

Practising Talent Management: Processes of judgment, Inclusion and Exclusion

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This thesis is dedicated to my kids – Gili, Omri and Tamar – you are my source of power and energy, you are my source of learning, I learn from you every single day... I have been blessed with you in my life, and I love you more than words can say.

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Abstract

Talent management is an organisational process aimed at maximising the benefit gained from the organisation's workforce, mostly by assessing the future potential of senior organisational members to fill key positions based on their proportional contribution to the business. Despite the increasing prevalence of talent management, evidence is accumulating to indicate an extremely low success rate of just 20–25% in predicting high performers. While talent management continues to address a growing business need, a better understanding of the process may help to refine its practice.

The underpinning assumptions of the practice of talent management are that organisations are systemic and linear, and that talent management must produce a single answer identifying what it means to be a 'talent' in any specific circumstance. As a profession, talent management also maintains a fantasy of control: the expectation that assessed individuals will indeed behave as anticipated, and that stated targets will remain unchanged.

As a progressive and trending HR process, talent management's close connection to organisational power relations and political dynamics is rarely acknowledged. The emotional toll on assessed senior executives, as well as potential ramifications for their colleagues, is also often overlooked, despite the significant implications for individual careers and broader inferences of inclusion–exclusion inherent in the process of talent selection. Talent management practitioners and scholars tend not to consider the impact on individuals of inaccurate assessments and mistaken decisions.

As a talent manager practitioner who decrees the fate of individuals, such glaring oversights provoked in me an acute ethical anxiety that drove this research. This work offers a critical perspective on the practice of talent management – in particular, the process of judgment involved in the assessment of 'high potentials' and the potent dynamics of inclusion in/exclusion from the talent group.

Having witnessed first-hand the inconsistency between apparently robust predictions (based on best practice) and subsequent outcomes, I began this research with strong feelings of ambivalence towards my practice of 25 years and my prospering business of 10 years. The critical perspective of the current study took shape within the research framework, which is based on the philosophy of pragmatism

and the complex responsive process of relating that draws on it, as well as on process sociology and complexity sciences. The research methodology insists that scholars take their own direct experience seriously, collect their raw data through writing narratives, and then exercise reflection and reflexivity both as individuals and as part of the Doctor of Management (DMan) learning community. The narratives 'translate experience so that it is meaningful to the reader' (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 228).

Applying this innovative approach not only to my research, but also to my professional practice, has led me to challenge the most fundamental assumptions of talent management. I now have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the process of judgment at its core, and have developed a new way to approach and implement this process within my work.

This thesis culminates in three main arguments describing talent management from a new perspective, as well as redefining the role and degree of involvement of talent management consultants. First, the central process of judgment emerged not as an objective analysis communicated in a unidirectional, linear way from the assessor to the assessed, but rather as a relational and social process that involves shifting power relations and an inclusion–exclusion dynamic influenced by many unpredictable factors. Second, from the perspective of the research framework, the assessor can no longer be seen as an objective observer, but must be regarded as a participant who is simultaneously both involved and detached and who must rely on their practical judgment. Talent management's traditional promise of future-oriented focus and reliable predictions is illusory, given that all participants are continuously merging their ongoing experiences to spontaneously co-create the future in unpredictable ways. .

Understanding that the assessment process is not a simple numerical exercise (ranking individuals on various scales) and that no single truth can be obtained through an assessment process (since assessment results are co-created with all participants in the process) has eased my ethical concerns and enabled me to continue practising my profession with confidence, by taking a fresh viewpoint of what it is that I am doing. It is my hope that other talent management practitioners will find these insights useful and generalisable, and valid to their own practice – extrapolating from the local to the global.

Key words

Talent management (TM), Human Resources (HR), assessment, judgment, inclusion–exclusion, complex responsive process of relating, pragmatism, power relations, belonging, reflexivity, objective–subjective, practical judgment, critical management, paradox

Key authors

M. Alvesson, P. Bourdieu, S. Brinkmann, J. Dewey, N. Elias, B. Jackall, D. Griffin, C. Mowles, R. Stacey, J. Smilansky

Introduction

My thesis explores the concept of judgment as it is practised and experienced by consultants and managers in organisations. The focus is on judgment in the practice of talent management – currently considered, by management teams and professional human resources (HR) communities, to be a significant new trend. Increasing globalisation has raised issues of job mobility and standardisation of what it means to be ‘talent’, across multiple sites and subsidiaries, particularly in multinational organisations. Talent assessment ‘has become one of the most prevalent topics in the field of people management’ (Collings, 2014, p. 301), not only in large corporations, but also in mid-sized organisations. Talent management has developed as an elitist and political process that mostly affects high-ranking personnel. The objective of the process of judgment is to decide who is included in the group of high potential or ‘top talents’; in judging for inclusion, by extension, consultants also determine who will be excluded from this group. In the literature and in practice, the criteria for identifying high potential or top talents are based on who contributes most or is considered indispensable to the future success of the organisation by helping to maintain its competitive edge (Smilansky, 2006; Reis, 2015). Hence, most of the literature on talent assessment tends to focus on a set of idealised ‘core competencies’ (Reis, 2015; Collings and Mellahi, 2009) in which strategies are matched with relevant proficiencies to ensure success. This approach uses tools and techniques to award scores, set benchmarks, and rate employees on scales and succession diagrams. Another way that talent management differs from most organisational processes is that we are dealing mainly with predicting the future – assessing the future potential of employees and managers for general promotion or specific positions, depending on the organisation’s strategy, needs, decisions and values.

Despite the self-assured tone of the literature on talent management, in my experience there is a significant mismatch between our carefully measured predictions and what actually happens. Recent publications taking a more critical perspective on talent management (Reis, 2015; Vaiman et al, 2012; Tarique and Schuler, 2010) acknowledge this discrepancy without indicating how we might try to improve results. My thesis explores what else is going on in talent management while judgment resulting in inclusion–exclusion is at the core of the process. Focusing increasingly on

this act of judgment, I have found through the process of research that being more fully aware of the dynamic of power relations, in the wider social and political context, is key to understanding what is really involved in processes of judgment in organisations.

Through the process of research, which will be described in the synopsis, I came to realise how talent management is not an analytical exercise aimed at generating a single, all-encompassing truth based on a numerical score. Rather, this research leads me to understand my practice as a social process that takes place in a broad historical context, involving dynamic relationships and power relations, while accepting that we cannot predict or control:

People in organisations do not fit into two by two grids, and are not parts of wholes. The interweaving of intentions, hopes, aspirations and behaviour of people who are both inside and outside organisations, who behave both rationally and irrationally, will bring about outcomes which no one has predicted and which no one has planned. (Mowles, 2011, p. 9)

By questioning what I am doing as a talent management consultant who runs such assessment exercises, I also gradually developed a new understanding of my participation in the process. Previously, I considered the main objective of any assessment process to be a systemic assessment in which I am expected to engineer a way to minimise any disparity between current and optimal performance – just as Mowles (2011, p. 5) describes the traditional expectations of a consultant:

There is usually a great emphasis on agreement, harmony and alignment toward an idealised future, and consultants often use the vocabulary of gap-closing between the inappropriate state we currently find ourselves in, and the ideally adapted state to which we aspire.

This description exactly fits with what talent management consultants are expected to do: to assess the gap between current state and future targets, in terms of skills, core competencies, knowledge, motivation and values, and to design the way to get there – coping with what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) describe as ‘identity manipulation’: part of organisational ‘functional stupidity’ by which organisations, using different devices and methods (including processes of assessment), create heroic and idealised definitions of what it means to be ‘talent’ (2012, p. 1214). By examining my own practice through the lens of this research, I have come to recognise that this traditional view is an oversimplification of the process and the relationships involved.

My new understanding, when considered in parallel with the significant and sometimes life-changing consequences of my judgment, has raised some ethical questions, mainly concerning my role as an assessor and the way I participate in the process of judgment for determining inclusion–exclusion. Some questions have been resolved through my process of inquiry; others so far remain somewhat open.

The context

For the last 25 years, no matter what position I have been working in, my involvement with organisations has dealt with executive development. I began working as an independent consultant offering my services to various companies, specialising in developing people in organisations, then spent seven years as Vice President of HR in a large communications company in my home country before returning to independent consultancy for a few years, working on a variety of projects. I then managed the local branch of a global company, specialising in career development and talent management as well as outplacement; 10 years ago, after finding myself at the centre of a dramatic conflict following the acquisition of this company (partly described in Project 2), I established my own business: TLT – a boutique company offering expertise in talent management.

