactions in which researchers found themselves enmeshed. The process opens the door to a richer understanding of their own practice. In this way, the activity of research itself offers the potential for transforming the researcher's practice and binds the two together. By affecting the researchers' practice, this method inevitably informs their identity as well. As a corollary, it poses a way of conceiving of the research activity as a process which develops theory, practice and personality of the researcher.



In my particular area of research, this means that I explore how relating to others is essentially a power-laden experience in which power shifts as we recognize the other and ourselves in and through that other. As a researcher, I do not attempt to conceptualize managerial practice (for example) in order to discover leadership principles as Peters and Waterman do, nor do I give advice on how to consult properly akin to Cockman et al. As a consequence, I am not trying to conceptualize organizations as idealized wholes. By the same token, I do not advocate a simple if-then mode of action for the managerial or consulting practice. I have tried instead to make sense of my experience which keeps together the individual and the social, i.e., the consultant and the client, by making sense of the way power fluctuates and how people try to realize themselves in relating with others in local interactions through processes of inter-subjective recognition.

The main focus of the methodology of this dissertation is on taking the researcher's experience seriously in a way which idealizes neither academic theorizing nor consulting or managerial practice. I take to heart Bourdieu's caution not to intellectualize my practice and so provide an enhanced understanding of the phenomena I have experienced. By the same token, this methodology reflects the Hegelian stance which I described above in terms of how we might make sense of change within organizations because changes in thinking can be described as well by the constant rupture, reconciliation and superseding of this reconciliation, paving the way to a richer understanding of my thought and so my practice. I am engaging here in a dialectical, not in a dualistic movement of thought in which the research object is my own experience; my theorizing is grounded in my practice which will in turn potentially be transformed by my conclusions.



## ***Conclusion***

The way I have worked as a consultant over the years has been influenced by the systemic discourse. This discourse has provided me with a language in which I frame organizational phenomena in a particular manner. It is marked by the idea that managers and consultants have the capacity to draw abstract ideas from their experience in a rational way. The process of abstraction leads to an understanding of corporate culture and sub-cultures. Each of these sub-cultures, resembled e.g. by departments, is understood to be unique and important in making a particular contribution to the organization at large. The role of corporate managers is to supervise their department and ensure that the work produced here is in line with strategic goals of the organization as a whole. What binds the different company sections together is managers' common understanding of the supraordinate goals. Conflict is seen as a potential threat to the required conformity and so it is best avoided, or failing that, managed. In this context, organization consultants like me offer services which support corporate leaders in their activities to secure achievement of the overarching organizational goals. They use models like the consulting cycle which rest on the idea of if-then causality through which the organization practice is rationalized. Many believe that sophisticated models borrowing ideas from the natural sciences help in this rationalizing process. To ensure that managerial activities are consistent with the company's goals, they are phrased in conformity with the long-term vision of the organization and its corporate values. Their constant reiteration is essential, and one method is to put managers through training or other forms of management education. During such programs, managers are usually presented with models of leadership, trained in effective communication or the efficient management of change or conflict on their teams. I maintain that such educational endeavors pose a form of abstraction from managers' actual experience which prevents them from taking its qualitative elements seriously. Important qualitative elements are the experience of relationships of recognition and how these are impacted by fluctuating power asymmetries. These elements are not discussed in any great depth by authors on (change) management or consultancy. Authors in this field prefer to give advice on motivating and leading employees by manipulating their expectations and ensuring compliance with corporate guidelines and processes. Ironically, this is said to lead to the

experience of self-determination; however, employees are not recognized for their creative interpretation of these guidelines when wrestling with the daily conflicts they encounter, but for behaving in conformed ways. This will not eliminate the conflicts people must deal with; it contributes to an abstraction of their actual experiences, leaving them without a language which would give cohesion to their experience within the organizations and what they think about them.

As an alternative, I have proposed an approach which offers a different perspective on organizational practice, one which does not draw abstract conclusions from peoples' experience by seeing them as parts of larger organizational systems and where change cannot be orchestrated along the lines of linear multi-step models by senior managers or consultants. I have suggested that it is the qualitative elements of inter-relating—mainly processes of inter-subjective recognition and the flux of power—which spur a constant dialectical, often conflictual, exchange with others which lead to change. In this view, conflict is an important (and inevitable) element for change which is negotiated in local interaction as people try to cooperate and compete. Conflict is not manifested in organizational systems in ways that can be managed and eliminated; it is understood to be an unavoidable experience of human interaction. Even if one negates the tendency to idealize the abilities of leaders and consultants to think of organizations as systems which can be managed, the alternative is not inescapably that consultative work is arbitrary. Nevertheless, it means that the self-image of consultants is impacted because if they cannot lead change themselves or train managers in doing so, what do consultants in my line of work actually contribute?

The radical perspective this view offers is not only a challenge to the concept of the dominant approach to consulting. It is at the same time a challenge to my professional identity because it raises a fundamental question for me: How should I recognize myself in my practice in the future? I cannot easily share the way my thinking has developed over the course of this doctoral study with my co-workers and clients because I have begun to question the game we are all playing. I must be circumspect in my actions and what I say and not appear too heretical in sharing my questions and thoughts with others if I want to be a recognized member in my community and not risk opprobrium or exclusion. But I cannot deny that my thought has begun to move, and I cannot and I do

not want to cast aside my insights. In consequence, others will recognize the way my attitude and practice are beginning to change, and others may interpret this as an inadmissible renunciation of the norms and unspoken rules which constitute consulting practice. In that sense, my breaking with widely accepted ways of thinking may lead to the experience of fundamental ruptures which carry the potential for creative or destructive conflict or, most likely both, and it is these elements of my practice which I intend to explore in my next project.



## PROJECT 4

# POLITICS, IDEALIZATION AND POWER AS PROCESSES OF RECOGNITION

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**We may even dare to speak here of the work of misrecognition in the gaining of recognition. It is this involvement of misrecognition in recognition that leads to the expression “struggle for recognition” – where conflict is the soul of this process.**

**(Paul Ricoeur, 2005: 259)**

### *Introduction*

THROUGHOUT MY THESIS I have explored different aspects of my work as a practising organization consultant. In this project I will engage with yet another dimension of this work: my recent experience of joining a new consulting firm. I was struck by the intense political dynamics I found myself caught up in right from the beginning. For this reason, I will begin by exploring the concept of “the political” as it has been presented by an important writer in the field: Chantal Mouffe. Her view is that in human political conduct, antagonistic and cooperative elements paradoxically co-exist, and this resonates with my own experience. Her work is of particular interest since, in contrast to many authors of the dominant management discourse, she takes the complexities of human organizing into account. I part with her views when, in the end, she collapses the paradoxical tension between antagonistic and cooperative elements, and will explore this dimension of her writing. This will lead to a discussion of idealism through the works of Mead and Stacey. I discern ideals as being both an important source of motivation in our work and at the same time dangerous if we find that we cannot critically engage with

idealized views a concept that particularly interests me as the notion of idealization has emerged in previous projects.

Idealized thinking can produce in- and outsider dynamics in that those whose abilities are idealized, e.g. consultants or leaders, can be recognized as “in-members” who contribute to an organization’s success more than others. Idealization is thus potentially important to how power structures are manifested. At the same time, idealization can influence how individuals are recognized and misrecognized. I will conceptualize power as processes of (mis)recognition, and pay close attention to the paradoxical elements of such dynamics. By doing so I will suggest a way to think differently about what is happening in the onboarding processes in particular, and in change processes generally. I will conclude by exploring what these insights mean for my own practice. In addition I will explore the implications for how I recognize myself in an environment where the dominant management discourse is idealized, and where I run the risk of becoming misrecognized and excluded if I attempt to present views—like in this thesis—which disarticulate orthodox modes of thought.



***The inevitability of politics: an onboarding process in a global HR consultancy***

As a consequence of the events I described in Project 2, I left my former employer to take up the role of Senior Consultant with another large HR consulting firm. I am assigned to the “Leadership & Talent” business line in which clients receive consulting on corporate talent management, including assessment services, and training designed to meet identified developmental needs. I had three job interviews with people in different positions within the organization and each described my potential role differently. Those who oversaw the Leadership & Talent business (amongst them my later technical supervisor Andy) emphasized the recent global alliance with a provider of online assessment tools and the need to market them in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. He saw a role for me in this enterprise while those responsible for business development (for instance my later boss Carl) stressed that they expected me to market complex consulting projects which integrated Leadership & Talent business with the other two business lines. People in these different businesses had been operating more or less in isolation in the past, and he was interested in a candidate who could sell and manage projects beyond their immediate area of expertise. Altogether, my interlocutors had been rather vague in the interviews about my role.

Two surprises awaited on my first day. The first concerned the German MD with whom I had had my last interview. Shortly after our conversation, he had been asked to step down from his position. A German MD, Steve, had been appointed in his place, and Steve had already progressed to being responsible for the Central and Eastern European operations. I was not informed officially about the reasons behind that move but there were indications that business had been declining throughout the time of the former MD’s tenure. Even though everyone acknowledged that the company’s performance had been heavily impacted by the economic crisis of the years 2008 and 2009, the MD was nevertheless asked to step down. The other surprise was that the new MD had begun to revise the organizational structure including a redistribution of the responsibilities of senior managers and reporting structures. The aim of this re-organization I was told was the facilitation of more direct communication between business lines and the reduction of political manoeuvres which seemed to undermine cooperation amongst managers. In my

first week an executive management meeting took place in which Steve presented for the first time the preliminary state of his thinking about the new structure. Rumour had it that he would propose a drastic simplification of this structure.

As part of my onboarding process I was scheduled to have conversations with executive team members. In these conversations I sensed a great tension. I speculated that the anxiety was spurred by the recent recall of the previous MD. I contemplated as whether some of them wondered if they too might have to step down from their roles, and in the process lose power and recognition.

Although everybody greeted me warmly and the mentor I had been assigned to made an effort to introduce me to other consultants and mentor me about the unspoken rules, I felt somewhat lost in these days. On the day of the management meeting Andy came to my office afterwards and seemed relieved. He did not talk about the details but he did indicate that he was happy that I was here so I could work on a sales strategy for the new assessment products. This was a very warm discussion and his relief also affected me in a positive way. He stressed that I had been hired because marketing these new products was supported by some highly ranked executives of the company and discussed who those individuals were. I was the first person globally who had been brought on board specifically to support the strategic creation of this new product line. He indicated that I would soon fly to London to meet the person who managed the European diagnostics business to discuss the launch of these new products in Central Europe. I was impressed and flattered. I started to feel that I had “arrived” now that my role and tasks for the next months were clarified. I sensed I would enjoy my relationship with this supervisor and felt relieved that it would be substantially better than my relationship with my former employer (Project 2).

The next morning Carl came to my office. He closed the door, took a seat and looked at me. I asked him how yesterday’s meeting had been and he replied smilingly “Don’t ask.” After a short pause I went on and asked him how he felt today. Again he smiled and said “Don’t ask.” I inferred from his responses that while things could have been worse, he was not happy with the outcomes of the meeting. He asked me how I felt at the end of my first week, and I told him about the warm welcome and also about my conversation with Andy. I told him that I looked forward to my new role. He indicated



that this was why he had come to talk with me. He had sensed at the meeting that Andy believed I would build the new assessment product line for Germany. Carl had repeatedly clarified that in his view I was not hired merely to market the new products. Instead, he thought I would support members of the three different business lines to set up and manage large consulting projects, integrating the business lines more purposefully. He felt that too few people in the company understood the importance of an “integrated approach” to consulting, and he began to gossip quite openly about colleagues who from his perspective were lacking this understanding. Since he had made this very clear in the meeting and even though he acknowledged that Andy had persisted in talking about my role in a very different manner, he went to suggest that Andy had probably only been joking. I replied that I did not think that Andy had been joking, and said that I felt like I was caught in a power struggle. He said that if this was a struggle over power it would not be fought out on my back and that I should inform him immediately if Andy continued to ask me to build the new product line.

The following week I had a meeting with the recently appointed MD, Steve. He managed the German operations in addition to his responsibility for another 19 European countries. Steve spent considerable time inquiring why I had joined the company and it appeared that our views about a new company culture were similar. He felt people needed to cooperate more freely, and to negotiate subject-matters openly while remaining appreciative of others as new business opportunities were explored. I suggested that this was a fairly idealized notion and that I felt human organizing would inevitably entail politics. He looked puzzled, and to offer a real-life example of what I meant I described the situation I had found myself in last week with Carl and Andy. He seemed surprised, and then told me that Carl was not going to be my supervisor, but that I would report into Andy with the clear task to market the new assessment products.

Steve was convinced that customers would literally snatch the new e-diagnostic product from me, and he projected I would need to hire four new sales representatives in six months from now since the business would be so successful. He ended by saying: “Be an entrepreneur, and do what you think is reasonable, and I will give you any support you need. We will hire trainers if we need to prepare you to speak in front of large audiences or even on TV if you think that is necessary.” I had a similar emotional response as I had

after my conversation with Andy the week before. It was difficult to maintain a critical stance towards Steve's ideas and to resist his highly idealized notions as I enjoyed being part of a new network of people who all appeared to be very supportive.

My experience of the first weeks has been emotionally and intellectually stimulating as well as enervating. There are different aspects I want to explore in this narrative. First, I want to pay attention to the political aspects of entering a large consulting firm, and how my time of onboarding constrained but also enabled me to become a recognized member of this new community of people; I also want to develop further my thinking about relations of recognition and power against this background. Second, I intend to explore why it had been so difficult for me to negate my affective response of being part of a larger "whole" despite the apparently idealized notions behind that thinking. Finally, I want to reflect upon how I continue to recognize myself in a business environment where I am tasked with marketing products which underpin a rather mechanistic understanding of humans and organizations.



### ***The politics of inclusion and exclusion***

Throughout these first weeks I experienced repeated invitations to different world-views depending on the interlocutors I interacted with. I sensed that in the pre-launch phase of the restructuring process different people tried to persuade me of the legitimacy of their interpretations of Steve's work. I was trying to make sense of what was going on and to understand who I could trust and who I should be more cautious about. I found myself caught up in a highly political process. Steve's initiative to change the company's culture involved flattening the organizational hierarchy—a change which impacted senior managers. Some would soon find themselves in a position without managerial authority. Consequently, senior managers would experience a shift in the hegemonic order of existing power relations. Their response was to try to uphold the status quo. They shared their views with me about how they thought this company should be run. I was obliged to interact with them in the midst of this re-negotiation process where my role was interpreted differently by different senior managers. Consequently I chose my words very carefully in my attempts to become an included and recognized member of this community.

### *Organizational politics: the dominant management discourse*

Research into organizational politics is varied and results have been ambiguous. There has been agreement that political behaviour is more likely under uncertain circumstances than in more formalized organization processes (Mintzberg 1979a; Ferris et al., 1989; Fandt and Ferris, 1990). There has been less agreement on where political behaviour actually occurs. Some researchers hold that political behavior occurs most at the highest ranks of an organization (Ferris et al., 1989; Madison et al., 1980), others (e.g. Gandz and Murray, 1980) find that employees at the lowest ranks in an organization are most impacted by institutional politics.

Political behaviour has been associated with the practice of promotion (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Ferris and Buckley, 1990; Gandz and Murray 1980). For example, Ferris and Kacmar (1992) make the interesting point that promotion-readiness depends on a person's performance, but also upon their willingness to cope with the political struggles involved in promotion. Watkins (2009) in *The Onboarding Challenge* speaks about the

particular case of joining a new organization, and he uses the human immune system as a metaphor to describe “the organization’s culture and political networks” (p. 7). Outsiders, Watkins holds, may be “isolated and destroyed” by the organization’s immune system if they are seen to bring in “bad ideas” (ibid.). The manager in an onboarding process can prevent this from happening by, for example, making political connections (p. 15) through “[identifying] key stakeholders and forging productive working relationships with them” (ibid.) He then points out two traps which newly onboarded leaders need to avoid: If managers are “looking only up and down” they risk not paying needed attention to relationships with colleagues at the same hierarchical level (p. 15). He also warns managers and new employees not to mistake “titles for authority” (p. 16). He brings to the reader’s attention that “there are always some highly respected managers in the organization whose influence far exceeds their formal authority” (ibid.), and that these need to be identified and their agendas understood.