My home country, Israel, has a small and closely networked business market; most of the work I have done to date involves local organisations with a broad international reach. Through my research, I have come to realise just how much the process of judgment, and the whole dynamic of inclusion–exclusion, acquire a unique meaning in a country that is in a permanent state of social and political conflict. In such a tight-knit community, there is a danger of judging someone by their history, the place where they live, the army unit they served in – such details can conjure up misleading stereotypes. Evaluating the relevance of such background information makes the assessment process more complex and can present ethical dilemmas. While aware of the implications of my national identity that could be relevant to my research, I have chosen not to focus my thesis on local talent management practice in my own country, but rather to generalise from my experience to global organisations. Nevertheless, the cultural context in which this thesis is written inevitably influences

its points of focus, as I will elaborate in the synopsis, in the critical review on Project 2 (p. 128).

While spearheading key projects to assess and develop senior executives, judging them for exclusion or inclusion based on predictions of financial success, I became increasingly preoccupied with concerns about the ethical implications of realising how often our forecasts and recommendations turned out to be inaccurate. As I searched for answers, my two academic degrees seemed outdated; even the professional literature continued to advocate the practices I was following and the tools I was using (which also served tangential organisational processes, such as managerial development and performance appraisal), insisting on their compatibility with best practices used in the largest and most successful global companies. I consulted currently trending literature on leadership (Charan et al, 2001; Heifetz et al, 2009; Schein, 1987, 2010) and read all kinds of books about 'outstanding' companies and their strategies for success. I had the opportunity to collaborate with the leading consultants and global firms in this specialist field. Yet, something was missing.

It was against this background of ambivalence that I started my studies in the DMan programme at Hertfordshire University. At my first residential, I was intrigued to find my own dilemma described perfectly by Stacey (2012): he questions traditional theories, tools, and techniques that are commonly used in organisations, because so much time is invested by management teams in planning and implementing best practices – yet their efforts produce such unexpected results. Later, as part of my reading, Mowles's words resonated strongly with me: 'Both managers and consultants get drawn into playing a game they can never win' (2011, p. 9).

The DMan was my first introduction to complex responsive processes – the main theoretical framework that underpins this research programme – as a way of thinking about our work as managers and consultants in organisations. This approach requires that when we consider processes and complexity in organisations, reflecting on our experience, we take into account mind, culture, social phenomena, and human relating. The perspective is based on process theory, which emphasises the essentially responsive and participative way that humans relate to people, objects, and intangible things around them, as well as the radically unpredictable aspects of self-organising processes and their creative potential.

In the synopsis, I will expand upon the complex responsive process perspective as part of a broader critical management tradition, and the key theorists on which it relies (mainly from the philosophical tradition of pragmatism), describing how profoundly it influenced my research.

Introduction to my research approach

The complex responsive process way of thinking encourages reflection on our experience in local situations and observation of interactions in terms of participative self-organisation, in which both the individual and the social emerge simultaneously (Griffin, 2002). The narrative-based methodology places an emphasis on the researcher's own reflections and reflexivity in gaining new insight and meaning. 'Reflection relates to the intellectual and emotional exercise of the mind to reason, give careful consideration to something, make inferences and decisions and find solutions' (Stacey, 2012, p. 111), while reflexivity relates to a process of becoming aware of the history of the traditions of thought in our communities, which are reflected in our interactions (Stacey, 2012). Reflexivity also offers a useful opportunity to think critically about 'what is the same and what is different about particular situation under review', and to challenge basic assumptions and habits (Mowles, 2015, p. 66). This approach involves critical reflection and iterative discussions within the community of researchers in the DMan programme – that is, with the large group of all participants in the weekend residential; and also with the small group, the learning set, together with my supervisor and second supervisor – as I will describe in the chapter on method (p. 138).

With the recommended reading for the DMan we are encouraged to take a critical perspective when referencing published authorities on organisational studies and management. Indeed, a challenging process in this research is bringing to the analysis multiple disciplines and perspectives – mainly philosophy, sociology, psychology, and complexity science – and finding how these help to inform a view of today's organisations, even though most of the publications were not directed specifically at organisations and some were written decades ago.

The raw data for this research are four projects that we write during the programme, based on the idea of phronetic¹ organisational research, where the researcher recognises ‘that our sociality and history is the only foundation we have, the only solid ground under our feet; and that this socio-historical foundation is fully adequate for our work as organisation researchers’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 375).

As encouraged by my DMan supervisors, I didn’t plan what to write about and what might emerge. I began simply by writing about events at work that animated and intrigued me – things I wanted to understand, that I felt uncomfortable with. In each project, even if I wasn’t writing directly about talent management, I realised that the questions driving me revolved around elements of the talent management process – such as power relations, inclusion–exclusion, and ethics.

Project 1 is unique in that we try to understand, through reflection on our history, how we came to be who we are today, in terms of why and how we think about our work; in the process of writing Project 1, the main research theme gradually becomes apparent through paying attention to what is important and has clearly influenced the history of who we are today. For me, the theme of belonging arose as important in its (unconscious) impact on the way I work, think, and manage my choices. There were already hints that this theme is related to my practice and expertise in talent management, although this did not become obvious until Projects 3 and 4.

In Project 2, strongly influenced by *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1994), I began to discern a link between power relations, belonging, and inclusion–exclusion in the context of talent management, which I began to recognise as a social and political process. Interestingly, while writing Project 2, the outbreak of war in my country prompted some interactions that reinforced my national identity while to some extent casting a new light on my sense of belonging to the DMan community.

Project 3 explored relationships based on the ‘power of knowing’, so highly valued in talent management. In reflecting on and analysing Project 3, I mainly researched literature that offers different perspectives on power relations, moving

¹ Phronetic organisational research is an approach to studying organisations based on contemporary interpretation of the classical Greek concept, *phronesis*. Phronetic organisational researchers study organisations and organising with an emphasis on value and power (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

away from traditional theories on ‘possessing’ power in organisations to a more processual view of power (based on Elias) or a radical view (based on Lukes). I found the processual perspective on power as a social process highly relevant to the practice of judging ‘talent’, inviting me to pay closer attention to my conversations and relationships with the assessed executive and other relevant participants, rather than relying on traditional analytic tools.

Project 4 directly describes the talent management process, investigating relationships that are co-created as part of the assessment, and the way reflection on those relationships in the specific situation leads to inclusion or exclusion. In the analysis of Project 4, based on shifts in my thinking from previous projects, I explore in depth, for the first time, the latest literature on talent management, taking a critical perspective that I will broaden in the synopsis.

My ambivalence, and the themes that emerged in the process of research, led me to understand ‘judgment’ as the core process that I feel uneasy with in practising talent management. Understanding this as a dynamic of power relations in its broad socio-political context is the key, in my view, to understanding the process and explaining the observable gap between talent management predictions (when professionals operate ‘by the book’) and what eventually happens.

The final step – another turn of reflection and re-thinking of the projects (see first chapter of synopsis) – helped to consolidate the various shifts in the way I see my practice and to highlight the three key arguments underpinning my proposals for an alternative approach.

Influenced by the ‘method of inquiry’ informed by pragmatism, I came to realise how much the process of ‘talent assessment’ resembles doing research. Engaging with the idea that I am not an objective participant in the process of judgment shed new light on relationships I am involved with and how these are linked to the eventual outcomes of my judgments. Through the process of research, in developing an increasingly acute awareness of what is going on and why, I realised how much the social processes that I explored, and philosophical perspectives to which I was exposed, through the DMan research have touched even my personal life by significantly impacting on how I respond, understand, and perceive things that I had not noticed previously.

The research methodology has certainly challenged my identity as an expert in talent management and as a plausible authority for high-level assessments in organisations – facing questions such as *Who am I? Who are we? What am I doing? What are we doing? What's going on? How do we move forward together?* In seeking the answers, I have experienced what Stacey and Griffin describe when they write that 'effective research is potentially transformative of identity, and is therefore bound to expose vulnerability and raise existential anxiety with all the emotion this brings with it' (2005, p. 10). All along, these waves of emotion associated with my work, which I had tended to suppress, had themselves been an important feature of the process of inquiry. After an initial impulse to abandon my practice, disheartened by anxiety about ethical implications and nervous about how my professional community might receive this thesis, I eventually began to feel excitement at the prospect of building on years of experience with a fresh perspective that has the potential to transform my work with organisations and make a significant contribution to practice.