What I find disturbing in Watkins’s ideas is that he conceptualizes organizations’ cultures and political practices in an anthropomorphized way by holding that these quite literally resemble a human’s immune system. I do not find such concept very helpful because it leads us to think that we may be able to inhibit the organization’s immune reaction in a recipe like manner. Watkins prescribes building good working relationships with supervisors, peers and direct reports, thus everybody, and he seems to claim that this will—almost like an antibiotics—act against the potential infectious symptoms which for him characterize the onboarding process. Such simplistic thinking fails to take into account the complex interactions that typically characterize all work relationships, including the emerging relationships that characterize the onboarding process.

What Watkins and the aforementioned researchers seem to have in common is that they take a rather cognitivist stance towards political manoeuvring. Even though research appears to have shown consistently that political behaviour is a social phenomenon. Ferris and Kacmar (1992) hold that individuals can choose if they want to take part in the political game or not, almost as if the wider organizational context would *not* impact their decisions. This seems particularly unlikely since they also admit that organizational politics can potentially be observed at different hierarchical tiers. So the question arises: where is one to work if one wanted to steer clear of politics when it may well be an

ubiquitous phenomenon? If politics cannot be avoided as for example in onboarding-processes we then find in the dominant discourse a recipe-like approach as to how to handle such situations. For Watkins (2009), candidates can reduce the potential for failure when joining a new organization by following his guidance. His solution to the social phenomenon of politics is focussed on individual action. This view neglects the complexity of social phenomena such as I experienced. This might explain why there is no prescription in Watkins for how to behave when an organization's "immune system" shows an "auto-immune reaction", i.e. when different important stakeholders do simply *not* agree on the future of the organization. Equally, there is little advice on how to act if one comes on board and there is no clarity about one's future role. I have perceived such phenomena several times, both myself and when acting as an onboarding coach for clients. For this reason I want to present a view which takes the richness of such processes seriously.

*Organizational politics: an alternative view*

Chantal Mouffe, Professor of Political Theory at the Centre of the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster, has written extensively on political processes of human organizing (e.g. 2000, 1993; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In *On The Political* (2005) she touches on different aspects of human political activity, and I want to explore some of these to make sense of my experience. Although Mouffe's main interest is in political theory and governmental organizations I find that her insights hold for economic organizations also. For example, she speaks about the emotional investment which underlies any identification with political parties but which is normally ignored in the way we rationally theorize about political phenomena (2005: 25). Her insight resembles my sense of the dominant management literature I have explored. Moreover, she stresses the importance of our understanding of "sedimented forms of power relations" (*ibid.*), alluding to the nexus of power relations we have come to accept as natural and comments on how power relations both maintain and potentially disrupt the hegemonic order (2005: 33). I have argued in earlier projects (following Stacey and Elias) that the constant negotiation of power relations is an important aspect of any form of human interaction, including our experience in economic organizations.

I find Mouffe's ideas both apposite and stimulating. I will engage with her concept of antagonism/agonism as it connects with her understanding of configurations of power relations to make sense of my own experience. Mouffe opposes a view of a world which is free of hegemonic conflict or struggles over power (2005: 2). In putting conflict and power struggles at the heart of her world view, Mouffe argues against much of contemporary sociology which denies the importance of power conflicts:

An idealized view of human sociability, as being essentially moved by empathy and reciprocity, has generally provided the basis of modern democratic political thinking. Violence and hostility are seen as an archaic phenomenon, to be eliminated ... through a social contract, of a transparent communication among rational participants. Those who challenged this optimistic view were automatically perceived as enemies of democracy.

(Mouffe, 2005: 2-3)

Mouffe holds that the paradox of human interaction is that it has continuously equal potential for agreement and for conflict and that attempts to overcome this paradox inevitably leads to an idealized view of what is actually going on (ibid.: 16). If this insight is not taken into account, the appearance of conflict as part of political processes will be enigmatic for those who find themselves entangled in them (ibid.: 24). This sends Mouffe on a quest for practices that uphold the paradox which comes about when she "postulate[s] the ineradicability of antagonism, while affirming *at the same* time the possibility of democratic pluralism..." (ibid.: 19, my emphasis). So, contrary to most orthodox management literature, she proposes an understanding which takes complexity and the paradoxical nature of human organizing seriously. It seems to me that it is particularly difficult to conceptualize human organizing in paradoxical terms because one runs the risk of trying to resolve the paradox, thus falling headlong into idealism.

In previous projects I have drawn on Elias (1970) and Stacey and colleagues (e.g. 2000, 2005, 2007, 2010) who propose it is all too easy to collapse the paradoxical elements when thinking of human conduct in organizations. In Elias's view humans are interdependent beings who always constrain and enable one another, paradoxically *at the*

*same time*. Through people's pursuing individual goals in local interaction (where local means that any one person can only interact directly with a limited number of people) a global pattern emerges through the intermingling of many, many individual intentions and deeds. Thus, the "structure" and the "individual", or in Stacey's terms the "global" and the "local" cannot be separated because the one could neither be thought of at the expense of the other nor by granting one aspect priority over the other.

Interestingly, conflict cannot be overcome in this or in Mouffe's view because it inevitably and continuously emerges once people come together to pursue individual goals (ibid.: 12); conflict requires attention, not conciliation. Mouffe goes on to propose that in the history of modern thought a bipolar conceptualization of human co-operation has emerged which stipulates on the one end hostile antagonism and on the other hand a form of cooperation which is free of conflict (ibid.: 2). It is difficult to break this notion up, and in her view,

[f]ew attempts have been made to elaborate the democratic project on an anthropology which acknowledges the ambivalent character of human sociability and the fact that reciprocity and hostility cannot be dissociated.

(Mouffe, 2005: 3)

If conflict and harmony are inextricably linked it is important not to fall into dualistic thinking about good and bad. Hence Mouffe embraces the competitiveness of human interaction rather than proposing enmity as the only alternative for harmony. She speaks of a "common bond" (ibid.: 20) which allows people to endure conflictual situations without conceiving of the other's demands as illegitimate, and she calls this type of relation "agonistic" (ibid.: 20). By agonism Mouffe refers to the adversarial nature of human conduct where difference is not dividing but spurs a practice of critically contesting a given hegemonic order.

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties,

although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.

(Mouffe, 2005: 20)

My recent onboarding experience has underpinned my thinking about the political tensions created in processes of becoming an “insider.” To be able to manoeuvre through such processes it is important to bear in mind what people are actually doing in practice when faced with complex social situations like the ones described above. I found myself overwhelmed by political struggles almost immediately on the day I arrived. I could not possibly escape the “positioning game” in my desire to become an included and recognized in-member. In my conversations with Carl, Steve or Andy the agonistic element of our relating was evident. Our struggle over valid interpretations of what was going on, what was expected of me and how I should be positioned in my new organization was neither utterly aggressive nor entirely peaceful. Yet it was agonistic and highly political. While the political game in organizations may be ambiguous, it is not necessarily either aggressive or peaceful, but rather could be an in-between sphere, as it were, one which acknowledges the highly competitive, agonistic, element of human organizing. This is why Mouffe opposes this dualistic concept. I find this view resembles my own experience very well, since it captures the idea that the interplay of intentions from which political struggles emerge are a necessary process through which novelty arises.

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### ***The politics of recognition***

The narrative accounts I presented should not deceive the reader into thinking that my experience has been mostly negative. Indeed, there were many aspects that I truly enjoyed, and I want to briefly summarize what these have been, and how they are important for my discussion.

As previously mentioned, I was offered a job in this firm because the company was going through a major change process. This change involved laying off some people, reassigning established staff to new roles and bringing in new employees. Only a few people were hired, and being one of them filled me with pride. I was intrigued by the prospect of working in Central Europe—a market which executives thought held the most potential in terms of general revenue targets for this year—and building the customer base for an entirely new diagnostic instrument, and I felt like an in-member right from the beginning.

Against this backdrop it becomes clear why there was such an idealized talk around the impact my work would have. “While organisations are ‘real’ processes of interaction, they also feature in people’s imaginations and fantasy lives. They do so as imaginative constructs of idealised ‘wholes’, which gives felt unity of experience” (Stacey, 2007: 405). George H. Mead (1923) described how ideals are a very important and indeed precious part of our human heritage:

..., there are many values involved in our problems of social conduct to which we feel we are unable to do justice in their whole import, and yet when they are once envisaged they appear too precious to be ignored, so that in our action we do homage to them. We do not do justice to them. They constitute our ideals.

(Mead, 1923: 238)

In the next paragraph it becomes clear, however, that Mead sees a danger which arises when members of an organization accept idealized notions uncritically:

What must be indicated is that they [the ideals, E.W.] have only been kept in men's minds (240) by institutions set up for a specific purpose. An institution should arise and be kept live by its own function, but in so far as it does not function, the ideal of it can be kept alive only by some cult, whose aim is not the functioning of the institution, but the continued presence of the idea of it in the minds of those who cherish it.

(Mead, 1923: 239-240)

I think that it is our ethical responsibility independently as consultants and also as members of an organization to constantly reflect upon our practice. Reflection can help us to avoid unwarranted idealization of our values because idealization can be both a source of motivation and the foundation for the emergence of a cult. It is difficult to engage in this kind of reflection. As soon as leaders or consultants present

imaginings ... [of] an idealized future for the 'whole' that is free of conflicts and constraints, [they] evok[e] in individuals who belong to it a sense of enlarged personality in which they can accomplish anything simply through their belonging to an idealised group in which they participate and from which they derive their value as persons.

(Stacey, 2007: 342)

I do not think that acts of idealization are inherently harmful. In fact they are an important aspect of how we go about our daily work and how we engage with others in order to reach our goals. In my experience, however, it is not easy to take a critical stance towards such idealized notions. Indeed theories of recognition are a good example of idealized discourses as they have been presented in the dominant management discourse.

*Orthodox views on recognition in organizations and their origin*

What authors on employee recognition (e.g. Gostick and Elton, 2007; Ventrice, 2009; Hansford, 2003; Daniels, 2000) have in common is a very instrumental view on how to “apply” recognition as if “it” was a tool. If leaders use recognition properly, it is then thought there will be less conflict, more alignment of individual with organizational goals, and people in general will more readily go the extra mile with a smile. These authors agree that the effects of personal recognition, for example a conversation with the CEO, a personalized thank you-note or some form of public appreciation of one’s work, far exceeds the benefit of monetary remuneration. Thus, mastering the arts of recognition seems to make a lot of sense: organizational goals will be reached more easily, employees will feel better and managers do not require large budgets to secure all these positive effects. Nelson (2005), for example, speaks about those ten managerial practices that employees value most. Amongst them are four forms of praise: public, personal, written, and electronic praise. An important aspect of recognition in most management literature is that it is often equated with praising or appreciating employees. Presented this way, it is only a short step to think about recognition as a technique which managers need to learn and apply. Such idealized understanding stands in stark contrast to how processes of recognition are conceptualized outside the managerial discourse, e. g. in philosophy. I will propose an alternative view. To prepare my discussion I will lay out briefly how the prominent discourse on recognition has actually come about and to do so I shall turn to an important philosopher of the Enlightenment, Jean Jaques Rousseau.

Rousseau held that morality is essentially an individual responsibility. He argues that people’s actions are accompanied by a voice from within that calibrates our actions and sustains societal order. However, this voice is often “drowned by the passions induced by our dependence on others ...” (Taylor, 1995: 228). Charles Taylor in his essay *The Politics of Recognition* (1995) finds Rousseau’s view to be built on the Romantic idea of authenticity. Human beings are obliged to listen to themselves in realizing their very own way of life, hence the ideal of holding *individuals* accountable once collective plans become thwarted. Importantly, in this view, I may not be able to live up to my human potential because I find myself forced to conform with constraints imposed on me from the outside world. For Rousseau, it is the task of the individual to live an authentic

life and not lose themselves as a result of “pressures toward outward conformity” (ibid.: 229).

In this line of thought humans are accorded an autonomous ability to develop and express their identities. At the same time, Rousseau was aware of social influences on the individual, hence his warning against over-dependence on outward pressures. While Rousseau concluded that an ideal society needed to be brought about in which “a perfectly balanced reciprocity takes the sting out of our dependence on opinion, and makes it compatible with liberty” (ibid.: 240), Taylor reminds us that “this isn’t how things work with such important issues as the definition of our identity” (ibid.: 230). For Taylor, these are indeed marked by a dialogical character. We learn to express ourselves only through exchange, negotiation and sometimes struggle with others (ibid.). It follows for Taylor that we need to transcend Rousseau’s ideal and acknowledge the fact that depending on others is crucial for how we negotiate (parts of) our identity constantly. It is this aspect which has been taken up by Stacey and colleagues through the work of Norbert Elias, and this is where I will turn to next.



### ***In-group behavior, recognition and idealism***

Human organizing is an essentially social process, and one which entails political activity (e.g. Stacey 2007, 2010; Mouffe, 2005; Griffin, 2002). Since people in groups continuously negotiate power asymmetries, and thereby recognize and misrecognize others, there is constant potential for becoming in- or excluded. In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scotson (1965/ 1994) elaborate on exactly this point. People in groups form particular power figurations—temporarily stable forms of dependence—which are, however, always open to contestation. While Elias never denied individual dispositions he stressed that these dispositions are acted out only in a social context.

Contrary to Rousseau, being oriented towards others and the experience of interdependency for Elias was not merely a matter of emotional or cognitive stimulation. No form of individual or group identity could possibly emerge if not in relation to, and thus dependence on others, which is why all thinking and feeling for him was entrenched in power relationships. Elias and Scotson (1965/ 1994) describe the specific power dynamics which emerged in a housing estate in England in the 1950s. Their main interest was in the fact that residents were split into two groups, one of which contained people who thought they had better manners, greater discipline in performing their jobs, and that they looked after their children better. In contrast they believed that people in the other group lacked their degree of sophistication. Elias and Scotson described the former group as the “established” group and the latter group the “outsiders.” Importantly, on closer scrutiny the researchers could not identify overt difference between the two groups. They argue that this in- and outsider group dynamic seemed to be founded on the fact that the established group had been living in that place for a couple of decades longer than the newcomers. Thus, the established group had greater cohesion. The closer knit social networks allowed them to develop and hold to a discourse that defined the overall inferiority of the outsider-group. The outsiders ultimately believed the myths the established were circulating and began to act accordingly. Thus both groups colluded to sustain the power asymmetry.

The parallel I want to draw with my work situation is that Steve’s activities spurred internal discussions around how things ought to be done in the future. He was keen to influence the organization structure in such a way as to prepare this company for

the future. His attempts implied a renegotiation of the corporate culture, and my arrival was partly understood to signify what this reforming process was about. He held a strong belief that people had to run this company who were more customer-oriented. Steve appeared to be very clear about what needed to be done. At the same time I assumed that not all senior managers would share his ideas. It was likely that some executive team members, for example, might lose their place, while others would assume senior roles. Steve—apparently clinging to Rousseauian idealism and ignoring Taylor’s insight that “this isn’t how things work with such important issues as the definition of our identity”—did not seem to recognize the possibility for a multitude of different, potentially antagonistic, responses to his one-sided vision of the future. He seemed to divide the firm into those who lived in the past and were not able to see what needed to be done and those who would lead the firm into a glorious future, a divide akin to that which Elias and Scotson had observed. It appeared to me that his gesture was an invitation to me to join him and become a member of this latter, heroic in-group.