The structure of the thesis reflects the process of research: the next sections reproduce the four projects, just as I wrote them at that time. Apart from one round of editing, I have changed nothing related to the content or analysis. In the first part of the synopsis, I review the projects one more time, from a critical perspective, as required by the DMan methodology. Before presenting my three key arguments, I give a detailed description of the research methodology and how it has helped to shape my arguments, engaging critically with talent management. Both the methodology and the arguments have ethical implications, as I go on to explain; finally, I conclude the synopsis by outlining how my research makes a novel contribution to knowledge and practice.

Project 1: Can talent be managed? The journey to talent management

Formative years

I was raised in an achievement-oriented home, to careerist, self-made parents who attained success in their respective fields without any external support. Both were sources of inspiration in my life. My father was forced into independence at the age of 16. An economist by profession, he was active in economic development projects carried out in developing countries, and was also involved in developing our national economy. Over the years, he transitioned from being an employee to being self-employed, establishing his own company and engaging in entrepreneurial initiatives. My mother, orphaned as a baby, was raised by her grandmother. She was forced to surmount many obstacles and began working at an early age for her living, ultimately becoming the first producer and director in our country's nascent and single national television channel – remaining with that organisation, in various positions, for 35 years.

'Belonging' – to a family, to a community – was a major theme in our home. It was accompanied by a very stereotypical view of what was 'right', valuable, worth 'belonging' to. While I was ostensibly encouraged to chart my own course, the underlying message was that failing to belong to the right group could entail risk. I therefore felt that I was not truly at liberty to choose what was right for me individually; I simply had to follow in my parents' footsteps, adopt and assimilate their high moral values, and meet their expectations.

Little did I realise that I was continuing my genetic programming – 'psycho-occupational DNA', as it would be called by Orenia Yaffe-Yanai (2000), an international leader in management and HR consultancy, who heads a consulting family business that employs a unique genogram-based methodology. At the heart of her theory are 'memes' (Beck and Cowen, 1996; Dawkins, 1990) – units of psycho-cultural information that are transferred in the collective subconscious of individuals, families, nations and organisations. Yaffe-Yanai argued that a psycho-occupational DNA is passed on from one generation to the next within families, dictating occupational choices and behaviour. I deeply identify with her theory; it feels as though it was

written about me. The way to break the chain, says Yaffe-Yanai, is by deciphering its 'genetic code', becoming aware of it, and carefully retuning it.

Yaffe-Yannai's notion contradicts Hanna Arendt's approach. Arendt, a self-described political theorist, investigated the fundamental categories of the *vita activa* – labour, work, and action – while also exploring the concept of modernity (Arendt, 1958). She related to all the components that ultimately lead to the development of the self as well as one's professional identity while focusing on action that takes place among many individuals, and in the public sphere, which is a place of competition and excellence. In her view, this is the only place where people share a common world and can demonstrate who they really are. The influence of social interactions was also explored by George Herbert Mead, a philosopher subscribing to the pragmatism school of thought as well as a sociologist and psychologist, who is considered one of the founders of social psychology. Mead believed that the emergence of mind and self depends on the interaction between the human organism and its social environment, referred to as social behaviourism (Mead, 1934). He also regarded language as 'a development and product of social interaction' (1934, pp. 191–192) that is emergent in 'the dynamic, ongoing social process' that constitutes human experience (p. 7).

While I identify strongly with Yaffe-Yanai's views, Arendt's and Mead's theories also resonate with me. I note society's influence on my professional choices – starting with the classification of what is 'right' and worth 'belonging to'. Furthermore, it is now clear to me that my parents' influence is also derived from their social encounters and experiences over the years, particularly during the times when their own self was formed. I recognise the importance of 'Family' – a term that embraces a wider concept than just my immediate relatives – as a connecting thread running through my life, including my professional career. I have always regarded my place of employment as my 'second family', one that satisfied my need to belong and to feel a part of something that was greater than myself as an individual; and I sought the approval and protection of the group.

As I advanced professionally, I received much praise from my parents and from my social milieu. This reinforced my sense of belonging to my family and social circle, and encouraged me to continue along this seemingly natural path, without ever

doubting it. I did not feel, even much later in life, that I had the liberty to stop and reflect on my professional life or to choose a different course.

The way my professional life has evolved and the transitions I chose to make are associated with having a clear sense of place and belonging. Working as a self-employed consultant, where I felt in control, but did not feel a complete sense of belonging, I invested a great deal of energy trying to figure out where I wanted to be included as a 'member of the family', and even more so – where I didn't. This was also manifested in my preference for executing large-scale projects for a very small number of client organisations – doing many things that perhaps were beyond the scope of my initial brief as an external consultant, simply to increase my chances of being accepted into the organisation, of belonging to it. This need also drove me to develop close personal relationships with individuals within organisations, instead of maintaining the distance of a strictly professional relationship with the organisation as a whole. As a result, both I personally and my business sometimes suffered; for example, when projects in client organisations came to an end, so did any relationships I had developed with specific individuals within it.

I interpreted belonging as pleasing, which meant seeking situations where my help was needed. It had become very clear to me that the places and situations where I felt most stimulated and comfortable were those in which my clients became increasingly dependent on me. This gave me a sense of great power. However, having the opportunity to deeply reflect on these issues since joining the DMan programme, I now realise that I was equally dependent on my client, who filled an equally great need of mine. This correlates to a concept introduced by Schein, an investigator of organisational culture, learning, change, and career dynamics, who described consulting processes as a relationship based on help: 'to think of themselves as helpful interveners is not uncommon among consultants' (Schein, 1969).

Gaining power by helping others and being needed by them continues to characterise the way I operate in my extended family, and has had a significant impact on my professional relationships with my clients. Schein emphasised not only the principle of helping others, but also the cultural context in which this takes place: the consultant must understand the cultural limitations and the organisation's 'code of conduct', and operate accordingly, he argued. He described the consulting process as

an interaction – gesture and response – within a set of rules that are clear to both parties. My departure from some of the organisations in which I worked occurred when I felt that the nature of relationship had changed between myself, as a helper, and the organisation that I helped. This usually occurred following change that transpired at a broader scale, which disrupted or diverged from the ‘code of conduct’ that served as the foundation for the consulting process.

The way I managed my life and that the choices I made were both based on strong *habitus*, a state where ‘our minds are structured by ... social experience, which is imprinted in our bodies as a feel for the game’ (Bourdieu as cited by Stacey, 2012, p. 35). The habitus in which people live was explained by both Elias and Bourdieu as the social customs and ways of thinking into which they are born. In other words, ‘we acquire our interest in particular social games through our living in the society we are born into’ (Stacey, 2011, p. 412), thereby deepening our psycho-occupational DNA programming.

Only over the past few years have I become aware of the extent to which internal schemes influence the way I operate. Being guided by these schemes also met my need for the power and influence that I sought to acquire in my professional relationships, in the way that these are defined by Bourdieu, who regarded the habitus of those in power as the authority to decide which culture is legitimate – what is considered good, and what is bad. In his view, the habitus creates the subject, and is related to historical experiences (Bourdieu, 1977).

Reflecting on what defines my professional development, I see the seemingly natural succession of positions and places of employment with which I was involved, as I took advantages of opportunities that came along. This succession was compatible with my need to progress to positions regarded by myself and by my environment as more worthy, significant and of value; to advance and climb up the professional ladder. It also met my need to belong. The content involved in my work played a secondary role, and I took care to avoid any associated professional conflicts; moreover, I now recognise that – perhaps subconsciously – I did my best even to avoid acknowledging the existence of conflicts that were clearly there.

Undoubtedly, my formative years in my family environment immensely impacted my professional life. While I have always thought of the home in which I was

brought up as the most unconditionally supportive home one could hope for and a major contributor to my success, I now recognise a negative aspect as well. The support was there, in abundance, because I chose a professional track that was aligned with my parents' views and preferences and met their expectations; however, I was discouraged from considering alternative paths. This was a form of 'beneath-the-surface' pressure that I naturally accepted and have not acknowledged until now. My participation in the DMan programme is perhaps the first time that I have allowed myself to take a close and critical look at my upbringing and at the road I have travelled. Consequently, I now admit, primarily to myself, that the idyllic family image to which I have clung is not altogether true-to-life and that I am not at peace in my work, but rather struggling with questions that remain unanswered.

Army service: Where my career began

In my country,² military service upon graduation from high school is compulsory and represents a significant stage of life. Typically, one's military role remains just that; I was the exception. My military service marked the beginning of my professional journey, creating opportunities that I would exploit later in my career. During my military service, I began exploring how individuals develop within the framework of organisations, a question that guided my entire career and continues to preoccupy me to this day.

While in high school, I fantasised about becoming an artillery trainer – a coveted military profession for female soldiers at the time, one that would satisfy my need to fill an important role, and which would reflect well on me. It was also considered a masculine role, which I associated with power and prestige. The various army corps are regarded differently by society with respect to perceived or actual contribution and importance. I wanted to be with the best; and I achieved my goal. After a year as an artillery trainer, I was appointed to a new position within my corps that came with broader responsibility: I found myself in charge of the professional training methodology of the entire artillery corps. Little did I know at the time that my new military profession would influence the way I think and work, even today.

² Coming from a small country where 'everyone knows everyone', I have been especially careful to anonymise names and entities throughout this thesis, to protect the confidentiality of those involved. See the Appendix (p.197) for a full list and description of the fictional names used.

Training is a major challenge in the army. New recruits, whose compulsory military service lasts two or three years, must be trained to fill their roles at a high level of expertise within a short time. My thinking processes and training development were based on the IJPT (Integrated Job Performance Training) model, which was developed by Professor Jonathan Smilansky and Ms. Avivit Shpizeisen, both cognitive psychologists who worked for the army. IJPT develops learning based on various hierarchical representative situations, starting from the most basic scenario and gradually proceeding to the most complex one. It rests on the assumption that if soldiers are trained to execute their tasks in the most complex situations, when they later face such situations in real life, they will be well equipped to handle them. Having implemented the IJPT model in the army, it influenced my approach to learning and professional development processes in general. A model closely related to IJPT is the model 'From Novice to Expert' developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980). This model defines five stages through which skilful performance develops: Novice, Competence, Proficiency, Expertise and Mastery. In the army, where training must be completed within three years of service, and the risk of errors is potentially immense, mastering skills as fast as possible can literally be a matter of life and death.

In the organisational setting, however, the question that arises with respect to executives and organisational leaders is whether Expertise and Mastery can be achieved in a relatively short period of time, or whether these levels of proficiency require experience accumulated over a lengthy period; and if so – which methodologies can be used to achieve these levels of proficiency.

An examination of the IJPT model from the perspective of the complex responsive model reveals that it overlooks the influence of the interaction of a particular soldier in a particular situation and the fact that interactions and their consequences cannot be planned in advance (Stacey, 2011). Retrospectively, I see that my criticism of the IJPT model focused on three main issues. First, it did not consider the effect of social interactions on development processes. Secondly, it was based on the assumption that we could predict all situations an individual might encounter and train them in advance to respond to each. Thirdly, it assumed all individuals would react similarly. The complex responsive model, by contrast, focuses on the uniqueness of human responses and the unpredictability of interactions.

Representing the complex responsive view, Stacey (2011, p. 296) regarded organisations as ‘patterns of interactions between human persons’ while Elias focused on ‘the moves of many interdependent players’ (Stacey, 2011, p. 302), and Mead advocated that our self emerges through social interaction, through which we learn to take the role of the ‘generalised other’ – that is, taking on the attitude of the social group to which we are most closely related. In reading these authors, my criticism of the IJPT model intensified: if social interactions produce different responses, and if they comprise a significant element in the way individuals experience and learn, then planning uniform learning processes in advance is bound to fail, as we cannot predict all possible interactions nor provide a pre-planned response to the realities they can generate. While I was aware of the IJPT model’s drawbacks, it was nevertheless deeply ingrained in me; and I continued to base my work on some of its elements throughout my career, as I found it easier to work and design in structured processes.

Starting out in the civilian sector

Immediately after my discharge from the army, I was offered a position as an external consultant at a defence systems company, DefenseTech, due to the recommendation of training development experts I had met during my military service. While most of my friends were taking trips abroad, or found untrained jobs as waiters or similar casual work, I already had a ‘real’ job. I found myself surrounded by much older colleagues – almost exclusively men – who were considered our country’s professional elite in the area of training development processes. I was grateful for the opportunity to work alongside such renowned experts.

The pattern of seeking the proximity of dominant professionals who are highly regarded in the market, and developing complex relations with them – a combination of awe and dependency – is a pattern I would repeat several times in my career. The many advantages this brought came at a high price. At DefenseTech, I was given the opportunity to do things in which I was inexperienced, and I was aware that I occasionally cut corners to save time. However, I felt that this was the only way I could execute the projects for which I was responsible, given the competencies, level of knowledge, and experience I had at the time, and still be ‘included’ in the ‘clique’ of training development professionals.

I began my academic studies two years later. The programme I chose was practical – one that would not demand much effort, allow me to continue working full-time, and offered a good foundation for further studies or professional development. It focused on sociological aspects of organisations. While as an undergraduate I had learned mostly basic sociological terms and theories, in my graduate studies I focused on the interface between sociology, organisations, and the business world. Throughout my academic studies, my perspective on organisations was based on a traditional approach derived from theories that viewed organisations as systems. I studied and implemented processes focusing on planning, structure, prediction, and training.

This period also marked the beginning of my professional identity-building, a process towards which I felt ambivalent. I was studying organisational sociology – a profession that I perceived as unprofessional and underappreciated, and therefore did not wish to be considered a member of its community. However, I quickly realised through my work experiences that there was a substantial gap between theories about processes (i.e. what was supposed to happen) and the way they unfolded in reality (i.e. what actually happened), and that the theories did not properly address difficult questions that the organisation had raised. Reading the complex responsive literature (e.g., Stacey, 2011), and participating in a residential as part of my DMan programme, has shed entirely new light on how organisations function, what drives change processes, how these take place, and how individuals develop and grow within organisations. These experiences also furnished me with different perspectives on leadership and what was the most important thing to focus on: paying closer attention to ongoing interactions, rather than making any futile attempts to predict and control.

Throughout the years, I operated under the assumption that organisations were well-planned, functional systems, and that their success largely depended on the capabilities and skills of their senior executives in conjunction with the planning and structuring of work plans. The complex responsive processes approach, with its emphasis on patterns of interactions between humans (Stacey, 2011) provided me with a new perspective on organisational behaviour: that the organisation is not a static structure but emerges from the interweaving of human interactions. 'It is this order of interweaving human impulses and strivings, this social order, which determines the course of historical change, it underlines the civilizing process' (Elias,

2000, p. 366). Of course, accepting this approach raises questions concerning the value of my continuing involvement in predicting, planning, and setting benchmarks.

Early on in my consulting career, I was often confronted with dilemmas involving what was called for professionally. I also noticed my avoidance of conflicts, particularly those that jeopardised my 'belonging' or my need to preserve a harmonious business environment. The first such dilemma came up when I was working on my graduate thesis, in which I explored the interface between the sociological understanding of self-sufficient agricultural cooperatives ('co-ops'), which were very close-knit communities,³ and the business perspective of their marketing boards. I specifically focused on the concept of 'power': in my research, I examined the influence of different boards when the co-ops were in crisis and undergoing extensive change processes. I studied the dynamics between the boards and the co-ops from the perspective of traditional models of power (e.g., Morgan, 1986; Pfeffer, 1981). This struggle was one to which I could not remain indifferent. In a way, it strongly reflected my own unresolved personal debate: how could we be guided by business considerations, which were clearly necessary, and yet avoid harming the 'family' so that we would not lose our sense of belonging? I now realise that I was, in fact, idealising the co-op community in much the same way that I had idealised my own family.

My role as consultant was to bring added value to the organisation, which would ultimately be expressed in better business results. Yet although I understood the rational logic that without the boards' intervention these self-sufficient communities would fail, threatening the concept of the co-op as a whole, emotionally I found the situation unpleasant. I identified with the communal ideology; I might even say that I admired it and the people who chose to live by it. Members fought to preserve their independence and the values upon which their way of life was based. I regarded members as people of very high moral stature, who had realised their dream and relinquished many of their personal needs to meet those of the collective. Seeing the boards exercise power against these members, because of conflict of interests, solidified my perception of power as a negative force. In my own life, I gained power by pleasing and helping.

³ The kibbutz community is based on a shared ideology, with a strongly egalitarian work ethic.