In that process I was invited into a discourse which underpinned the experience of group cohesion which Elias and Scotson had described. It seems to me that Steve neglected the social aspects involved in such processes, however. Including some must at the same time lead to the exclusion of others. Moreover it must call out responses in those who are excluded to attempt to disarticulate this new discourse because the experience of becoming excluded would mean loss of power and loss of recognition. How then, are we to carry on in our organizational practice if we try to take this potential for agonism or antagonism seriously, and avoid escaping into unquestioned idealisations? And to what extent has the way in which we conceive of leadership made us hostage to this way if idealizing?

### *Taming antagonism*

From Mouffe’s (2005) standpoint, society is always “politically instituted” which is why she “denies the possibility of a non-adversarial democratic politics” (p. 34). This resonates with my own experience. Despite her helpful insights I want to take issue here with some her views. Mouffe’s backbone is “discourse theory” which she and Ernesto Laclau (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) have developed. They posit a discourse is

constituted by socio-political struggles which are never fixed, and it is these struggles which propel societal change. Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize a dominant hegemonic discourse as a current but transient point of stabilization in the ongoing negotiation over what is taken to be the truth. Nevertheless, this discourse is merely one possible view that has gained prevalence and acceptance at the expense of other discourses. Thereby it serves to manifest a particular power structure. The process of establishing and challenging hegemonic orders is never-ending. For Mouffe, it is the task of those involved in such debates to radicalize them; that is, to constantly re-open the discussion around a particular discourse in order to progress to new, ever more elaborated concepts. This whole process is an important precondition for the “extension of democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xv). I think this is an important point in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s concept. It signals that their own thinking goes beyond the desire for *understanding* social dynamics by suggesting that these can be more or less *actively shaped*. Indeed it appears in Mouffe’s later work (2005) that this call for an active promotion of democratic struggles can be influenced to become more agonistic, and thus freed from antagonistic aggressive tendencies.

Quite early in *On the Political* (2005) she points out that the agonistic (competitive) element of human interaction has to be cultivated so that it can be “tamed” (op. cit.: 20). This is done by means of creating institutional practices that allow for antagonistic tendencies to be catalyzed in such a way that they become agonistic (op. cit.: 21). “Conflicts are less likely to emerge as long as agonistic political channels for dissenting voice exist” (ibid.). Mouffe does not deny the ever present possibility for antagonistic struggles to emerge (op. cit.: 24), and yet it seems to me that she tries to build the case for a particular kind of practice which transcends the aggressive elements of human behaviour so that conflicts do not become disastrous.

It is not in our power to eliminate conflicts and escape our human condition, but it is in our power to create the practices, discourses and institutions that would allow those conflicts to take an agonistic form.

I am not fully convinced by this idea. In fact my experience has been quite the opposite. Despite Steve's good intentions and advice, his interaction conjured up in me, and in others as well, all kinds of thoughts and fantasies. While I was intrigued by the idea of being part of those who would "lead this company into the future", I sensed that others experienced it differently. Carl in particular viewed himself under threat of losing power and as a consequence, he did not feel adequately recognized. In his struggle to keep the status quo he gossiped about others in a way I found disturbing. Elias and Scotson (1965/ 1994) in fact describe how gossip can be used to sustain a given power structure. They found that the outsider group who lived in an area of town referred to as the "Estate" were talked about in a particular manner:

They had a clear awareness that they, as Estate people, were set apart from the people in the "village." *A common way of expressing this awareness was the use, even among themselves, of derogatory terms commonly used in "village" gossip with reference to the Estate. All the people interviewed ... on the Estate mentioned the name "rat alley" as a generally accepted term for their own part of [town].*

(Elias and Scotson, 1965/ 1994: 79, my emphasis)

I did not feel I could address my concerns with Carl since the power difference between us was large, and I did not dare to risk putting him on the spot. Such an occurrence reflects how Steve's desire to implement a more open culture of discussion—which one might interpret as a call for a more agonistic as opposed to an antagonistic form of debate—is constrained by political manoeuvres and power relationships. Mouffe's idea seems to me to be over-optimistic, almost calling for (democratic) practices which, if implemented properly, will increase the likelihood of debate and struggles exempt of the aggressive, yet not the agonistic, element of human conduct. From my point of view Mouffe here tries to collapse the paradox of the constant potential for both agonistic and antagonistic struggles at the same time. In proposing to tame aggressive behaviour so that it becomes agonistic, she attempts to dissociate politics from human interaction. I want to propose instead an understanding which keeps this paradox, namely that human



interaction constantly holds the potential for harmonious, agonistic and antagonistic experiences at the same time.

*The dialectics of recognition and power*

As I have pointed out in previous sections of my thesis relations of power and relations of recognition co-exist in a dialectic form; one cannot be conceptualized without the other. Here I want to take this view one step further to argue that power relations can be conceptualized as processes of (mis)recognition. This will be an important aspect for an explanation which upholds the paradoxical elements of human interrelating. As Stacey (2000, 2007, 2010), following Elias (1970), has made plain, power relations are constituted by interdependencies. In social and thus communicative interaction people cannot always do as they please. They are held accountable by others for their deeds and vice versa.

Of particular importance in these conversational processes is the emergent reproduction of themes and variations that organize communicative actions into membership categories. These tend to be themes of an ideological kind that establish who may take a turn, as well as when and how they may do so. ... *[T]he result is categories of conversational participants in which some are included ... and ... [others] are excluded.*

(Stacey, 2010: 184, my emphasis)

Importantly, Stacey (ibid.) argues that an unconscious dynamic is at play in which both groups serve a purpose for the other. The dominant group which hosts the “insiders” not only becomes dominant because they conceptualize of themselves as such; equally important is the fact that the “outsiders” recognize the “insiders” as superior since without this recognition no feeling of being in- or outside would exist in the first place. Elias and Scotson have elaborated on exactly this point:

People can often disarm or silence others with whom they disagree or fight by throwing in their teeth some disparaging and vilifying group name or pieces of shameful gossip

which refers to their group provided they themselves belong to a group which successfully claims a superior status compared to that of their opponents. ... [T]he objects of the attack are unable to hit back because, though personally innocent, of the accusations ..., *they cannot discard, not even in their own mind, the identification with the stigmatised group*. Vilifications setting in motion the socially inferior group's own sense of shame or guilt, feelings of worthlessness attributed to them and the paralysis of their power to strike back ... forms thus part of the social apparatus with which socially dominant and superior groups maintain their dominion ... over socially inferior groups.

(Elias and Scotson, 1965/ 1994: 102, my emphasis)

In other words, to be inside or outside, means to be recognized as such, and to recognize oneself as such. In this dynamic both the established and the outsiders need to be considered. The former try to sustain the power asymmetry through means of gossip, shame and other emotionally charged forms of discourse to underpin their superiority; and the latter internalize these views to an extent that they literally believe them. This is how processes of recognition/misrecognition shape identity.

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### ***Overcoming dualism: Power as processes of recognition***

In order to maintain what I see as a complex understanding of organizing, I proposed above that once we conceptualize power and recognition there is a need to take seriously the paradox and ambiguity the human encounter constantly opens up. I will continue this line of thought by suggesting that human interaction continuously offers the potential for recognition and misrecognition, agonistic and antagonistic struggles, and for hegemonic orders to remain stable and to fluctuate all at the same time. In other words, if there is stability then it is dynamic stability. It takes effort to keep things stable. I shall narrate another episode from my experience at my new employer in order to illustrate the point I want to make.

When I came in I was told by different people throughout the first days that someone in this company had had the idea to administer an “organization culture survey” with senior managers since this was one of the diagnostic tools people in this consulting firm used with their clients. This is a so-called 180° feedback instrument through which direct reports can anonymously give feedback to their supervisor’s performance. It was seen to offer important insights for Steve in his thinking about the new organization structure and who would assume a leadership role in future. Carl’s team had also taken part in this exercise and the feedback had been very negative. Although I knew that I would not be a member of Carl’s team this had not been officially announced and so it happened that Carl invited me to one meeting with his team. In contrast to his usual self-confident appearance, Carl looked rather depressed, and it turned out that this meeting was to announce that this team would cease to exist. Carl indicated that once Steve announced the new organization structure he (Carl) would assume a different role. What intrigued me was what happened after he had made this statement. People stared at the floor or out of the window. Since I was so new in this team and actually did not have anything to say I remained quiet as well. It was the person next to Carl who eventually found his voice, and he began by saying how much he had enjoyed working with this team and with Carl in particular. Shortly after he had finished another team member spoke up to thank Carl as well for the great work he had done for this team and the company at large. All remaining five team members joined in by highlighting Carl’s leadership. I found this to be quite an awkward experience since these were the very

people who only three months ago in the survey must have made the opposite point. It struck me how political manoeuvres were at play in the moment their misrecognition had been made public. It almost appeared as if people now were ashamed of what they had done.

Charles Taylor in *The Politics of Recognition* (1995) talks about the conditions under which we are today constantly presented with the possibility of misrecognition. He stresses the importance of recognition for the formation of our identity (1995: 232) which arises from the fact that our experience of ourselves is fundamentally dialogical.

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others—our parents, for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.

(Taylor, 1995: 230)

Taylor shows that the discourse of recognition emerged with Rousseau (and was later elaborated most notably through Hegel who followed Rousseau in his romanticist idealism, a stance I have critiqued earlier in my thesis) because prior to the age of modernity, social categories granted people recognition automatically in relation to their standing in a particular society. Rousseau, however, emphasized the individual responsibility of every single person for a life well-led. This ushered in the end of an automatically granted form of societal recognition.

... inwardly derived, personal, original identity doesn't enjoy ... recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange ... What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition *but the conditions in which this attempt to be recognized can fail.*

(Taylor, 1995: 231, my emphasis)

In my third project I pointed to the work of Hugh Willmott (1993) who stands in the tradition of Critical Management Studies. He claims that in the dominant management discourse a particular style of management is being promoted by means of which those in power need to find ways to capitalize upon the need for recognition of their staff members. Managers are to claim that the ideal of self-realization can be achieved through work under conditions the manager provides. However, and this is Willmott's crucial point, workers are not recognized for pursuing their own life-projects but for work that serves the interest of those they work for. This "doublethink" as Willmott terms it is very difficult to spot since the whole discourse sounds very positive and indeed promising for all involved.

I have argued that the struggle over power is a struggle over recognition. Mutual recognition for adults includes the experience of having one's voice being taken seriously by others (Honneth, 1994), and being taken seriously by others constitutes the precondition for becoming an in-member. In socio-political conduct "inclusion" is a sign of being part of a dominant group, and hence "recognition" is "power." Importantly, I do not wish to present the concept of inclusion/exclusion as a dualism. Inclusion may also mean exclusion, and the struggle for recognition may equally be a struggle against a particular kind of recognition. Why is this so?

### *Beyond dualism*

Rainer Forst is Professor of Political Theory and Philosophy at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University in Frankfurt/Main. Forst was an assistant to Axel Honneth in Berlin and Frankfurt prior to publishing his professorial dissertation *Toleranz im Konflikt* (2003) [Tolerance in conflict]. Forst is reckoned among the third generation of the Frankfurt School, and he has extensively researched and published in the areas of practical philosophy and political theory. His concept of "repressive tolerance" is explored in van den Brink and Owen's reader *Recognition and Power* (2007: 221) and it illuminates the point I want to make. For Forst, the act of recognizing a minority may actually serve to manifest a hegemonic order because it officially confirms the position of the dominated and subversively presents the current power figuration as natural, rendering its potential disarticulation difficult. This would eventually lead to feelings of repression on the side

of the minority despite their overt participation in the dynamics of their own recognition. Forst gives different examples which illustrate this case. For instance the ruling party in second half of 16th century France, the Politiques, in order to safeguard the political order had to accept the Calvinist minority of the Huguenots which ultimately led to the Edict of Nantes. “This Edict clearly recognized the Huguenots as French citizens, though as citizens of a second class” (Forst in van den Brink and Owen, 2007: 217). Huguenots were allowed to practice their religion yet only in carefully chosen places. From now on they could assume public offices but they were highly restricted in terms of what these offices were; they were allowed to found schools and universities but not just anywhere and not of just any kind (ibid.: 218).

A more recent example which Forst gives is that of the discussion around gay marriage in Germany, and he speaks about the generally proclaimed tolerance and recognition of gay people which at the same is also still restrictive. This led to the slogan of Germany’s main conservative party, the “Christian Democratic Union”: “Tolerance yes, marriage no!” (ibid.: 221). What I take from these and other examples he gives is that recognizing others cannot be dissociated from political acts. To the contrary, recognition has to cross the sphere of the political, as it were. This opens up the risk for recognition to be compromised because recognizing others for who they are carries the potential to change a predominating power figuration. Granting gay people the right to marry, for example, may undermine conservative values and views of what constitutes a legitimate marital relationship. Ultimately this might lead to power tilting away from the dominating conservatives, a situation they would naturally resist.

Insights like those of Forst and Taylor render a dualistic concept of inclusion/exclusion wanting. In terms of naming those involved as in- or outsiders, I think we run the risk of reifying the different political actors in ways as if they were somewhat fixed in their positions. To be clear, Elias was very much aware of the constant potential for the fluctuation of power relations<sup>4</sup>. What I am rather pointing to is that we have to

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4 In fact Elias has worked towards an understanding which transcends individualist and structuralist positions. For Elias (1991) individuals are part of a societal “figuration” and these individuals are interdependent in such a way that their dependence on one another constitutes a nexus of power relations. That is, that a figuration does not exist apart from the individuals who make it up. It is only through the individuals’ intentions and deeds that a given figuration and its underlying rules are reiterated, and paradoxically potentially changed at the same time.

acknowledge that in this fluctuation process the border between in- and outsiders becomes rather blurred; it is continuously contested and re-negotiated and hence difficult to demarcate even though it may appear firm and stable. What Forst and Taylor help us with is the idea that in struggles over power those who dominate in fact cannot simply exclude those they (want to) dominate. They have to engage with them (in dialogic form) where engaging means that they have to recognize them; nevertheless this act of recognition may fail. Under such uncertain circumstances this may turn out to be a highly political act since official acts of recognition may actually be acts of misrecognition which could serve to underpin the current pattern of power relationships (the hegemonic order). While the dominated will inevitably experience this misrecognition it is very difficult for them to speak into this dilemma because it presents them with a paradoxical situation.

I call forms of toleration “repressive” when they help to uphold unjustifiable relations of power by forcing those who are dominated to accept their inferior position” (ibid.). In fact *“the power structure of this form of tolerance/recognition is ... inclusion and exclusion at the same time.*

(Forst in van den Brink and Owen, 2007: 222, my emphasis)

Under such conditions the dominated group may generate a particular we-identity which may spur them to stand up for their rights, essentially struggling against (this form) of recognition (ibid.: 223). This concept speaks to the ambiguous elements of human organizing that I want to point to. In the struggle of those who dominate to sustain the hegemonic order, they have to recognize some outsiders as insiders (at least in a democracy which holds that all are equal). At the same time this act of inclusion leads to minority members feeling misrecognized because ironically it appears as a strategic move to demarcate them as inferior.

Interestingly, it seems to me that Forst’s idea can also be seen to operate in the reverse order. When Carl was judged negatively through the culture survey by his direct reports this was a clear sign of misrecognition, hence exclusion by his team members.