Traditional theories on organisations always perceive conflicts as adversarial and counterproductive political processes:

Most of the literature on organizations and their management ... understand conflict as a characteristic of antagonistic relationships between people characterized by hostility, fighting, and sometimes the breakdown of cooperation. Conflict is usually described as a struggle to neutralize, injure or eliminate the values, status, power and resources of opponents. (Stacey, 2011: 191)

Organisational consultants can often perceive their role as conflict resolvers. Although I have always naturally preferred to avoid conflict and the use of force, the complex responsive process perspective offers me a very different view of conflicts and organisational power: understanding that conflict can be seen as a positive and essential element in building organisations, and that power relations are in a constant state of flux.

Reading Stacey (2011), as well as Elias and Scotson (1994), allowed me to clarify for myself the ways in which I may have been gaining and losing power through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Stacey 2011, p. 390). Throughout my life, I had identified with the established community and followed its norms and values; this played a major role in the formation of my identity. Professionally, this translated into a strong ideological justification for determining which activities and projects I was willing to undertake (and include), and which I would not (thereby excluding them).

From consultant to manager

The next opportunity that I pursued was to manage RJH, the national affiliation of the global business consulting firm, Hepburn Associates. The offer was made by Nancy Bowman, owner and CEO of Hepburn Associates, one of the most well-connected women in the local market; it came after a career coaching process that we performed together. Looking back, I believe that I rationalised that this would be a good next step for me, while the truth was that I felt that I could not refuse her offer after the long, intimate process that we had shared. I thus became the CEO of a company employing about 20 consultants, most of whom were much older than me. Establishing my position as their boss involved some challenges, and was not something I could achieve overnight. Eventually, however, not only did I win my employees' trust and

cooperation, but I also managed to create a pleasant working environment with a family ambience.

At RJH, I began focusing on global processes within the framework of large-scale projects, and for the first time I became aware of consulting work that involved career development and talent management. Managing a business required me to place the economic rationale before the 'family' rationale, which (as when dealing with the co-ops) did not come naturally to me. Furthermore, in this new role, I was required to contend with what, in my personal view, was often a rather ruthless activity: financial negotiations. I preferred to focus on the 'family', even at the cost of not maximising the financial potential of the company.

When I ponder why I avoid marketing activities, I realise it is because I find it difficult to sell myself at the expense of my competitors, to 'blow my own trumpet'. I believe that this is what Elias and Scotson describe as gossip: 'how ideology emerges in local interactive processes of gossip, streams of gossip stigmatise and blame the outsider group, while similar streams of gossip praise the insider group ... gossip plays a significant role of maintaining identity' (Stacey 2011, p. 392).

When I first joined RJH, its main area of specialisation was providing professional support to employees, usually senior managers in their 40s, who had been dismissed. The company established and managed a career centre that supported the largest dismissal processes in the country. This work was very taxing for me emotionally, as I could not avoid coming into direct and continuous contact with executives who had been close to the top of their professional pyramids and were now in a position of weakness. My personal perception of their situation was that it was humiliating, and I felt embarrassed for them. This touched a raw nerve in me, and highlighted my own anxiety around handling difficulty. The days when we carried out dismissal processes involving 1000 employees were painful beyond words – I literally found myself gasping for air. I was able to avoid this kind of stress by leaving the professional work to my employees while managing the activity with as little contact as possible with the client population.

During this period, I realised that the same career consulting processes which the company had developed under my leadership for individuals who had been dismissed could be assimilated into organisations for internal personnel development.

I understood that the same questions that individuals ask regarding their career when leaving an organisation should also be posed when examining one's career horizon within the organisation. Applying this process in organisations would facilitate keeping key persons within the organisation, would reduce turnover, and would enable the organisation to more fully realise the potential of its individual members and of the organisation as a whole; the organisation would thus be better able to handle future challenges. I therefore embarked on the expansion of the company to include career development within organisations. By the following year, this new activity was RJH's main revenue generator.

I quickly identified the discipline of talent management as an expertise and position within the organisation that places the talent management expert in a position of great power – not least because it involves close liaison with the highest echelon in the organisational hierarchy. However, all this soon came to an end with the sale of RJH, which came to me as a huge surprise. It was an extremely emotional process for me, and seemed to be carried out by the owner with what I experienced as aggression. Being at the heart of conflict, I felt like a child caught up in a tug-of-war between parents going through an ugly divorce. Along with me, my employees also suffered; we experienced something that felt almost like the breakup of a family. It was not until later that I would realise the full impact of this grief.

I think that the acquisition process of RJH best demonstrates how much power I had gained through the relationships that I created with my team members, my consultants, and my clients. Managing the company with a family ambience and forming close and supportive relationships with clients led both employees and clients to feel engaged and personally connected to me. They needed my help, they needed me; and as I filled their needs, I was also indirectly filling my own needs as well. I left RJH with two key clients who preferred to continue working with me, owing to the recognition and reputation that I had established as a talent management expert. I was in the midst of two large-scale projects, and continued working on them immediately, without taking time to consider how I really wanted to continue my career.

A turning-point in my career: Collaborating with Professor Gary Davidson

Still working independently and alone, I became increasingly critical of executive development processes; my faith in their effectiveness was fading. I found it difficult to specify to new clients where my precise area of expertise lay, but did not have the courage to stop and examine this difficulty in depth.

A turning-point was meeting Professor Gary Davidson, who had just returned from over two decades of practising talent management in Europe and the United States, and had written an authoritative book on managing executive talent. Anxious that I would be unable to execute my projects alone, I proposed that we join forces. I thus, once again, teamed up with a powerful, successful male professional, who would supplement my know-how and experience with world-renowned expertise and authority.

My collaboration with Gary, and specifically his approach to talent management, significantly influenced the way I had been working since our encounter. It also helped me to define myself and find a niche that I felt comfortable filling, as opposed to organisational consulting: the market defined me as a talent management expert even before I did. The division of roles between us was clear: I brought the projects and did all the work behind the scenes (the 'feminine' roles), while he represented the 'big league', the academia. This was manifested not only in his academic title, but also in the language that he used, his external appearance, even the luxury car he drove. Gary had an uncompromising ability to voice harsh feedback in assessment processes and justified charging prices much higher than those of senior national consultants. His skills and my expertise in talent management produced a creative, contemporary and prestigious brand – one that stirred great interest among senior managers, and which involved work at the core of organisational influence, power, and impact.

Gary and I each brought a form of power into the relationship. According to Elias and Scotson (1994), power relationships are created within the interaction itself. The relationship could continue to function because each of us derived power from a different source. Gary was also my bridge to the international business environment and to Egon Zehnder (<http://www.egonzehnder.com/>), a leading boutique business consultancy, which we contacted whenever we needed to cooperate with a global

company. I undoubtedly grew professionally, learned to charge higher prices for my services, and gained considerable kudos in my professional environment. However, this came at the heavy price of my fear of confrontation, as well as a clash of values, when I identified a large gap between Gary's omnipotent image and the quality of his professional work. In many instances, I found myself covering his professional errors and compensating for his difficult interactions, which tended to be more confrontational than mine. Yet I felt unable to tackle him directly about any of this.

It became abundantly clear to me that we operated from opposing ideologies. Gary always explained to me that making money was the most important thing, while I always attributed more importance to making sure the process implemented was the correct one and that the client was well served. I also formed and shaped the relationship with the client, which was always also personal, while he kept his distance. One of the questions I ask myself now is: Why didn't I say anything? Why didn't I declare 'the Emperor is naked!'? It appears that what I gained through this collaboration carried more weight even than my professional loyalty. I lacked the courage. My desire to be accepted and liked by him, not to mention the fear of his anger and its potential repercussions, prevailed. I also felt – rightly or wrongly – that my own professional reputation benefited considerably from having him on board.

Perhaps my collaboration with Gary enabled me to be there, and not to be there at the same time. One of the main characteristics of our ongoing collaboration is that Gary does the things that I don't have the courage to do. I often find myself angry at him for operating based strictly on business-related considerations and using force politically – yet the fact that he so readily does this allows me to maintain my image of the 'good girl', as it releases me from the burden of handling this side of the business myself, which must be done in order to hold the position I want. While I harboured much resentment towards Gary for a long time, lately, with a better understanding of our respective roles in our professional relationship and in our relationships with our clients, I find that my resentment and anger have subsided and that I am more open to his business-like, matter-of-fact attitude.

This stage in my career was what finally brought me to define myself, and later brand my own company, as specialising in talent management (as defined below).

Talent management

Talent management can be defined as

an integrated set of corporate initiatives aimed at improving the calibre, availability and flexible utilization of exceptionally capable (high potential) employees who can have a disproportionate impact on business performance ... talent management processes are designed to ensure that the business improves its competitive advantage through the effective utilisation of a small number of exceptional individuals in key leadership positions. (Smilansky, 2006, p. 7)

Talent management focuses on three main components:

- Discussing with the client company, at a fairly abstract level, how it intends to implement the talent management methodology and values within its organisation. This results in defining a set of rules based on which talent management processes would then be carried out. Questions such as who should be considered talent, the level of transparency, key roles, remuneration, and so forth, are discussed.
- The identification of talent in the organisation, based on a wide range of assessment tools aimed at identifying and predicting future potential.
- The characterisation of personal and group development processes for those identified as having the potential to advance to key roles within the organisation.

The core component in any project that I undertake involves external assessment of the individuals being evaluated based on the Potential Model developed by Egon Zehnder International.⁴ The model, which was validated by many organisations and academic institutions worldwide (such as Harvard University), references three elements: (a) competences, (b) motivation and values, and (c) learning – either cognitive or derived from social interactions. The assessment process includes an interview of the assessed individual with two interviewers, in which we emphasise success stories that would allow us to gain an understanding of the assessee's achievements and strengths. We also characterise their professional level in core competences as predefined by the organisation. Additionally, assessed individuals

⁴ See, for example, https://www.egonzehnder.com/files/look_past_performance_to_see_potential.pdf. Accessed 3 June 2017.

are asked to respond to a self-reporting questionnaire. Finally, eight of their co-workers are also interviewed.

Talent management, as defined by Smilansky and quoted above, is the focus of much debate. Researchers and organisations often differ in their definition of individuals who might have the potential to succeed in management positions. Most criticism against the practice of talent management, however, centres on the fact that the process causes organisations to invest more heavily in a small chosen elite, neglecting the broader (and arguably greater) long-term development needs of less high-ranking staff. Additionally, there is the risk of alienating those who are not selected as part of the 'talent group': if they feel their prospects of advancement within the organisation are limited, the organisation may face a high turnover of qualified and capable personnel. At the same time, individuals included in the talent group develop expectations of promotion and higher pay, which the organisation may not necessarily meet. A third hazard emerges in scenarios of organisational change processes, the result of which may be that a group previously selected as talent is no longer relevant.

The notion of predicting someone's potential to fill key roles, and the effectiveness of using structured development processes with senior executives, raised many questions in my mind. Most notably, I was concerned that any information I added to this process was the result of my stereotypical thinking, my own prejudices about the individual's relative value; I was evaluating whether the assessed individual was 'important' or 'worthy', in the same manner that I judged myself. Information about an individual's belonging to social and occupational classes, their military background (particularly relevant in our country), or places of residence serves the diagnostic purpose, but is also stereotypical and judgmental, and therefore detracts from the validity of the process. Reading Elias's (1994) research on the legitimacy, and even importance, of gossip and stereotyping as part of assessing others set my mind at ease; it was just an inevitable aspect of the process of inclusion in and exclusion from the group of senior executives with future potential. I came to understand that gossip helps define groups, and therefore helps the decision whether to include or exclude; it thus helps with instilling order in organisations. Suddenly, the need to classify

individuals became a positive, contributing factor rather than a potentially damaging prejudice.

As a person who is so preoccupied with the notion of including versus excluding, it seems that I cannot stop being so judgmental in the evaluation processes that I perform. This also raises concerns about the validity of the tools we use in assessment processes and the weight of the subjective judgment both I and other assessors exercise. I wonder: on what is this judgment based; and is it legitimate that it should play a role in determining the future of the assessed individuals?

Another significant component in my work involves formulating group development plans for populations defined as talent, for senior executives, and for organisational leaders. On the one hand, this is work that I immensely enjoy – as it requires much creativity and integrating experts from various disciplines. On the other hand, however, I find myself wondering whether it is really possible to significantly change leaders at this stage and to bridge large gaps that I detect in their assessments. In other words, I ask: is one born with potential, or is it something that is acquired and developed?

In his book *Outliers*, in examining the factors that contribute to high levels of success, Gladwell (2008) questions whether potential can be predicted. Looking at individuals who are extraordinary in relation to their peers, Gladwell claims that intelligence or inherent skills do not predict future success. Instead, he attributed great significance to the home in which one was raised, to exceptional opportunities, and to hard work – akin to an oak tree: the tallest tree in the forest achieves that height not only because it grew from a very hard acorn, but also because no other tree blocked its sunlight; the soil in which it grew was rich and deep; and no lumberjack cut it down. My work experience leads me to fully agree with Gladwell; yet at the same time, this approach pulls the rug out from under leadership development processes I devise, including my ability to help prepare executives for future success.

The learning methodologies and their level of effectiveness at this stage of the assessed individuals' career are also a major concern. When I look at senior executives and individuals in key positions who are perceived as high-quality leaders, I doubt that it was structured development processes or courses taken at university that brought them there. There are other factors involved, such as those Gladwell discussed; nor

can we overlook the importance attributed by researchers such as Elias and Mead to social interactions in building an executive. More generally, however, there is the question whether potential can ever be predicted, and whether executives' skills and capabilities can indeed be developed to qualify them for future roles. While my work in recent years has been based on the assumption that potential can be predicted and that capacities can be developed, Stacey (2011) – and other researchers subscribing to the complex responsive process school of thought – rule out the possibility of predicting the future of organisations, executives, and executives' professional development. Instead, they challenge traditional notions regarding talent management by insisting that organisational processes cannot be predicted or managed – making it impossible for me, as a manager or as a consultant, to observe these objectively and operate in an isolated or detached manner. According to this approach, I cannot remain impartial and external to assessments or organisational processes that I lead. Rather, I, the processes, and their results are all influenced by the relations and interactions taking place within the situation.

For example, from the complex responsive process perspective, in an assessment process I cannot regard myself as an external professional who assesses an executive based on one defined reality and uniform criteria that determine the meaning of being a 'good manager' or being successful in a certain organisation or culture. Rather, the assessment process itself is one from which I and my experience are inseparable, and my involvement shapes its results. This way of thinking requires me to look at the consulting and management processes that I conduct not as something that I can control, but rather as something of which I am a part and which is also influenced by my form of involvement. This is true for all entities involved in the organisational process. To paraphrase Griffin (2002, p. 18): all participants are co-creating what is happening, while at the same time being formed by it in terms of individual and collective identities.

Identifying key themes

In 2008, I established a company, TLT, whose primary area of expertise is talent management. At the time, I was still working as a self-employed consultant on a large, system-wide project for a key national industry. The project required me to have a

presentable office where meetings and assessments could be held. I now have five employees and work in close collaboration with eight senior consultants. My main clients are major companies in our country that also have a prominent international profile.

'Belonging' continues to be a central theme in my professional life, as well as in my personal life. TLT, my company, meets my need for belonging, for a 'second family', as well as for being part of what is considered an elitist professional milieu and for executing important projects for eminent clients. I still manage to avoid direct involvement in marketing activities. The projects that I conduct today are ones that I was invited to do; they are not the result of a deliberate and carefully planned marketing strategy. Marketing and sales activities always call into question my sense of belonging. I encounter difficulty each time I find myself in a situation where I need to convince potential clients of my qualifications and advantages over my competitors, as I feel that I am being personally judged as worthy or unworthy of inclusion.

Talent management itself is directly concerned with the notion of belonging. Much of my work focuses on helping organisations create a sense of belonging, especially among groups defined as talent, in order to enhance both performance levels and employee retention. At the same time, I aim to support the retention of employees who were excluded from the talent group but are nevertheless critical assets for the organisation. To achieve this, I must also grapple with the different ways various organisations define groups within them and the criteria used to classify employees into these groups (criteria that then serve as my assessment framework). This leads to yet another aspect of belonging in the context of talent management: Who owns the talent management processes? With whom am I cooperating? The aim is to execute processes owned by the CEO or otherwise highly placed executive, as their backing increases the chances of success (and how success is defined is another issue altogether). From my perspective, the question of ownership also symbolises where I belong in this process.

I have come to realise that all the assumptions underlying my development and assessment processes revolve around the sense of belonging. As I remain very preoccupied with the question of my own belonging, I define executives' belonging to organisations from my own subjective and stereotypical viewpoint. At the same time,

it is very clear to me that a shift is taking place in my understanding of what belonging means, towards understanding it as an emergent phenomenon of social dependency. During the course of my work on Project 1 and my participation in the residentials and learning set, I have undergone a fascinating transformation. Initially, I defined my own personal development process from the perspective of the content I deal with generally. Through the DMan programme experiences, however, my intense inner investigation revealed central themes that have played, and continue to play, a dominant role in the way I work and think today. I am still conflicted between my need to belong to a professional elite and my reluctance to contend with some of the less appealing aspects this belonging entails.