Consequently, this led to his stepping down from his role and exclusion. At the same time people in the meeting described above indulged in memories of team events they had enjoyed together and recognized Carl for shaping this team in a way they felt positively about. It remains speculative if there were aspects in the work with Carl they had truly enjoyed. Nevertheless, what I think this instance shows is that recognition and misrecognition, and exclusion and inclusion can appear, paradoxically, all at the same time. I would add to Forst's (and Willmott's) ideas that such dynamics are not only spurred by activities of those who dominate at a given point in time, but also by those who are dominated and who, by their interaction, have the same impact on those in power.

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### ***Recognizing myself***

Since I knew that writing this project would have to do with my entry into a new organization I wondered how I could capture the richness of the new experiences I was going to have. I decided to keep a diary, and kept note of particular instances and my reflections upon them several times a week for the first month. In the end I wrote up the narratives I presented here as they reflected different aspects of my experience which I believe can be generalized in different ways. First, the highly political processes I found myself caught up in informs the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that underpin my thinking about power relating and dynamics of mutual recognition in organizational contexts. Second, acts of idealization serve to sustain our sense of identity and make it difficult to think of the future realistically (as I have encountered both in my own and in client organizations). This has resulted in a fundamental question for me: how do I recognize myself in my own organization where, to remain employed and be part of those who are included, I am obliged to subscribe to ideas I have become highly sceptical of?

I think this question points to the heart of the struggle for recognition. In calling into question taken for granted beliefs, I find myself in a difficult situation. I want to be a recognized in-member of the community of consultants I belong to, and at the same time I have begun to question fundamental assumptions underlying this practice. How am I to sustain myself in such situation, when it is particularly difficult to address my insights with other members of this “in-group”? I might risk both exclusion from the field of consulting I work in and also misrecognition from many sides if I do not act in politically effective ways. However, as Ricoeur says in *The Course of Recognition* (2005: 258) “... it is at the very heart of *Anerkennung* [recognition] that the competition between recognition and misrecognition is revealed, both as regards self-recognition and as regards recognition of others.” In other words, risking misrecognition may be an important aspect in the process of becoming recognized. Ricoeur uses the example of a criminal who “makes himself recognized in his rebellious singularity vis-à-vis the law that refuses to recognize ... him. In this way, misrecognition finds itself incorporated into the dynamic of recognition.” (ibid.)

Taking this as an analogy he goes on to hold that the one who contravenes norms poses a threat to both himself and others, and possibly the hegemonic order at large. But

in doing so, he or she makes an important contribution to the search for truth. This search may be risky because breaking the norms may lead to new forms of understanding—or to mistakes. It is the fate of those who try to bring about a new understanding that they may be praised as heroes, or condemned as heretics, hence risking potential misrecognition and bearing the fear that, after all, they may be wrong.

It is ever only after the fact that mistakes show themselves to be a relevant part of the search for the truth. With contempt, the incorporation of the negative into the winning of recognition is complete. We may even dare to speak here of the work of misrecognition in the gaining of recognition.

(Ricoeur, 2005: 259)



## ***Conclusion***

Recognition is but one aspect of the dominant management discourse, and it has been taken up in a fairly instrumentalized way. It is held that if managers understand how to master the practice of recognition then this may benefit their business at large through the delivery of superior results. Such mastery supposedly bears the possibility for more aligned action taking, reduced organizational politics and conflict, and happier employees. I have tried to distance myself from this idealized view, and have instead presented as a counter position a view on recognition which pays close attention to the paradoxes and complexities of organizational life.

On reflection, my discussion can lead to generalizations about what it is that I am actually contributing in my work as organization consultant. It seems to me that it is not so much about the actual “delivery” of results. Instead, I find myself being recognized for the ability to manoeuvre the political sphere in which my work is embedded, and to endure the constant possibility of failure and misrecognition. This speaks to an ability to support clients in their struggle for becoming recognized members within their own organization through conducting change or leadership development programs. Likewise it speaks to the way I interact with colleagues in my organization when we struggle about recognition of our own leaders and their leadership. Out of this struggle the potential for new forms of cooperation arises. Consequently, this opens up continuously the opportunity for prevailing hegemonic orders to be overthrown, and hence conflict. I find myself being recognized for helping clients to bear these conflicts through engaging in conversations, programs and developmental initiatives of different kinds.

What I have tried to demonstrate throughout this project is what it is that is actually going on when we speak about acting politically and contend that it is struggles over power and for recognition which underpin political manoeuvring. Most importantly, I have conceptualized struggles over power and recognition as a paradoxical dynamic where the interaction of those we label as recognized or misrecognized or as in- or outsiders continuously opens up the potential for a given hegemonic order to become disarticulated. I have held that we have to acknowledge that in this fluctuation process the border between in- and outsiders is blurred; it is continuously contested and re-negotiated which may lead to the paradoxical experience of being recognized and misrecognized or

in- and excluded at the same time. Consequently, to understand what it is that I do in my work, I must pay attention to this paradoxical element of my experience because it is in this ongoing negotiation process where change (potentially) comes about and also where we continue to negotiate our identity. Sustaining this paradoxical stance is difficult as it contradicts recipe-like approaches to organizational change. Here change is presented in an idealized way which I have rarely seen work in organizations I have been associated with for the past 15 years. Instead, I experience organizational life as complex, even contradictory, and hence emotionally enervating and potentially anxiety provoking. It appears to me that through acts of idealization we are trying to make such anxiety more bearable. I propose that another way of coping with anxiety is a different attitude to the work of organization consulting; an attitude which does not deny paradox but which takes it seriously. With such attitude consultants do not try to yield solutions or generalize their experience in terms of “best practice.” They accept the contingencies of organizational life in general and of our communicative interaction in particular.

Ricoeur stresses that in communicative interaction we come to experience both the differences and the sameness of the other. Although we differ in terms of our individual identities and although we often come to stress the differences between ourselves and others, the fact that all humans are able to communicate and to reason brings about the experience of sameness. In Ricoeur’s idea we seek the social encounter to ensure our sameness with the other and to explore our differences. Taylor (1995) utilizes Gadamer’s (1975) concept of “fusion of horizons” with which Gadamer, in the tradition of Rousseau and Hegel, held that in encountering others we bring together our different standpoints (horizons) to eventually reach an ultimate harmonious end-state. Taylor, while using this concept, resists its idealist notions. He captures something else, which speaks to my own practice and to what it is that I am actually recognized for.

We learn to move in a broader horizon, where what we once took for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the unfamiliar ... *The fusion of horizons operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, for articulating these new contrasts.*

(Taylor, 1995: 253-253, my emphasis)

I consider my main role to be to help clients develop new ways of thinking and speaking about the phenomena they encounter day in, day out. I am still aware that “we are very far away from [an] ... ultimate horizon” (ibid.: 256). In that sense my work is not only about delivering results but also about the ability to fuse horizons and endure the debate and conflict that comes with it. This aspect is important because in my experience we will never reach an ultimate fused horizon in which organizational life is harmonious for everyone. As Stacey has said elsewhere, the patterning of human interaction leads to nothing more than more patterning. In that sense the potential for both success and failure is always present which is why I want to capture from Mouffe (2005) the idea of the “ambivalent character of human sociability and the fact that reciprocity and hostility cannot be dissociated ” (p. 3). I have argued (after Mouffe) that we try to escape this constant ambivalence through idealized ways of thinking about (consultant) leadership and avoiding this is also something I am recognized for in my role as consultant (and of course, sometimes I am not). The potential for misrecognition is covert, however, and is rarely addressed because the discourse about idealized abilities of leaders and consultants in organizations has gained much prevalence.

In this project I have tried to conceptualize this ambivalence as the experience of the paradoxically co-existing potential for fluctuating and manifested power relations through struggles for recognition. In the narratives presented above I gave examples of how leaders and their staff in a consulting firm may overtly subscribe to the necessity for recognizing others for the contribution they are (potentially) making, much in the Rousseauian sense. However, in my experience this behaviour is often compromised by very adept political behaviours of those in power as they covertly misrecognize others. Such behaviour tries to sustain the hegemonic order and their position in it. Sometimes they may not be political enough though as in Carl’s case, for example. Withholding recognition may be one way of exerting power over others; much in the way that Carl’s team members did. I sensed that in giving him such negative feedback they were both ashamed and yet prepared, possibly eager, to deal with the consequences. In the same vein, this dynamic was at work when I described my experience with my supervisor in my second project. He had to include me officially in a project team qua the role I was

assigned to in this organization. However, to sustain the given power structure, he worked towards my exclusion from that team from the moment he brought me on.

In my third project I spoke after Richard Bernstein of the idea that contradiction is essential for our understanding of how change in human interaction comes about, and that the ability to endure such contradiction is the basis for their *Aufhebung* (superseding), and hence for a potentially richer understanding of our interactions with others. It is this contradiction which we easily gloss over by idealizing the abilities of leaders or consultants. It is difficult to critically engage with idealized goals since they are also an important source for our motivation. As a result I have come to think that the main contribution organization consultants are making lies in enduring the conflict their work inevitably evokes, not for but together with, their clients or their own leaders. Thus they potentially understand the dynamics and complexities they are experiencing in a more sophisticated way than most authors of the dominant management discourse encourage us to do. Bernstein captures this aspect of my work aptly:

It means taking conversation seriously (and playfully), without thinking that the only type of conversation that is important is the type that aspires to put an end by reaching some sort of “rational consensus”. ... It means turning away from the obsession “to get things right” and turning our attention to coping with the contingencies of human life.

(Bernstein, 1983: 203)

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## SYNOPSIS

# PROCESSES OF RECOGNITION: FROM MANAGERIAL SIMPLICITY TO DIALOGICAL UNCERTAINTY

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**“We do not even know what ‘success’  
would mean except simply continuance”  
of the conversation...**

**(Rorty in Bernstein, 1983: 198)**

### ***Introduction***

THROUGHOUT MY THESIS, I have revisited an experience that I think poses a practical challenge for most organization consultants: the phenomenon of finding myself being (re-)invited by clients and consultant colleagues to engage in organizational change (particularly through culture change or leadership development programs) in planned ways despite the shared experience that such projects rarely go according to the plans we devise. The conflict that I inevitably encounter when projects go astray has often led me to question my ability to lead these projects. However, if clients and colleagues (re-)invite me to work with them, I must be contributing something, even if it is not what they explicitly expect of me. When I began to ponder what it is I am recognized for, it turned out that it was my ability to tolerate the unpredictability naturally arising from my work better than those I come to work for and with. In other words, it is paradoxically only in the opening up of the possibility for misrecognition that I am actually recognized, if paradox is defined as the irreconcilable contradiction of two apparently mutually exclusive experiences nevertheless occurring together.

As a consequence, my definition of success has shifted from actually reaching a predetermined goal to supporting clients in making better sense of their current practice whilst struggling on their way towards this or that goal. I find this particularly useful

because it may lead to an enhanced comprehension of repeatedly enacted patterns of interaction and, importantly, a debate about their usefulness. Failure might then be described as an inability of the members of a group to reflect upon their generalized tendencies to act in ways that would heighten their awareness of how they contribute to the patterns of interaction they find themselves caught up in. In that sense, I have come to understand my main contribution to be the constant opening up and re-visiting of our assumptions about what we are *actually* doing against the backdrop of the programs I am contracted to deliver while coping with the uncertainty of not knowing what is going to happen over the full course of these programs. In this light, it seems to me, I both support clients to redefine their organizational context and help them to come to terms with the redefinition of their self-perception in this context. The same holds for my collaboration with consultant colleagues; consulting firms appear to mirror the dynamics of their client organizations in that sense.

So while ostensibly my work has to do with conveying techniques for providing leadership or defining methods for successful roll-outs, the writing of this thesis has changed my understanding of my work and at once impacted my practice. Besides tolerating misrecognition for the limited impact new techniques and methods usually have, I have begun to take seriously my experience of receiving recognition for the ability to point out opportunities, however minimally, to re-negotiate reflexively what we are doing as we struggle to implement strategies. In the section below, I will take another look at my Projects 1 to 4 and summarize in broad strokes the effects of reflection of this nature on my perceptions of my work.

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### ***Towards a new understanding of what happens to me at work***

In the following paragraphs, I will succinctly summarize each project in this thesis to lay the groundwork for my discussion. As I do so, I will repeatedly point to the often contradictory elements of my work, especially those related to the experience of being simultaneously recognized and misrecognized.

Throughout Project 1, I explored how my professional career mirrors an important theme in my life which had never previously entered my awareness: an intense struggle for recognition. I attribute this drive back to early parental performance expectations and have determined that the desire for recognition has been an important motivational force for me from an early age. It served as a point of departure into my work as a consultant because it was here I found clear-cut approaches and procedures which others, i.e. clients, recognize and value. However, my enjoyment of this sense of recognition actually prevented me from critically questioning basic assumptions of consulting practice. As this project unfolded, I began to develop a more complex understanding of the concept of recognition, mainly through the work of Axel Honneth (1994). Drawing on the writings of Hegel and Mead, he points to the importance of understanding recognition as a dialectical process which indicates the notion of mutuality. This clearly sets him apart from more orthodox management writers who conceptualize recognition rather as a unidirectional means of motivating and, ultimately, controlling others. These themes have reappeared throughout my thesis.

In Project 2 I have tried to make sense of my experience as a member of the German management team of a globally operating HR consultancy. I talked about how difficult it was for me to speak into what I perceived to be an oppressive regime of the MD. I described one particularly bizarre incident when he humiliated me during a meeting in front of the management team when I brought up a new perspective on how we might try to work on a concrete client assignment, an incident which I perceived as the culmination of our often antagonistic struggles. Two aspects stood out for me when I reflected on this experience. The first was the detailed treatment I gave to the potentially denigrating and even violent aspects of working in a consulting firm, something I have rarely found addressed in the dominant literature on management consulting. The second concerned my experience of being hired by the MD to make a certain contribution, only

to find him working in opposition to me from the moment we actually sat down as a team. As I thought about the experience, I began to appreciate my lack of sensitivity with respect to the contribution made by both sides to this destructive pattern of interaction.

In Project 3, I presented a case where, for unforeseeable reasons, a client withdrew from any interaction with me for a prolonged period of time in which important decisions needed to be made. Despite the strategic importance our project was said to have and the client's enthusiasm about our consultancy work, struggles over budgets began to have an impact, ultimately revealing internal power asymmetries at the client organization which caused such embarrassment for our direct interlocutors that they could not find a way to discuss the development of the situation openly. Highly conflictual conversations were the result, and eventually we consultants were embarrassed and blamed for not having interacted professionally. A multi-year program was on the verge of being terminated before it had even started. I described how a consultant colleague and I went from being lionized to lacerated within a brief time span and how we found ourselves struggling in trying to make sense of what was going on. While we had officially been hired to design and deliver a leadership development program, we felt stymied in our efforts to do exactly that.

In Project 4, I narrated an episode from my own onboarding process when I joined a new consulting firm. Early on, I learned that the MD had removed my future supervisor from his position as a result of a very negative 180° feedback from the team I had just joined. However, when the man originally expected to be my supervisor announced his resignation in the last team meeting, team members colluded spontaneously in a hypocritical act, pretending that they had truly enjoyed the cooperation with this manager despite everything, and I felt obliged to respond in a similar manner even though I did not have a history in this group. This incident spurred my own anxiety and I began to wonder who I could trust. Who should I side with to ensure my own survival and to avoid becoming the target of such violence? This was the setting for my conversations with the MD about my future role, and he had a vision of my becoming the leader for a new team. He did so in quite an idealized way, almost inviting me into the new "in-group" of future managers he was about to form. However, having just participated in the meeting described above, I was very conscious of the tactical behavior organizational life

sometimes demands. I realized how hard it was for me to remain critical vis-à-vis the MD's idealized vision of the future and that it might even be harder to spot if my own position was in jeopardy. The path from being a recognized in-member to a misrecognized outsider could be rather short, and, as the incident of my supposed future supervisor shows, both can paradoxically be experienced simultaneously. As the summary of my projects shows, the experience of being recognized and misrecognized at the same time seems to recur repeatedly for organization consultants. These are processes which I have always been caught up in at work, but which I have never really fully taken account of myself.