Therefore, the subject I intend to explore in my dissertation involves questions of belonging and the shift in this concept in contemporary organisations. Part of the need for talent management processes derives from changes in employees' own sense of belonging. This is particularly true when dealing with groups defined as talents or assets. As I continue the DMan programme, I intend to examine the concept of belonging from different perspectives, primarily from the viewpoint of complex responsiveness, and also review extant literature on this topic.

Project 2: A broader perspective of ‘belonging’

Introduction

Project 1, in which I reflected on my professional development, highlighted the concept of *belonging* – which has preoccupied me my entire life, influencing my career decisions and the way I think. Each stage of my professional life began with questions concerning belonging and the ways in which I belong. I still often ask myself: Where do I want to be? What do I strive to belong to? Yet on the other hand, I realise that I want to belong to everything, everyone, without giving up anything, anywhere. I wonder – is this at all possible? After all, sometimes, to be included in one place automatically implies exclusion from another.

A review of the literature on belonging reveals that this topic has been extensively researched from very different angles. Psychologists such as Freud regarded belonging as an individual need, whereas theoreticians such as Elias and Stacey viewed the need to belong as a process that is essentially social in nature. Others consider the sense of belonging to be an expression of dynamics of power relations. Additionally, participating in the DMan programme and engaging with complex responsive processes literature have each contributed different perspectives to my understanding of belonging and the way organisations perceive this phenomenon.

I have no doubt that the growing interest in the field of talent management, combined with its strategic centrality in organisations, is the result of changes that have taken place in the employees’ experience of organisational belonging and of changes that have occurred over the years in the power relations between employees and organisations. The narrative of the current project reveals two powerful processes in which the sense of belonging has changed. The first, concerning my personal perspective, felt like an earthquake. The second occurred during my reflection on the narrative of Project 2 and my understanding of the process through the complex responsiveness discourse, which in turn raised many questions on some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin my current work with organisations involving this challenge.

The main literature that I have studied while working on Project 2 reveals various viewpoints regarding belonging as well as the changes that are taking place in

contemporary organisations from the perspective of inclusion and exclusion, and also regarding the power relationships, values, and ideology that are formed through these processes. I also investigate the complex responsive approach: how this is manifested in contemporary organisations, and its implications for today's organisational reality. In discussing shifts in the sense of belonging in the organisational context, I also include a review of the literature that is concerned with global trends in the labour market that have led to this shift in the perception of belonging.

The narrative

First steps at RJH

Nancy Bowman was the owner of the executive placement firm Hepburn Associates, which was the global parent company of RJH, their national affiliate. Nancy had received the concession 10 years before I was appointed as its CEO. Throughout this decade, RJH was managed as a separate revenue centre within Hepburn Associates.

Nancy maintained powerful ties with the business elite. She was already well known as a key professional specialising in the placement of senior executives; indeed, all senior position placements passed through her. Being in contact with her offered an opportunity for me to benefit from the power she held. Nancy had undergone many crises in both her personal and professional life. I always admired her for her resilience and ability to overcome them. Perhaps one of the traits that most characterised her, and that I had a difficult time accepting, was her refusal to accept any door as being closed. Her attitude, which I sometimes found aggressive and persistent to the point of embarrassment, was that no hurdle would stop her.

We met at a time when I was conducting projects as a self-employed consultant. Back then, I spent a great deal of time pondering what the next big thing would be. We met through networking, and Nancy offered to provide me with some personal career consulting, free of charge, because she found me 'interesting'. I wondered why she chose to offer me her services for free. Was she already planning, at that point, to recruit me? Did she have a different agenda? From my viewpoint, this was definitely an offer I could not refuse.

Looking back, Nancy's consulting was meaningful, and some of her key insights remain with me to this day. Perhaps the most significant of all was her saying to me:

‘There is a Big Tali and a Little Tali. Big Tali is all-powerful, and she is a good girl. But there is also Little Tali, who wants different things. Each time Little Tali raises her head and tries to climb out, Big Tali hits her on the head and tells her to lower it again’. Is Big Tali the Tali that behaves as expected of her in order to be accepted, to belong? Does Little Tali jeopardise this?

When RJH’s CEO announced that she was leaving the company due to her husband’s relocation, Nancy offered me the job. After much deliberation and internal conflict, considering this position versus another that focused strictly on organisational development, I decided to accept her offer. My decision was partly based on a sense of personal commitment to this recognised industry leader, and looking back, it was perhaps also influenced by my natural propensity to associate myself with high-level executives and to seek positions that would manifest my own success.

At the time, Nancy was not actively involved in the company’s ongoing management. RJH was managed by Dan, with whom I negotiated and finalised my terms of employment. He was a highly respected executive in the local market, and I was happy to work jointly with him. However, on my first day on the job, Dan resigned for reasons that were unknown to me, and Nancy took over running the company as my immediate superior.

RJH became a company that specialised in career management, the development of future potential, the management of high potential programmes, and also in lending support to dismissed executives through a career centre – at that time, unique in our country. Under my leadership, we developed career development processes within organisations and performed assessments to identify potential in global organisations. These processes were based on the understanding that belonging to a workplace was a crucial element in a person’s identity. Through the initiation of outplacement processes, we created an alternative place where dismissed executives could feel a sense of belonging as they contended with their separation from former employers and sought other employment. While the parent company, Hepburn Associates, experienced economic difficulties, RJH was very successful. We developed extensive operations abroad, travelling to India, the USA, and Europe to carry out projects while growing our scope of activity.

Assuming the CEO position at RJH presented me with several complex challenges, most of which had to do with finding my own place within the organisation – that is, in relation to the parent company, the market, the clients, and my own staff (both salaried employees and freelancers). Firstly, I needed to build a new kind of professional relationship with Nancy, one that would allow me to control her level of involvement in RJH and secure my position as the professional authority and decision-maker. I was aware of earlier tension between my predecessor and Nancy due to her efforts to control RJH's management, and understood that the dynamics between them had been very complex.

Secondly, I needed to establish myself as the boss in order to be accepted as such by my employees, who were all older than me and had more years of experience. At the same time, I needed to find a way of building 'a company within a company', one with which I could identify, that I could manage as I saw fit, and that would be built on more than strictly professional relationships with employees. It was abundantly clear to me that the only way I would achieve the sense of belonging that was so essential to me, especially as the new CEO heading a team that had already been working there for years when I arrived, was by creating a sense of identity that we would all share. I needed to establish what to me would be my 'second family', and I desperately wanted each and every employee and freelance consultant to truly feel like members of that family. I successfully overcame these challenges, and recreated RJH as the firm I had envisioned.

Lunch with Nancy

That day in March, I was driving to my office just as on any other work day. As usual, I was busy making phone calls and trying to reorganise my schedule in response to an urgent request from Nancy, my boss, to meet her for lunch. On my way, I mused over the reason behind her request. Did she want to discuss her economic difficulties with me again? For some months, my employees had noticed from their payslips that Nancy had not been transferring money to their pension funds; this was due to her severe payment collection problems. For some time, I had sensed tension between us. Could she be jealous of me? Was this possible? RJH's success, and the sounds of laughter among its employees, as compared with the heavy silence at Hepburn Associates, the

parent company, and its difficulty in collecting payment from its clients, certainly did not escape her. Our one-on-one meetings were always unsettling, and I tried to keep these to a minimum. I felt ill at ease as I drove to meet her, wondering why she needed to meet up instead of talking on the phone.

My lunch with Nancy took place three eventful years after my appointment as CEO. We sat down in a small restaurant as I continued to wonder about the reason for this urgent meeting. After some small talk, Nancy dropped a bombshell: she informed me that she had decided to sell RJH to a national consulting firm. She explained that she saw this as an opportunity to overcome her financial difficulties at Hepburn Associates. Furthermore, she stated that since I had assumed the role of CEO she had become less and less involved in RJH, adding that I ran it as a family company, of which she no longer felt a part. Consequently, Nancy thought that the time had come to part ways with RJH, improve her financial situation, and focus on her senior executive placement activities at Hepburn Associates. She added that this presented me with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become a part of a leading global HR firm as the acquiring company.

I was too stunned to hear the rest. I could not have been more surprised at her decision, nor at the reasons behind it. I was also shocked that she had negotiated with the acquiring firm without my knowledge, not to mention without my involvement. To a certain degree, I felt betrayed at the thought that she was mulling over the fate of my business, my company, without consulting me.