Since I could not find ways of exploring these experiences of mine, ones which demonstrate the potential for shame, humiliation and exclusion, and the simultaneous experience of recognition and misrecognition in the orthodox management literature, I have drawn on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (e.g. Stacey, 2007, 2010; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2002; Stacey et al., 2000), sociological theories of recognition (e.g. Hegel in Wood, 1990; Honneth, 2001, 1994; Kearney, 2003; Taylor, 1995; Forst 2007) and neo-pragmatism (Bernstein, 1983, 1991) to make sense of my own practice from a different direction. In the following, I will give a brief introduction to each of these elements.

### *On complex responsive processes of relating*

The perspective of complex responsive processes thinking (Stacey 2007, 2010; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2002) offers me an approach which gives serious consideration to the paradoxical experiences of mine. It argues that organization-wide patterns arise through the multitude of local interactions among people with differing degrees of power, not because of the will of individual consultants or powerful executives. In their local interaction, individuals negotiate the realization of their intentions by enabling and constraining each other in relationships of power reflecting their current ideologies. Population-wide patterns of cooperation and competition often become reiterated over longer periods of time. Nevertheless, humans have the ability to question modes of interaction, to be creative, and to a degree recognize and critically reflect upon ideologies. It is these attributes which paradoxically at the same time allow for

unanticipated change of habituated patterns of cooperation. Paradox here means that in human interaction two contradictory processes are constantly open *at the same time*. In that way, even small changes in local interaction may spread to encompass larger numbers of the workforce, even the entire population, and alter modes of cooperation considerably. Global patterns of interaction emerge which no one single individual desired, and any form of interaction is paradoxically open to re-iteration and change at the same time.

When individuals interact, they constantly act upon and respond to each other's intentions. The aroused conflict is mediated by the fact that over the centuries human communities have evolved social practices for the avoidance of overt violence in the face of conflicting intentions using mechanisms of internalized social rituals of courtesy, the experience of embarrassment and shame when these are violated and the fear of being excluded as a consequence (Elias, 1978). Elias argues that our interdependency involves power relationships among us. But—and this is significant—even the most powerful depend on the recognition of the less powerful since otherwise there would not be any experience of power and interdependency whatsoever. Our sense of self is continuously affected by the interaction with others. In the terms of complex responsive processes, the notion of an autonomous self is abandoned in favor of the concept of a social self where our identity arises in a dialectical process in which “I” and “me”, the sense of my individual agency and the way I experience how others perceive me are in a constant state of tension and leave our identity continuously open for both perpetuation and redefinition.

### *On theories of recognition*

As I became aware of how our interdependency highlights the dynamics of the social formation of self, my research led me to explore theories of recognition. Being dependent on the other points to the notion of mutual recognition. In order to feel recognized we need an “other.” Hegel is the philosopher best known for having drawn attention to this aspect of human interrelating. Becoming aware of this mutuality is for Hegel the source from which self-consciousness arises, and he explains the underlying process with the shared desire for being recognized by the other: “Self-consciousness has an existence

only through being recognized by another self-consciousness” (Hegel in Wood, 1990: 85).

Kearney (2003) maintains that acts of recognition offer the experience of the other as being at once different and the same. We share a sense of humanness with the other, but being human is decidedly marked by our ability to form our own opinions and to be creative. Any encounter with another person constantly offers the potential for discovering novel aspects in both the other and oneself. So it is not surprising that sociological theories of recognition build on the same idea of a social self as complex responsive processes thinking does.

In the face of the unpredictability of what our interaction may yield, Kearney cautions us to be critical with both the other and our selves and neither to engage with nor disengage from them prematurely, but to try and be both critical and open towards the other as long as possible. By doing so, we preserve the chance to explore ways to make sense of the other and our own conduct in the face of that other and potentially to redefine aspects of our identity.

At the heart of Honneth’s discussion about recognition is the gradually growing capacity of the individual to take into account others’ positions and their desires. The individuation process coincides with an ever expanded capacity of the individual to decenter and consequently to experience states of enlarged subjectivity (Honneth, 1994; Mead, 1934). Honneth believes that throughout this process we are socialized in that we voluntarily confine ourselves in our own desires in the face of the other, and this is ultimately, yet paradoxically, also a precondition for the experience of self-determinacy as well as a prerequisite for mutual recognition (Honneth, 2001: 100). The mature individual will have the capacity to become more detached, postpone desires and recognize others’ needs as well as their own. This postponing is not felt to be restricting, however, “because if the other reciprocates in the same positive way this is experienced as true freedom” to act, that is self-determinacy (ibid.).

Taylor (1995) describes how the discourse on recognition actually came about. When in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the notion of authenticity emerged, the need to discover our own originality through which people could find ways to make unique contributions to the communities in which they lived and for which they would in turn receive recognition

came with it. Failing to be true to oneself would mean failing to make these contributions, possibly resulting in misrecognition from others. This was a new experience because people had previously been recognized automatically according to their standing in society. Taylor criticizes the notion of the autonomous self which coincided with this new understanding, and he demands that we be aware that recognition arises once we engage with the other, whereby engaging means that we “fuse our horizons”, a term he borrows from Gadamerian hermeneutics (1975) to delineate truth as being negotiated through dialogue. He offers an alternative to the idealist undertone which underlies the idea of fused horizons as unconditional mutual understanding by emphasizing the necessity of maintaining a respectful attitude towards the other.

These authors represent for me an understanding which takes recognition as a non-teleological concept; it does not serve any further end. It is a process through which we manifest or renegotiate our identity continuously, and this process cannot be managed. Such a view stands diametrically opposite to most management authors who conceptualize recognition as some form of technique (e.g., Gostick and Elton, 2007; Hansford, 2003; Daniels, 2000). Their intention—with quite a behavioristic subtext—seems to be to teach managers how to recognize their employees properly and so ensure conformity with wider organizational rules, ultimately substituting organizational values for one’s own ethical standards (see Willmott, 1993 for a critical appraisal).

Importantly, and I will devote more space to this in a later section, the experience of recognition and misrecognition cannot easily be separated. In fact, in the examples I gave in the previous section, I experienced the paradox of being recognized and misrecognized at the same time, which affects positions of power, feelings of being in or out of the groups one participates in and the way one depends on others. In other words, the experience of being simultaneously recognized and misrecognized coincides at once with a feeling of being either in- and excluded. What this would mean for my consulting practice and how I perceive myself in this practice was also mediated by neo-pragmatism.

*On neo-pragmatism*

One important figure in this tradition of thought is Richard Bernstein. What he and others point to is the radical contingency of any social practice. There is an appreciation here, much in line with complex responsive processes thinking, of the unpredictability which characterizes all human interaction. That does not mean that we are bound to end in chaos, however; quite the contrary, the continuous potential for creative ways of interaction always carries the possibility for new forms of understanding of who we are and what we do.

For what is characteristic of our contemporary situation is [that] ... the very forces that undermine and inhibit communal life also create new, and frequently unpredictable, forms of solidarity.

(Bernstein, 1983: 228)

What this means in terms of practical consequences for me as a consultant is this: when we cannot know what our interaction is going to bring about—and experience shows that this instance is hardly mitigated by ever more sophisticated techniques and methods we come to employ—the only thing that is left is to keep on exploring, to remain in a “conversational mode” as it were, to raise our awareness of what we find ourselves actually doing *despite* all methods and techniques.

With the experience of sameness and difference that others bring comes the ethical obligation to reason and discourse in ways which do not try to end conversations by searching for solutions or some rational consensus. As an alternative, we might appreciate the radical contingency conversations with others allow for, which should not “be construed as a disguised form of inquiry about the ‘truth’” (Bernstein, 1983: 203). Bernstein argues that we need to remain open and keep on exploring what Hannah Arendt termed the “miraculous” quality of human action, by which she refers to the potential for spontaneous forms of novel interaction which may “make [their] appearance against all odds” (ibid.). I think the important aspect that Bernstein adds to my line of inquiry is this:

as consultants we are obliged to stay engaged in what we find ourselves doing by opening up more and more spheres of dialogue to further “the type of solidarity, participation, and mutual recognition that is founded in dialogical communities” (Bernstein, 1983: 231). I find this aspect particularly important for me as a practicing consultant because—according to the authors I have drawn on—this is how we come to know who we are and how we can explore the contributions we can make in the particular contexts we are working in at the same time. This stands in opposition to what I find myself usually contracted for: to bring “solutions”, “best practice” knowledge and “expertise” to my clients, ultimately telling them what to do and closing the conversation down instead of continuously exploring together what would be the next reasonable step for us to take. This latter idea makes more sense to me as

[a]t each stage ... we think we have achieved fulfillment and completion [we] experience apparently irreconcilable internal conflicts and contradictions. In this journey we are constantly deceived into thinking we have achieved a true reconciliation of ... oppositions only to discover that these are false unstable reconciliations. Otherness and estrangement are always bursting forth in this restless dialectical movement.

(Bernstein, 1991: 296)

Taking the nature of the dialectical movement of human interaction seriously would oblige me as a consultant to stay open to exploring continuously what clients and I find ourselves doing in the often unanticipated situations we happen to end up in and to cope with these instead of working according to an agenda or milestone plan as if I knew in advance what is going to happen down the line. I may potentially yield to clients’ (and my own) desire for best practice solutions and start asking what patterns we see emerging in what we find ourselves doing or what habitual ways of responding become apparent in our interaction. I recognize clients (and they recognize me) by supporting them to become more detached about their own practice instead of encouraging forms of dependency on me as the “expert” which may ultimately lead clients to refrain from



taking over responsibility for their own action. This is an important example in terms of how I have changed my mind and my practice as a consequence of the DMan.

Even though my discussion points in the direction of the radical contingency of organizational practice, I think one would be mistaken to believe that this was a call for an “anything goes” approach. The view I present takes seriously three factors which point clearly to the contrary. First, we are bound in power relationships, i.e., we depend on others in what we do (Elias, 1978). Being dependent means that others hold us accountable for our deeds and potentially have the capacity to exclude us from the groups we belong to, and it is this awareness that prevents us from doing just anything. Second, we are bound by relationships of recognition, that is, we depend on others not only for the experience of self-esteem which arises from the feeling that they find the contributions we make worthy of further contemplation (Honneth, 1994), but for the constant renegotiation of who we are as well. Such renegotiation rests on the encounters with the other and the struggle with both the difference and sameness they bring (Kearney, 2003; Ricoeur, 2005) and the feeling of self-certainty which coincides with the experience of being able to assert oneself in the face of the other (Hegel in Wood, 1990). Third, the situations we find ourselves in are always influenced by the history of our interactions. While things could have been different, we always live and work in situations where the historicity of our being constrains us considerably. “There is an effective history that is always shaping what we are in the process of becoming” (Bernstein, 1983: 204).

My study of authors from the above traditions of thought has led to a shift in my understanding of my ability to plan human interaction. I have become much more humble about what I can actually achieve as well as more sensitive towards people’s tendencies to try to simplify the complexity of organizational cooperation. The forms such simplification normally takes and my suggestion for a view which pays close attention to the actual richness and complexity in organizations will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

***Beyond the practice-theory split***

Cultural change and leadership development initiatives are important aspects of renegotiating who we are and what we do in organizations. Such enterprises are resistance-provoking, not only because re-defining the way we cooperate may profoundly affect our positions of power and our sense of identity. In my experience, people are also put under strain by the complex social processes involved. Often there are rumors that leadership development initiatives are really screening processes for potentially talented senior managers. Moreover, executives tend to display differing degrees of agreement with such programs, but not because they do not believe in their usefulness. Patterns of agreement and disagreement often reflect power struggles amongst executives which are rarely brought to consultants' attention early on, but which tend to have an impact on the program throughout its execution. I gave an example of such dynamics in my Project 3 where senior managers and board members at a client organization struggled throughout the process of setting up a leadership program because some feared power would tilt away from them as a consequence. After all, it is quite difficult—despite (or perhaps because of) well-intended goals and communicated agendas—to address the paradoxical experience of the *continuously co-existing* potential for sincerity and hypocrisy of those affected in highly political processes of culture change or leadership development programs. Why is this difficult and why is it important anyway? It is difficult because these paradoxical dynamics are easily simplified so that we come to believe that we can manage them. It is important because believing that we can manage paradoxical processes while constantly finding that actually we cannot must have important ramifications for what I in my role as consultant can actually contribute or achieve in my work.

My previous belief in my ability to manage highly complex social processes is expressed in a way of thinking in which elements which are often self-contradictory are simplified by being split in a dualist fashion (Stacey et al., 2000). Through the process of simplification, paradoxical dynamics are perceived in a “both ... and” fashion (Griffin, 2002), so they appear manageable in such a way that they can effectively be dealt with sequentially. With this dualist split, the paradoxical tension which is, however, so much the daily experience of people who are/must be (ostensibly) sincere and (behind the

scenes) hypocritical *at the same time* in order to survive the organizational-political game is lost. To give an example, it may be helpful for the reader to recall the narrative I presented in my Project 4. Team members, once they found themselves in a meeting with their team leader who was soon to step down from this role as a result of a very negative anonymized feedback from exactly that team, joined spontaneously in a hypocritical act and pretended that at the end of the day they had truly enjoyed their collaboration with this particular manager. Such behavior may have important social functions such as, in this case, helping the manager to save face. For this reason, it is extremely difficult for a consultant to speak into such a paradox, and it is much easier to try to substitute seemingly rational advice for a potentially painful exploration. This is exactly what I experience with clients who usually deny any kind of paradox as a form of irrational thinking or claim that I should be able to eliminate it with the help of techniques and tools. Inevitably, the work I am supposed to deliver rests on a very reduced notion of what people actually experience in organizations, often rendering the results of my work rather dubious.

This is why I have tried to emphasize throughout my thesis that it is important to acknowledge that talking in dualisms effectively glosses over and reduces our otherwise kaleidoscopic everyday experience. For me, this experience is often conflictual and even paradoxical, and it is important to pay attention to these aspects precisely because they are at the heart of the radical contingency of our life in organizations. It is this latter aspect which has the capacity to heighten people's sensibility and to amplify feelings of vulnerability which can fuel tendencies to resist or undermine change programs. Such experience is, for example, reflected in Project 2 where my own supervisor and I were repeatedly in conflict, undermining the internal change process our national organization was supposed to undergo.

I claim that much of the work I do as an organization consultant does not deliver the intended results because when I try to trivialize clients' reality through multi-step change agendas or when I try to bring about a uniform understanding of what leadership means, I do not take seriously people's experience of this radical contingency. I have come to believe that the experience of contingency in their work actually deserves intensification, not simplification. In the past, I have typically tried to mitigate people's

resistance to change by enhancing their grasp of the rationale behind changes through increasingly “transparent communication”, through educating executives to show more “visionary forms of leadership” or through the roll-out of organizational values as if everybody accepted these as governing principles for his or her own behavior. This is quite in line with authors in the dominant management discourse (e.g., Kofman, 2006; Schein, 1999/ 2009; Cockmann et al., 1999) and reflects the dualist mode of thought which gave me my belief in my ability to exchange one form of communication, one set of values or one form of leadership for another.

Against the background of my research, I have come to argue that my insights demand that I be radically open in my conversations with clients instead, not only because of the *potential* for paradoxical experiences, but because we may actually encounter them. All my projects give testimony to this factual experience. What such openness requires of me is to resist clients’ desires to depend on me as the “expert” who knows what form of leadership or communication needs to be applied. In the same way, I have begun to utilize milestone plans as one (among many) ways of trying to make sense of how things *might* develop. What I can nevertheless contribute is my ability to help clients to cope with the feelings of uncertainty which they inevitably encounter in processes of organizational change. I may be recognized for being able to stay engaged that little bit longer and keep on exploring despite being fully aware that such form of inquiry might also lead clients to misrecognize me for not living up to generally accepted forms of organization consulting when, for instance, I am less optimistic about the application of tools and techniques. It is in the ability to tolerate the constant potential for being recognized and misrecognized at the same time as a consultant that I support my clients while negotiating what we think needs to be done.

#### *On the notion of practical tools*

My clients’ obsession with “practical” tools, it seems to me, is in fact an expression of the dualist mode of thought I have begun to disarticulate throughout my thesis. Clients I work for usually split theory and practice into discreet areas so that we have different conversations about what they do practically and how they think about their practice theoretically. The important insight gained through the perspective of complex responsive

processes is that theory and practice are interlaced or in a dialectical state of tension where one would not exist without the other. Consequently, a dualist mode of thought would actually inhibit my clients' ability to grapple with the often complex nature of their own experience when they try to put thought *before* action.<sup>5</sup>

It is this split, I claim, which explains my clients' difficulty in understanding more clearly why the application of increasingly sophisticated tools such as psychometrics, feedback instruments or SWOT analyses is not terribly helpful in coming to terms with the dilemmas confronting them day in, day out. My response to my insight would be to try to work into this dialectical tension of "thought-action", helping clients to find the courage to taking their experience seriously with others without resorting to more and more sophisticated tools and so to discover new forms of actually drawing abstract conclusions from that experience. While I do not claim that we need to let go of tools altogether, I have begun to resist idealized notions as to what becomes possible through

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<sup>5</sup> The problems which arise out of the dualist split between theory and practice have been explored most prominently by scholars in the tradition of American pragmatism such as George H. Mead and John Dewey. They traced back the dualist mode of thought to Descartes's insight that we can doubt everything except ourselves as the entity which does the doubting. This not only led to the split between mind (which doubts) and body (which can be doubted). More profoundly, it made *one's own* mind the only foundation from which any further understanding could emerge. The problem which results is precisely how we then come to understand and actually interact with other people when in principle we can doubt everything, including their existence or our relationship with them. American pragmatists proposed that the Cartesian split does not exist in the first place because it simply does not reflect our experience of being in the world. If we doubted everything, we would ultimately be paralyzed because any action would be rendered meaningless. American pragmatists criticized Descartes's conclusion for what it was: a conclusion gained through an isolated and highly abstract meditation about our position in the world. They suggested that thought and action cannot be split because thought, or the necessity to think, only arises in concrete action. Once we find ourselves in a new or a conflictual situation, our first response is not to doubt these circumstances, but to begin to - think. So thinking and acting always occur together, never separately. This also holds true for our interaction with others. Mead proposed that our sense of identity arises in a dialectical process when other people respond to our gestures and evoke potentially unanticipated emotional-cognitive responses in us. In other words, we (re-)experience who we are through the other. The concept of self, our identity, is not that of a single mind in isolation; it is that of social self of a simultaneously thinking and acting body in interaction with other thinking and acting bodies (Joas and Knöbl, 2004: 186-191).

the application of this or that tool in lieu of potentially opening up further conversations. Let me give an example.

Leadership programs at my current employer are largely based on multi-rater feedback tools, the results of which are explained to larger groups of feedback receivers over the course of two-day seminars. The seminars are followed up by team meetings in which leaders must share their feedback with their team (the feedback givers) and discuss points for improvement of their leadership skills. Usually the discussion around the results is highly constrained by alluding to a specific set of “leadership styles” said to influence a team’s “climate”, each of which is analyzed by the use of various 180° feedback instruments. The climate represents the experienced working conditions the leader is said to influence to a large degree. It consists of several dimensions which address different areas of people’s experience at work such as clarity about the company’s vision, standards of excellence or experienced commitment of one’s team. The idea is to show very clearly to leaders the domains in their climate in need of improvement and how to bring about the improvement by modifying their leadership and using the 180° graphs as points of reference. I have found myself quickly abandoning the graphs that show leadership styles and organization climate results in team meetings which, however, I am told are supposed to clearly guide those meetings. This is mainly so because I found throughout the first team meetings I facilitated that clinging to these graphs effectively serves to close conversations down.

In participating in the discussions in very different ways from other colleagues, clients and I find ways to address issues such as team identity, issues of power relating or the experiences of mutual (mis)recognition, none of which are captured through our feedback instruments. These aspects of work seem to trouble people quite substantially, however.

It is usually believed that mastering the discourse around leadership styles and organizational climate takes a while, so it is most surprising for colleagues that literally every manager in the programs I initially participated in has asked me to come back to continue the work with him or her and their teams beyond the assignment I was originally contracted for while none of my colleagues have been asked to do so. While colleagues believe that this is because I have become a master of our tools, the opposite is actually

the case. For instance, a recent team meeting I facilitated was quite a shocking experience for the Vice President who is the head of a group of directors. As part of her feedback, she had also received anonymized verbatim comments, one of which was fairly critical of her leadership ability. Quite contrary to her intuition, it turned out in the team meeting that her deputy had made the critical comments, and as she told me later, she had been on the verge of terminating the team meeting when this became clear.

Instead of advising the VP on how to make clear to her deputy that he had failed to live up to her expectations and removing him from his present role as a consequence, I responded to this situation quite differently, and I would consider this to be related to my shifting attitude towards my work. In drawing attention away from the deputy and pointing the VP to her own intense response, our discussion began to gravitate towards her own naiveté and what this meant for the views about other team members she took for granted and about herself. Instead of closing the conversation down by giving clear advice on what to do, I encouraged the VP to explore further her contribution to this situation and to take into account the social complexities this incident revealed. At some point, she even began to recognize the deputy's contribution as a highly courageous act, possibly conveying the most important feedback for her in this whole exercise. I pointed out that in daring to explore the difference he brought to the table, she had become able to tender provisionally her view of her deputy and found a way to complexify her interpretation of the situation, resulting in a more reality-congruent understanding than her initial view might have suggested. She was so surprised by this form of consultancy that she hired me for a team retreat later in the year right away.

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### ***On method II***

In the paragraphs above, I described some of my situations at work and began to theorize on their basis. There are different roots for such theorizing employed on the DMan. Principal among them are important ideas from American pragmatism and the hermeneutic tradition. The pragmatic tradition informs the research method by the way it takes an interest in the generation of knowledge. Knowledge is understood to be attainable by means of paying attention to “ordinary” phenomena, a concept central to Charles Peirce’s work. He stresses the importance of ordinary conversation over solitary contemplation (Freadman, 2004: 34) or, in his words, “pure ideas” (ibid.) for the research process. It is within these conversations that knowledge is constituted, negotiated or rejected. Mead (1932: 68) adds the idea that “Knowledge is a process in conduct that ... organizes the field of action ... The test of success of the process of knowledge, that is, the test of truth, is found in the discovery or construction of such objects as will mediate our conflicting and checked activities and allow conduct to proceed” (ibid.).

The idea that we find a way of thinking which allows conduct to proceed signals the preliminary nature of what we take to be the truth. What Peirce suggests as a radical alternative to Descartes’s idea of reflecting on ideas in isolation is a form of conversational inquiry in which the researcher is constantly open to new ways of understanding with others (Peirce’s understanding of the community of engaged inquirers). Apparently, this is a very different way to undertake research from that of Descartes. One might understand Descartes’s position as radically subjectivist: the world exists because I, a rational, autonomous mind, think it does. Alternatively, Peirce would argue that we discover whatever we take to be reality through the dialectical movement of thought within a community of inquirers. In this sense, the process of knowledge generation is one in which researchers are constantly open to contestation of their beliefs and to continuous exploration. The session with the VP’s team I described in the above example seems to be indicative of what this means for my consulting practice. In opening up and exploring further the beliefs we take for granted, the client and I became able to discover a more complex understanding of what had been going on and, importantly, what this meant for the VP’s next steps for the future cooperation with her deputy.



Hermeneutics is concerned with the idea that any kind of knowledge generation is an act of interpretation. Phenomena are researched from a particular point of view. However, this is not entirely a subjective endeavor because we always live and act under specific socio-historic conditions which impact the research process. One of the founding fathers of modern hermeneutics says: “Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act, than as participating in an event of tradition, a process ... in which past and present are constantly mediated.” (Gadamer, 1975: 291). There is no attempt to deduce a-temporal rules and mechanisms in an objective way either because:

We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved, yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but on the essence of the historical being that we are. *To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.*

(Gadamer, 1975: 301 emphasis in original)

Gadamer points to the practical orientation of interpretation dealing with a particular phenomenon which spurs the process of inquiry. “Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation” (p. 310). It is present incidents and interests which guide the process of research and understanding, and so Gadamer emphasizes not only making claims for further explanation, but for some form of their application. In this thinking, he relies on Aristotle whom he finds “[c]riticizing the Platonic idea of the good as an empty generality, [when] he asks instead the question of what is ... good in terms of human action” (ibid.), a claim which is shared by the pragmatists. In this sense, knowledge generation does not aim solely at the generation of theoretical knowledge (episteme in Aristotelian terms), but at phronesis (practical wisdom), which is understood to be “the ability to spot the action called for in any situation” (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996: 207). This is the tradition of thought at the root of the DMan program: a strong interest in understanding how people find practical ways of coping with the challenges they encounter in their work. That in turn has an

effect on the actual method deployed and the understanding generated through it. Insights gained in this way support a theory of, and contribute to, practice which is the principal aim of a professional doctorate like the DMan.

The phenomena being researched in this doctorate in management are social in nature. In contrast to natural phenomena, the study of social peculiarities requires paying attention to the complexities of human interaction, and this is the reason for the dissatisfaction I felt with the advice I found in most books on management and change. I determined them to be grounded usually in a positivist understanding of the natural sciences, and human interaction is conceptualized almost as if it followed simple “if-then” causalities. German systems thinker Fritz Simon (2007: 46-47) takes Maturana and Varela’s understanding of a biological (living) entity as defined by its structure, said to be its elements plus the relationships between these elements. Simon transfers this understanding to social systems. A social system—an organization, for example—does not consist of material particles like a biological organism, however. The elements of organizations are “communications” and the relations between these communications. The question for Simon becomes how organizations manage to maintain their order if communications cannot be reproduced since spoken words vanish almost as quickly as they appear. His answer to this question is that in communications we convey expectations. When expectations are communicated, and if they are reasonable, these expectations are likely to be met, provided that official contracts constitute a kind of mutual obligation. This is said to reduce complexity substantially since deviant behavior requires explicit explanation. According to this line of thought, human cooperation in organizations becomes manageable when those in authority master the practice of holding others accountable for what they do. The idea, it seems to me, is that human interaction can be understood in ways which do not seek to consider the complexities of human conduct, but search for understanding in the reduction of this complexity. At the same time, such an idea carries with it the notion that deviant behavior must be managed away. However, from a complex responsive processes point of view, the multiplicity of views is actually the cause of all creative (and possibly destructive) behavior.

*The research techniques for the DMan*

Since the research of social phenomena has to address such peculiarities as the uniqueness of the human encounter, how people interpret others' gestures, or how people behave in irrational and then rational ways, the researcher must deal with phenomena which are highly ambiguous, in constant flux, and potentially paradoxical in nature. So what technique allows the researcher to give due consideration to the richness of human interaction?

One central insight from the body of ideas called complex responsive processes of relating is that global patterns emerge in the local interaction between people as they negotiate how to go on together to accomplish a set goal. If this is so, one way of understanding organizational phenomena is to research patterns of local interaction where "local" recognizes the fact that a person can only engage in ongoing interaction with a limited number of people. If as researchers we want to understand how global patterns emerge from local interaction, we need to consider carefully the way we interact with others by giving an account of our own experience. If it is to contribute meaningfully to research, narrative of this type requires critical reflection on the part of the researcher, which is what distinguishes it from literature or mere fantasy. The researcher will not idealize his or her experience; s/he will write about how conflict was dealt with, how emotions were stirred or how their plans were thwarted in unintended ways. Writing about any interaction with others will necessarily entail some form of emotional involvement. This points to researchers' inability to take a completely objective stance towards their experience. So while they try to detach themselves to reflect on their experience they remain involved to some extent in this experience. This signals a departure from the positivist understanding where the researcher is seen to be an objective observer who can take a completely detached stance and through the cycle of stating hypotheses, testing, and rejecting or confirming the hypotheses to make universal truth claims.

It has been argued (e.g., Elias, 1953/ 1987) that it is much more difficult for researchers in the field of the social sciences to take a detached stance because an involvement in human affairs will necessarily limit the researchers' ability to understand complex social phenomena (p. 10) as they can never get outside of their experience and

take a fully objective stance. In pursuing this line of thought further, Stacey (2010: 101) claims that greater detachment may indeed lead to a better understanding of social phenomena, but that some forms of involvement hold this potential as well. He uses the example of a therapist whom he notes can develop a more complex view only through empathetic engagement (involvement) with the patient while at the same time reflecting on it (detachment). Pursuant to such an approach, one way of doing social scientific research employs a method which sees researchers as connected to the experience they describe and which takes seriously the close relationship between the phenomena experienced (involvement) and reflection on one's experience (detachment); in other words, the self is used as an instrument of research. Reflection on this program requires engaging with different traditions of thought which play an important part in the domain of research. The researcher will wrestle with orthodox literature on management and change and analyze writers who take a rather critical view. Just as importantly, literature which stems from very distinct domains of thought such as sociology or philosophy is of key interest. The researcher will point to the ideological premises which sustain the dominant discourse on (change) management, the extent to which this supports existing power relationships in the wider world of academia and/or organization practice and how this constrains and enables researchers in their endeavors to reflect on their own experience in an academically recognizable way.

The activity of reflection is sustained in different ways, most importantly through discussions with other researchers who explore organizational phenomena in the same way and can therefore challenge the researcher's own understanding. This will lead to repeated reiterations of the narrative account which is then discussed again and probed. It is in the discussions and rewritings that researchers' ability to reflect on their experience is developed and that their thought moves, a process which will likely impact the researcher's professional identity, leading in turn to implications for the researchers' practice since through reflection upon their thinking—reflexivity—they come to understand their own experience differently.

*Action research and at-home ethnography*

But how does one legitimately account for the technique of “reiterated reflexive narrative?” Once again, it must be stressed that validity claims need to be understood in terms of the social nature of what is being investigated. One way of explaining this would be to scrutinize what is different and what is similar between the method employed on the DMan and other methods which appear similar at first glance, say, action research or hermeneutically informed ethnography. Toulmin (in Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996) points to the contextual nature of any action research project (p. 205). On the DMan, there is agreement with Tsoukas and Hatch (2006) who point to the contingent nature of our experiencing where “... narrative thinking provides sensitivity to ... situational particularity” (p. 264). Second, Toulmin explains that “the outcome of action research is phronesis not episteme” (ibid.: 210). This coincides with the idea of what research should aim for on the DMan; to be a contribution to practice in terms of how people find practical ways of moving on despite their day-to-day struggles. Furthermore, action researchers do not aspire to live up to the Platonic ideal of trying to gain knowledge which is “universal, general and timeless” (ibid.: 206). This is in line with how Williams (in Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 49-50) explains the view on legitimation and truth on the DMan program where truth is not an absolute finding, but the most persuasive form of understanding in terms of what is going on in human interaction at a given point in time. Still, for me the major difference would be the political agenda which is pursued by action researchers. Toulmin repeatedly points to the importance of improvement of the human condition as a major aim for action researchers (e.g., Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996: 210-211). In the DMan, the means by which people are moved to action through their values are given serious consideration. At the same time, they are regarded as remaining mere idealizations if the way they are put into practice is not equally researched because only in their functionalization do values actually produce meaning for those involved.

Ethnography is another discipline which bears some resemblance to the method used in the DMan. Significantly, there is no one single way of doing ethnography, with some researchers tending towards a more positivist end and others to the rather hermeneutical (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 85). I will concern myself with an

example of the latter approach: what Alvesson (ibid.) calls at-home ethnography. Researchers are themselves part of the research, drawing on their personal experience. Alvesson describes this particular way of doing ethnography as research in a field to which the researcher has “natural access” (p. 159) and where the researcher is “an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher works and/or lives in the setting...” (ibid.). Empirical material for the research endeavor is complemented by experiential accounts and knowledge gained through prolonged immersion in the social field of study. This appears to be close to the method employed in the DMan. Researchers are part of the community they research in this case as well, and it is the researchers’ observations which provide the raw material for the research. Moreover, Alvesson points to a methodological difficulty which can affect DMan students as well. Being so deeply immersed in the study—being a part of it, actually—means that researchers must be capable of reflecting on their observations in a detached way. In other words, they must demonstrate reflexivity, an awareness of how they are thinking about their thinking. Otherwise, they may themselves become hindrances to the research process as they will possibly be unable to “liberate [themselves] from ... taken for granted ideas or ... see things in an open-minded way” (p. 166). This issue is taken very seriously within the DMan program, the reason behind the process of iterative writing through which researchers try to reflect on their narrative more and more intensively. It seems that at-home ethnographers address this issue differently: while personal accounts are part of the research, they are not its focus. They “draw attention to ... cultural context, what goes on around oneself rather than putting ... one’s experience in the center” (p. 160). This is a clear difference between the two methods since personal experience is the starting point for further inquiry in the DMan.

So there are different ways of claiming legitimacy or validity for results of qualitative research which accept its partiality and contextuality when focused on the ongoing process of obtaining data, reflection and consequently potential transformation of practice rather than on producing a-contextual truth claims. In speaking about validity and truth claims, I have started to address another important point: the way the use of a specific method brings about claims which can be generalized. As we saw earlier, these should address the complexities of social phenomena appropriately. So one can

generalize from the theory of complex responsive processes of relating that human interaction is marked by the paradoxically simultaneous enabling and constraining influences of power relationships. Furthermore, it is understood that individual identities emerge only in social interaction. In addition, the idea that individuals in local interaction are functionalizing general guidelines by negotiating their meaning, in turn giving rise to unintended global patterns of interaction, is seen to hold true for any organizational context. It is the exploration of exactly these generalizable aspects of my work which make my research a contribution to practice of organization research. What are the implications of such theorizing for my work now?

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### ***Towards implications for my practice***

While doing the work to earn the DMan, I have begun to coax clients to pay attention to the multi-facetedness of their daily experience which quite often leads to discussions concerning conflict, organizational politics or struggles for recognition. However, I in no way direct them in one direction or the other, but I do not block exploration into these realms, either. As the focus of my attention has shifted, I have seen changes in my work which are at once subtle and significant. One important aspect which I have noticed is this: I have begun to suspend my judgment of people and situations, and at times I experience clients responding by doing the same. By understanding what I am doing differently, I have become more aware of the complexity involved once people start to cooperate and compete. I remind myself repeatedly that I will not have any one “right” answer, but that all I can do is help people reflect upon what they do in particular situations. Sometimes I raise their awareness of patterns they are enacting which can then become a moment of greater insight for all involved. In writing my thesis, I have tried to intensify this experience, and I have become aware that re-interpreting my work in this way has enabled me to come to terms with the fact that there is no guarantee of “greater insights” to be gained as well. Tolerating this element of unpredictability allows me to encourage clients to explore aspects of their practice which typically remained unaddressed in the coachings, trainings and workshops I have facilitated in the past. One important consequence of pursuing the DMan for me is this: I do not try to work towards a concrete solution if by solution we mean a point at which everybody knows what needs to be done to start working now, an approach which tends to be a relief for people. Having said that, it may trigger aggression just as easily because participants may begin to doubt the value of my work if we near the end of a session and no concrete action planning has been yielded. Working under these conditions speaks about my ability as consultant to endure the constant possibility of being recognized and misrecognized better than my clients while we are struggling on our way to find the most plausible explanation for what we perceive to be our social reality.

Another aspect which stands out for me is my growing awareness of how violent life in organizations can be, and it seems to me that this is an ubiquitous element of human organizing irrespective of membership in a consultancy or any other organization.



As soon as people come together, the nature of their dependency on one another gives rise to struggles about the course of interaction to achieve this goal or the other. While people experience recognition if they find their views being taken seriously, I have given several examples of how life in organizations offers any number of ways to experience misrecognition such as humiliation, shame, hypocrisy or even tyranny. I will address each aspect in turn.

*Processes of recognition: a paradoxical understanding*

Part of the paradoxical view I am suggesting is that a feeling of being recognized only arises through exposing oneself constantly to the risk of being misrecognized. Only when we interact with others do we create the conditions under which others may take our views seriously, i.e., recognize us, and vice-versa. Nevertheless, any exchange may just as well highlight our differences from others, potentially leading us into conflict.

I understand the ability to tolerate the potential for misrecognition and conflict to be an important characteristic of organization consultants, and I have argued that such ability is rarely addressed in the dominant literature on management consulting. The idea is more that consultant knowledge is generic and that it can be applied in many situations in which clients may find themselves. It is the task of the consultant to convey their expertise in order to bring about a shared understanding among managers and employees so that all work in step towards the desired vision for the future, almost regardless of the contingency of contexts (e. g., Kofman, 2006; Cockman et al., 1999; Schein, 1999/ 2009).

I have drawn on the discourse of complex responsive processes thinking (Stacey, 2007; Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002), neo-pragmatism (Bernstein, 1983, 1991) and Hegelian dialectics to develop a different understanding of what I contribute through my work. As an important consequence, I have tried to describe how consultants experience entanglement in the nexus of power relationships through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and I have presented these dynamics as processes of recognition. In particular, I have conceptualized the fluctuation of power relationships—the political—as the potential for the paradoxical experience of being recognized and misrecognized *at the same time*. Acting politically may cause people to demonstrate conformity with official demands in public, but to behave quite differently in private. It seems to me that this

experience is quite common in particular for consultants who are working on bringing about change, and the narratives I presented give examples from various organizational contexts that support this view. It is this aspect of human interaction which may cause people to feel paradoxically recognized and misrecognized at the same time because those they work with may overtly support their work, but through their covert actions actually undermine it. The interaction which follows from such behavior often presents people with a precarious experience which they find difficult to speak or act into (Forst, 2003). I have argued that such phenomena are closely related to activities which those in power utilize in their attempt to sustain a given hegemonic order or to circumstances in which those with lesser power try to change this order. In this light, processes of recognition enhance our understanding of how and why power relationships are reiterated or why they fluctuate.

Organization consultants in my consulting field usually interact with people at different hierarchical levels. They are contracted by senior managers with whom they define strategies on how organization values can be spread or how leadership behavior can become more aligned, for example. But when doing the actual work, they usually address mid-level managers. Interestingly, it often becomes clear that senior managers feel rather powerless because they do not understand why people at lower echelons do not accept their seemingly rational advice. In contrast, mid-level managers apparently gain quite a sense of power by finding ways to resist orders “from above”. In this sense, the work of organization consultants is vulnerable to the difficulties in having to negotiate such power relations. As consultants attempt to aid managers in appropriating or particularizing specifically the general strategic guidelines set forth by top executives, they must constantly deal with the messiness inherent in these processes. My Project 3 is a prime example of such a case. Internal power struggles undermined a project which was otherwise deemed to be of the highest strategic importance. This left us consultants fairly powerless when we were confronted with the unexpected postponement of the program, even though we were officially contracted by the CEO to deliver. Once into the program, we learned that senior managers constantly faced struggles of this nature, and now they were asking us, the consultants, for clear advice about operating in this context, even though we had just experienced ourselves how easily we could become paralyzed as well.

The only response we had for the people we worked with was to challenge their leaders and to demand transparent communication and clearer advice on what to do. Despite our own experience, we still believed that in our role as consultants we had the ability to convey knowledge of how to manage such processes.

Often a power relationship is marked by an asymmetry in which the need of one party for the other is greater than in the opposite direction. But this need is always open to fluctuation, and the less powerful will never be completely powerless since “the power of the more powerful depends upon the recognition of the less powerful that this is indeed so” (Griffin, 2002: 352). Such understanding has important ramifications for what we think consultants do and are actually capable of achieving in organizations because it indicates that the way recognition is conceptualized in the dominant literature on management is much too simple. This is problematic since in this discourse it is perfectly rational to believe that managers or consultants have the capacity to shape actively the conditions under which employees can be intentionally motivated. One important aspect in this tradition of thought is that proper recognition of employees will foster alignment of many as well as contribute to avoidance of conflict, eventually yielding better bottom-line results (e. g., Gostick and Elton, 2007; Kofman, 2006; Peters, 1988).

As I have developed my thesis, I have come to question this rationality, and I would part from orthodox authors on three points. First, my ideas do not point in the direction of “using” recognition as a technique to motivate and control employees. Such an understanding would rest on a cognitivist approach which puts the rationally acting individual at the center; it leaves out the social and relational aspects of human interaction, i.e., political behavior, the experience of shame or embarrassment, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. All these experiences arise only in social contexts, and no manager or consultant can determine precisely which responses they might call out in others. Consequently, I do not think that recognition can be used as a tool because the experience of recognition is never unidirectional.

Second, and as a consequence, I am not suggesting that consultants’ main task is to realize solutions or to bring about uniformly shared agreement among their clients about proceeding. While such understanding is very much at the heart of what most management thinkers and consultants advocate, I have proposed that consultants should

not try to bring about alignment or harmony, but that they take diversity and conflict seriously. This might help to understand why people behave in seemingly rational and then irrational ways, why change programs fail or why “best practices” cannot easily be transferred from one work context to another. The experience of otherness (and its corollary diversity) is an important aspect of the human encounter, and denying or to attempting to manage this aspect seems virtually impossible. This is my reason for advocating the exact opposite: resisting the desire to manage difference and acknowledging that most efforts to align human interaction have rarely been successful.

Third, I am advocating an approach which does not try to do away with paradoxes. I would argue instead that human interaction is often paradoxical and that there is no way of overcoming this paradoxicality. I have described the paradox of recognition in this way: recognition means seeing the other as human (like me) and at the same time recognizing that the other is different (unlike me) because of this humanness. Starting from this premise, consultants or managers might begin to perceive their own practice differently. Realizing that we can at the same time experience being similar and different, being recognized and misrecognized, or being included and excluded may be difficult to understand, but even more difficult to bear. Nevertheless, the daily experience of organization consultants is often contradictory, and they often turn to an idealized understanding of what managers or consultants can do as a way to cope with and overcome such paradox. In the writing of Hegel, Stacey et al., and others, I have found a different way to make sense of such experience, one which does not deny contradiction or ascribe heroic abilities to consultants, but which encourages them to pay close attention to what is actually going on when people cooperate and compete. This demands a change in attitude and expectations as to what consultants can do. Such a shift would require them to be radically open and to encourage their clients to keep on exploring the often contradictory circumstances they are operating under. The idea of “a solution” is redefined to be rather a prolonged process of complexifying and paying attention to one’s experience without seeking a final destination, a continuous intensifying in experiencing one’s interactions which might best be expressed as the constant existence of potential to find new forms of cooperation without having a guarantee that this actually happens. Consultants would be obliged to help clients face what is actually going on and not to

take their usual route: trying to get on top of paradoxes by means of seemingly rational “best practice” interventions. But if human organizing is always political and human conduct often irrational, how should consultants interact with their clients to engage them in dialogue if they are not used to the experience of open debate in their communities?

We know what has been the typical modern response to this situation: the idea that we can engineer, impose our collective will to form such communities. But this is precisely what cannot be done, and the attempts to do so have been disastrous. Such failures occur when we restrict ourselves to the horizon of technical reason, to the mentality of fabrication, or confine ourselves to the perspective of purposive-rational action.

(Bernstein, 1983: 226)

### *On organizational violence*

In trying to go beyond what Bernstein terms the “modern response”, I believe that giving close attention to the violent aspects of human organizing is a sensible step because in my experience these aspects are quite resistant to purposive-rational management. Still, violence in organizations is treated in the dominant management discourse quite extensively. I have examined Marshall Rosenberg’s (2003) concept of Nonviolent Communication as one very sophisticated representative of this more orthodox literature canon. The intention behind the technique of Nonviolent Communication is to help people to find a way to articulate their needs that others can recognize. But the challenge this view presents is not its intention, but its inevitable consequences. Rosenberg suggests that communication, once it becomes conflictual, should follow a routine four-step process so that people have a clear guideline for advisable interaction in difficult circumstances. This idea is indicative of other forms of conflict management such as Glasl (1999) or zur Bonsen and Maleh (2001), for example. What stands out in Rosenberg’s concept is the very notion of “Nonviolent Communication” which seems to suggest that we can somehow get rid of the violence in our interactions altogether.

I would argue with Hegel that this is hardly possible because superseding one conflict leads us right into the next one. Since making sense of our social reality is an interpretive act, people will inevitably have different notions of truth, and these need to

be negotiated. Hegel's notion of conflict is a generative one, which means that how we make sense of any given situation becomes clearer to us only in the course of debate with the other. Hegel describes this debate as a dialectical process which coincides with the psychological experience of enlarged self. In other words, if we can reflect on the other's responses to our gestures, we might have the potential to learn something about ourselves continuously—and vice-versa. So throughout the negotiation process there is constant potential for our identity to be perpetuated and renewed because in recognizing the other we continuously realize who we are. In Project 2, I termed this experience the "flowing selves" to point out that it is a mutual and a dialectical process. Against this background, the idea that conflicts can be managed in a way Rosenberg suggests appears to be an attempt to circumvent its enervating aspects. However, these aspects are necessary if we are to keep on struggling to cooperate despite our difference and to reaffirm continuously our sense of an integrated self. While writing my thesis, I have consistently argued that it is decidedly necessary to take seriously and pay attention to (but not manage) the difference the other brings because this gives rise to the possibility to extend our understanding beyond the mere experience of the other as being alien or as someone who is simply not capable of understanding our points of view.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt (1970) also talks about the way people do violence to one another. Instead of giving proper advice on how to interact, however, she points to the experience of intense helplessness caused by not knowing what else to do that leads people to behave violently. In her view, it is the experience of power tilting away from oneself or one's group and the fear of being excluded as a consequence that gives rise to violent behavior. I have suggested that exclusion can be understood as a painful form of misrecognition. Applying these authors' insights has helped me to reinterpret the form of organizational violence I have experienced in the past. For instance, the very difficult experience I described in Project 2 when my supervisor humiliated me in front of a group of senior managers might actually be a sign of my supervisor's fear of power tilting away from him if he recognized the contributions I made. The way he publically shamed me in front of the management team could be understood as a strategy to preserve his powerful position. Having said that, I have also learned from Arendt that my own contributions must actually have been quite terrifying

for my supervisor as well and that I was fairly insensitive to this aspect of our relationship. Kearney adds that one way of preserving the interaction with one another might be to recognize that both sides fear the same: that the other will find a way to interfere with our own practice which has the potential to undermine our position of power. Paradoxically, this appears to me to be the only way to find a means of continuing with one another: we need to open ourselves up and make ourselves vulnerable to misrecognition to become recognized. Recognition would not only mean being recognized for what we might have to contribute. More importantly, we may be recognized as well for our ability to stay radically open, to suspend or delay our judgment of the other. This may lead them to respond in the same way, experienced as freedom to act (Honneth, 2001: 87), and, I would add, to cooperate.

This approach differs significantly from prevailing consulting practice. To wrestle with the generative tension the human encounter causes, opening ourselves continuously while remaining critical vis-à-vis the other represents a different way of understanding how to cope with the uncertainty and the experience of contingency, antagonism or violence. This openness may make us more vulnerable, and sometimes this may be painful or leave us feeling exposed. But this is how we realize ourselves through the other—in other words, how we recognize one another. In this process, thinking and acting are bound together by the way we come together to reflect on our experiences and what we need to do. It seems to me that this, an enhanced ability to reflect as a means of becoming more detached about our involvement, is precisely the most important contribution I can possibly make as a consultant for my clients.



### ***My contribution to practice and knowledge***

My thesis is a contribution to practice in that it challenges predominant assumptions about what consultants actually *do* in their work by negotiating what organization consulting is about. I consider my thesis to be an attempt to interrogate the “social object” (Mead, 1923) of organization consulting. A social object in Mead’s terms refers to a generalized tendency to act, a widely shared assumption about what can be expected in particular social circumstances. For example, a leadership development program or a culture change initiative conjure up (unspoken) expectations, and acting in accordance with these expectations is the prescribed path to recognition as consultant. This includes guiding clients in the process of strategy formation (what culture or leadership behavior do we want?), determining milestones on the way to the set goal, measuring success along the way by means of repeated “evidence” and evaluating one’s work in the end.

In my writing, I have begun to question these rules by pointing to the impossibility of consultants taking a completely objective view because they are dependent on their clients’ recognition to be experts and, on occasion, leaders; a situation which inevitably impacts their thinking about maintaining their own powerful position. It would be naïve to believe that all involved would simply follow the rules of logic, and consultants are no exception. When I come to work, my thinking is guided not only by the current assignment, but by the future business I might take away upon completion of my present work.

Richard Bernstein speaks after Gadamer when he points to an artificial distinction between three elements of experience: understanding, interpretation and application (Bernstein, 1983: 38). Gadamer does not regard these aspects to be separated; they are interlaced. “They are internally related; every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application” (ibid.). In this sense, the consultant cannot understand in advance what will be best for the client. Nor does the client merely act out the consultant’s advice. They must collaborate in a continued effort to grasp the circumstances, interpret them and apply the best knowledge available to them for any given situation. Looking at it from this angle, neither consultants nor managers can stand outside the interaction or successfully manage any change.



It seems to me that the task of organization consultants is to pay close attention to the unpredictable and at times unintended forms of solidarity, hypocrisy, or fluctuation of power and the spontaneous change which sometimes emerges right in front of their eyes despite their plans to the contrary. If they find skillful ways to involve the people they are working with and to reserve and suspend their own views, they may contribute to a new form of interaction which is marked by “the type of solidarity, participation, and mutual recognition that is founded in dialogical communities” (Bernstein, 1983: 231). The danger I see in believing in idealized abilities of both managers and consultants is the risk of oversimplification. Even the managers in the very top echelons do not (always) act in rational or logical ways. This has to do with their incapability to observe the organization from an “objective” position, an assumption which is the foundation of most modern systemic management literature (see Stacey, 2007 for a critical appraisal). While humans have the ability to detach themselves from their interaction (Elias, 1978; Stacey 2010), they are at the same time always immersed to an extent. This recalls the fact that consultants and managers are just as affected by their work as the people they are advising.

Since in my experience consulting assignments’ outcomes are never fully predictable, I have started to try to find ways to address the many different emotional and politically laden responses change initiatives elicit. In doing so, I try to go beyond the technocratic jargon which change leaders use in rationalizing their activities, suggesting that they are in control of what is to come. Importantly, the technocratic jargon of clarity, transparency and efficiency induces managers to forget that such discourse actually serves to prevent people from voicing dissent, apprehension or distress which they nevertheless feel.

I understand my work as the creation of opportunities to heighten clients’ awareness of what might be left unaddressed, generating at least in part the possibility of creating multiple narratives for what is going on. This will not necessarily make change processes any smoother or more readily acceptable; what it does do is reveal possible new ways of making sense of what is happening. In re-telling experiences, people actually make an active contribution to the change itself because it is in the contemplation of one’s personal experience and that of others around oneself that one’s practice is

potentially perceived from a different angle and as a consequence, reformed. While the agenda of senior management is a major factor in performing these assignments, it does not stand alone. Discussions also revolve around the meaning of this agenda for the people actually involved and how they are to concretize it in their daily work.

By negotiating and re-creating the context, we reveal the potential for new forms of interaction. The term “negotiation” signals that conflict will almost naturally emerge. This is reflected in my projects where, for example, I described a case where a colleague and I almost turned an assignment down because we seemed unable to find ways to keep the renegotiation process going (Project 3). The same is true of the example I described in Project 2 in which colleagues and I found it very difficult to come to a provisional consensus on proceeding with a complex client assignment. While such experiences in the past have often caused distress for me, writing my thesis has changed my attitude towards my work. I have come to see conflict not only as a source of distress, but as ruptures in our interaction which can allow innovation to emerge. During the prolonged processes of presenting and defending different viewpoints, identities and opinions are potentially re-created; in these processes, our points of agreement and our differences are debated with the result that they are based on a “dialectic between sameness and alterity” (Kearney, 2003: 109). Such conceptualization highlights the importance for processes of recognition—and what their understanding can add to the consulting practice—because it is the dialectic between sameness and alterity which is at heart of these processes (Ricoeur, 2005; Kearney, 2003; Honneth, 1994).

Consultants must endure misrecognition when projects may not go as planned while at the same time they receive recognition when they stay engaged and help their clients in their struggle to come to terms with predicaments they must deal with. By reflecting on their own interaction they may not only be able to reflect in enhanced ways about their own practice, but clients may respond by doing the same. In coming to terms with this double process, consultants might open up and invite new forms of interaction which potentially alter organizational practices, even though there can be no guarantee for this. I think this is what Gadamer is alluding to with his idea of fusion of horizons, which is why in Project 4 I mentioned (similar to Taylor) the ability to

... learn to move in a broader horizon, where what we once took for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the unfamiliar ... *The fusion of horizons operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, for articulating these new contrasts.*

(Taylor, 1995: 253-253, my emphasis)

“Articulate new contrasts” means to me becoming aware of our responsibility to explore *different* viewpoints. Interestingly, the official language in leadership or change programs is often marked by calls for driving *aligned* action. But in Taylor’s opinion, the search for the one single best solution would be abandoned.

The concept of fusing horizons goes back to ideas of Hegelian dialectics. The difference between this concept and ideas of leadership alignment is that the former decidedly refers to the never-ending dialectical process through which our once “fused horizons” lead us right into the next conflict or contradiction. This prohibits us from working towards an ultimate fused end-state which we can never reach. While there is an idealistic tendency in the writings of Hegel, the point I want to make has been worked out in complex responsive processes thinking or by neo-pragmatists such as Richard Bernstein. As he puts it in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983): “It means turning away from the obsession ‘to get things right’ and turning our attention to coping with the contingencies of human life” (p. 203). The focus shifts from driving unified action to reach a goal in the distant future towards making sense of what we are currently doing in the face of a plethora of responses evoked by the work of organization consultants. One of the possible consequences of this type of pragmatism might be a “renewed sense of community” (ibid.). From a consultant’s point of view, I interpret Bernstein’s “renewed sense of community” to mean inviting people to become aware of how they constantly re-narrate their “reality.” They take seriously the conflictual experiences which organizational transformation processes normally entail, and they reflect on them against the background of official statements which managers and change leaders usually employ to gloss over those conflicts. Theories of recognition, it seems to me, offer a different

interpretation which takes seriously those precarious elements of organization consulting which in the orthodox discourse are rarely addressed.

I understand my contribution to knowledge to include an extension of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating in two ways. First, I present processes of (mis)recognition as a way to understand how and why power differentials fluctuate. Second, I suggest that misrecognition can take different forms, many of them violent, and that these are important to understanding how we continuously realize who we are and paradoxically, how we are recognized by others. The former is an attempt to represent the struggle for recognition as the political dimension of organizing, the latter refers to the potentially denigrating, nonetheless important, aspects of this dimension. Each point will be addressed in the following.

I have conceptualized power in accordance with the ideas of Elias (1978) as the experience of differing degrees of dependency on one another; power differentials become manifest through the experience of inclusion and exclusion. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating builds on Elias's notion of power. In doing so, it is argued that there is constant potential for the hegemonic order to be perpetuated or reformed in the way people relate to one another in local interaction. Local interaction is marked by attempts to persuade one another of what we regard as the "truth" through constantly interpreting and making sense of how we jointly define what we call the truth. I suggest that in the process of offering the most convincing accounts of what we perceive to be our reality, we experience something that is quite important: we find our views potentially being taken seriously by others—we feel recognized. It is through critical examination of our views by others that we are recognized, and as a consequence, included. Recognition is a mutual, a social act because the experience of inclusion necessitates an other with whom we can engage and who has the capacity to respond to our gestures. Power fluctuates when new people become included and others excluded as we begin to recognize or misrecognize one another in different ways.

Becoming recognized may take different forms. For example, we may find creative ways of reiterating what others have said, demonstrating that we have mastered a particular discourse and justifying our inclusion in this or that group. Another way I have repeatedly pointed to is less obvious but, I think, particularly relevant for consultants.

Recognition, I suggest, may also come about through phases in which we find ourselves highly exposed and vulnerable. A consultant may attempt to describe a situation in counter-intuitive ways much like I did with the VP in the example I gave above. The VP might legitimately have questioned my ability to interpret group processes. I would argue that in this case it was my ability to tolerate the anxiety for potential misrecognition that eventually led to my being recognized. Sometimes recognition follows from the consultant's ability to tolerate potential or actual misrecognition. In Project 3, I narrated a situation in which the prolonged tolerance of a client's struggle and aggressive attacks eventually allowed a colleague and me to work on a leadership development program lasting several years. In this particular case, consultants who had tried to work with this client previously had not been able to cope with this prolonged misrecognition by the client. This is an important route, although one which is difficult to explore, to understand how consultants may become recognized. This difficulty arises from the fact that the forms violence can take in organizations such as public ridicule, shaming, or humiliation provoke high levels of anxiety. As a consequence, it appears to me, many consultants prefer to resort to highly idealized approaches for implementing change. For me, the ethical obligation for consultants would be to support their clients in coming to terms with the radical contingency and uncertainty that can be experienced in change programs and to stay engaged, to tolerate conflict and the anxiety of being potentially misrecognized by advocating further exploration rather than proposing the seemingly most rational route to change. To experience recognition as a consultant through (exposure to the potential for) misrecognition is an important aspect of organizational change initiatives, but one which is rarely addressed.



## ***Conclusion***

I understand it to be my responsibility to reflect critically on my practice and not simply to accept what is given and thought possible in my work, to find ways to challenge the prevailing hegemonic order of management consultancy. The necessity to do so arises for me out of the inferior explanations this discourse offers for the phenomena I experience in my work. To offer a critique in this context means to me exploring the contemporary conditions of the dominant discourse and the way it becomes manifest in our daily work so that I can uncover its unquestioned basic assumptions. Here is the potential to find ways to open and redefine my relationships with colleagues and clients so that our possible joint accomplishments become clearer. However, the subversive element in the dominant discourse is that people who speak its language easily hinder exactly this: the possibility to protest, to explore difference and otherness, effectively preventing the articulation of alternative and meaningful forms of making sense. Systemic modes of thought in particular are so entrenched in consulting practice as I know it that any attempt to question them can meet with very strong emotional responses from clients and colleagues, especially when perceived as threats to their identity.

Inviting others to problematize what is taken for granted requires a heightened ability to understand and negotiate what Bourdieu has termed the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). I must acknowledge that the way people speak about their activities is an important part of their identity, and by pointing out the inconsistencies of what they say, I might easily be perceived as someone who unduly complicates already complex modes of work. I might even risk being excluded from the field of consultancy, and if I want to support clients in becoming more detached about their practice, I must live with the anxiety this may arouse. Then, too, my insights oblige me to resist substituting one dominant view for another. My proposals in this thesis are simply another perspective on my work which I offer here as a viewpoint which is more congruent with reality than those I find in the orthodox management canon. What is it that makes the view I present here more congruent with reality?

I think one important aspect which I have pointed out can be summarized as follows: difference is a creator, and—potentially—a destroyer. In my experience, catchphrases which have gained prominence in the dominant management discourse are

expressed by calls for more *aligned* forms of leadership and for *reduced* sets of competencies which *everyone* needs to develop, and for *widely shared* organizational values which are to guide *every* individual's behavior, all of which are actually attempts to mitigate difference, ultimately leading to a dramatically simplified notion of consulting. To me, such forms of simplification are an important reason why we are so often surprised when we discover that our projects do not go according to plan and life does not seem to cooperate.

Encountering some form of otherness is in my opinion not only inevitable in human interaction, but is actually the prerequisite for cooperation and the eventual emergence of novelty. If there were no other, no differentiation in the form of "us" and "them" and if there were no constant negotiation about power and struggles for recognition, there would be no conflict—nor would there be any (r)evolution. What I have sought to advocate is to pay attention to the generative tension which arises from such diversity as opposed to attempts to harmonize it. Simultaneously, I have pointed to the difficulty this poses for any form of cooperation: we may feel recognized and misrecognized, in- or excluded, praised and humiliated, sometimes even simultaneously, in particular in situations when power fluctuates. In my attempts to make sense of this experience, I have begun to take seriously the unpredictability that characterizes human interaction and the way it serves to enable and constrain us.

Being enabled and constrained only appear as dualistic once we come to interpret interdependency with others as constraint in conflict with our intentions. One important consequence of this thought is that I and others are antagonistic poles which would in turn reinforce an individual notion of self. I have attempted to go beyond this notion by presenting a position which suggests that the experience of identity does not take place until we encounter the difference the other brings, because it is only through their (sometimes unexpected) responses to our gestures that we understand who we are. This is the process I have described as mutual recognition. The debate with the other provides us with the paradoxically co-existing experience of enablement and constraint. In other words, if there were no conflicting views, there would be no necessity to act and subsequently no experience of agency. As a consequence, I have argued that sameness and difference exist in dialectical tension rather than antagonistic opposition. The

important social function of constraints—the experience of (inter-)dependency—is that they simultaneously order our experience *and* oblige us to cooperate. Action becomes our attempt to reflect and negotiate the responses we call out in others in the process of intermingling intentions. Such a notion helps us to transcend the practice/theory split since our necessity to think arises only if concrete action is called for; thought cannot come before action, both arise together.

Such reflection must inevitably lead to different forms of struggle: I must be politic in my actions with colleagues and supervisors to ensure my survival in the highly competitive environment of a globally operating consulting firm. I must be very careful in sharing my doubts about the usefulness of the concepts and tools we employ. By the same token, I need to be very careful to appear neither hypocritical nor heretical in front of clients who ask for delivery of programs and initiatives based on a logic I have begun to question. So what is left to me? While the DMan offers an unusually intense experience to reflect on exactly this question, I need to find ways in the long run to communicate with others outside of the program where I am recognized for the contributions I make, but can still recognize myself.

One credible option I see for myself is to participate in the groups my assignments take me to in such a way that I continue to explore even when the general tendency is to close down a conversation and get to work. The ideological stance behind this idea would be to “make better sense of the situation.” I think that my main contribution would be related to my ability to tolerate the struggle which “making better sense” may provoke—and I believe that this is what colleagues and clients recognize in me. Negotiating and thinking processes can be experienced as action, and the only way, it seems to me, for practicing OD consultants to express this insight in their work and so to recognize themselves is by offering provisional viewpoints of how best to appropriate their present understanding in this or that context and inviting clients and colleagues to do the same, both with respect to the circumstances at hand and beyond. I do not propose definitive solutions, just awareness of contingency and radical openness; yet this may turn out to be solution enough.





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