Nancy left me wondering how she could have initiated losing the firm she had founded by going through with this sale. How could she stand to lose such a strong and profitable brand? How could she give up her only connection to the global business community? Was her situation really that bad? In those moments, and also in the days that followed, I was unable to appreciate the difficult situation in which she found herself. I couldn't bear to think that I had a part in her decision to sell. Could I have managed the company differently while helping her handle her economic difficulties? Or perhaps I could have facilitated more of her involvement?

Only months later did I come to understand that she was able to part with the company because she sensed that it was, metaphorically speaking, no longer hers: it had become mine. I had excluded Nancy from her own company to satisfy my need for

belonging, and she now excluded me, in her desire to make me part of a more profitable larger corporation – a place in which I would lose myself and to which I could never feel I belonged. Suddenly, I realised how much power I held – how I acquire power and build my own sense of belonging, as well as that of others around me, through their association with me. I had the immense power to take Nancy’s company away from her, by creating a new family that excluded her. At the same time, I also realised how fragile power was – and that it could be lost instantly. I understood that the balance of power had shifted as a result of this change in our interdependencies.

Nancy divulged that the transaction was entirely dependent on my willingness to make this transition, together with my entire team. I realised how much power I held at that moment: my refusal could block the sale entirely, or strongly influence the selling price of RJH. In a way, it was similar to a parent–child relationship, where the parent is regarded as the party holding the power, but it is the child who has the power to pull strings to get her way. I did not feel comfortable holding such power in my hands. So many questions were rapidly spinning in my mind. On the one hand, I was glad that I apparently had the power to terminate the transaction; but on the other hand, I felt guilty. Was this situation based on pure business considerations? Was the sale of the company the only solution? Or was there a hidden agenda here – one that had more to do with my interaction with Nancy than with any commercial considerations? If so, would I be able to uncover this and prevent the sale?

I asked Nancy when I could share the information with my employees, and when this transition was planned to take place. She asked me to wait several days, stressing that only after receiving my answer would she be able to finalise all the details with the buyers. I went back to the office with many open questions, and anxiety began coursing through my veins. At the same time, I was very clear about two things: this was the end of my role as CEO, and I would not be joining the new company under any circumstances. I was staggered by the fact that from one moment to another, my circumstances had been reversed: the manager of a successful and prosperous company, I suddenly found myself in a seemingly weak position, becoming effectively unemployed, excluded from my professional ‘family’. A day that had started like any other regular work day had turned into a major crisis, shattering my

perception of the business world and my place within it. This further undermined my sense of security in my ability to belong to an organisation, and ultimately led to the establishment of my own company – one from which no one would ever be able to kick me out.

The ironic aspect, of course, was that despite the fact that I managed a company that supported individuals who had been dismissed and helped them process the difficult emotional side of this experience, I never imagined that I might find myself in their shoes. Moreover, I taught a university course on careers, in which changes transpiring in the perception of the workplace was a key theme. Through my work, I had constantly witnessed economic changes, new perceptions concerning HR, influences of globalisation processes, and changes in the workplace, as I prepared others for their career changes. Yet I was completely unprepared when faced with the same situation. What concerned me most at that point was: How and when I would share the news of RJH's acquisition with my permanent staff? And how they would react?

Acquisition by HR-Tech

I had heard about the buying firm, HR-Tech, and the persons heading it from conversations with colleagues in the industry, but had no personal links with them. HR-Tech was established by Jonathan Linklater and Keith Eastwood, as an IT company, specialising in IT services targeted at HR functions. HR-Tech's strategic plan was to be acquired by a US giant HR company. In order to be considered a prime candidate, they had to take over a number of companies that would together comprise a significant professional body, whose importance would be comparable to that of the US firm. To advance their strategic acquisition plan, they added a third partner, Simon Green, an HR executive who was well known in the local professional community and who was also a RJH client.

RJH was one of the four companies HR-Tech had planned to acquire, as a firm that specialised in talent management. Neither Jonathan nor Keith were HR consulting professionals. I believe their considerations were purely business-related, which was understandable, although it was never my sole consideration. Like Nancy, they wanted to maximise the market value of their company, and therefore tried to make it as

attractive as possible to the prospective buyer. The business aspects of the planned sale were led by Keith, a very shrewd businessman with whom I found no common ground. I had no intention of managing a division or a department of a US corporation after having successfully managed an independent company – especially one that I had succeeded in making ‘my own’ by working so hard to establish a strong sense of belonging and a family-like ambiance among my team. Also, I could not see myself reporting to people who I regarded as having inferior professional skills and therefore unfit to be my superiors. How did I know this? How did I judge them?

The meeting with Keith

A short time later, Keith invited me out to lunch at one of the best restaurants in Tel Aviv. He sat in front of me, waiting for me to order. He himself did not eat a thing during the entire meeting, but only drank a glass of water. He tried to persuade me to accept their offer, asking whether I could really refuse to be part of the world’s largest HR consulting firm. It was clear to me that we held completely different views on what would entice me to remain with RJH. Without hesitation, I said that there was no chance I would join the new company. Interestingly, the issue of my financial compensation for having successfully led the firm and made it attractive for buyers was not raised at any point. Could this be because they sensed that I could not be bought? That what mattered to me most were the values that guided me, and not personal monetary gain as the primary factor? If so, they were right: money would not have swayed me. I also wondered whether I could be reading the situation wrong. Could they have been so convinced that I would not turn them down that they saw no need to offer me a financial incentive? Or were they afraid of me, of the power I held, and therefore felt a need to insinuate that ‘I should be grateful for the opportunity’ to join their company?

I attributed my decision to two factors: firstly, I was not fully convinced that the global company would indeed acquire their firm; and secondly, I could never be a part of a company that seemed to be motivated primarily by cold business considerations, lacking ‘soul’ and the family values I considered so important. HR-Tech’s aim was not to develop creative talent management and assessment methodologies, which were my personal motivation; its clear interest was ultimately to be acquired by a huge US

corporation. I knew that in a business environment with such different values, I would feel not only professionally disempowered, but also excluded to the point of anonymity.

I then had another meeting with Nancy. She argued that it was my duty to the company that I had been managing over the last three years to consent and support the sale and that if I persisted in my rejection, the entire transaction would fall through. I thought to myself: here again, Nancy encouraged me to 'let out' Little Tali and give her space, yet when I did, it aroused such anger in her. And this anger frightened me. I explained to her that I felt it was necessary to distinguish between business considerations and my personal considerations. On the one hand, it was her company, and I understood her reasons for wanting to sell it; but on the other hand, this was an extremely painful move that I wanted no part in.

I even felt insulted that she had failed to consider that Simon (who would have been my boss, had I joined the acquiring firm) and I did not see eye to eye. Despite knowing me so well, and being professionally acquainted with him, she could not see that this would never work. Her agenda was different. Nevertheless, I promised to do what I could to encourage my team to make the transition to the new company. Nancy reiterated that what was in fact being acquired was me, with my team; and that without me, the acquisition would not be attractive or worthwhile to the buyers.

The power relations changed again: from the complete sense of impotence that I had felt, to the power to overturn the transaction. Yet I was fully aware of the potential cost of my decision: Nancy's highly influential position in the market meant that she could easily hinder my professional advancement if I crossed her. My refusal to go along with her plan was potentially self-destructive: clearly, my choice demonstrated how strong my sense of belonging was to the company and its employees.

The meeting with Keith and Nancy

Several days later, the two partners and Nancy invited me to a meeting. As soon as they closed the door, I felt the tension rising. Nancy was the first to speak: 'OK, we understood that regretfully you do not intend to join the company. We therefore have one request: that we will all agree to tell RJH's clients and employees that you will be

joining, with the understanding that you'll leave in three months' time'. I could not believe my ears, and felt my heart pound in my chest. I managed to maintain my composure, and answered quietly that this was out of the question! I had worked hard for many years to build my impeccable reputation. This was the kind of thing that I would not do even with a gun held to my head; it was inconceivable. The room grew silent, and I excused myself and left. This encounter further reinforced my conviction that from a moral perspective, we were at polar opposites, and I felt a sense of satisfaction at my decision to exclude myself from their firm. I strongly believed that belonging, at its most basic level, is being true to oneself. The conflict had intensified into a clash of values – and I refused to compromise mine.

My team

The subsequent meeting was held with my team – the people I had come to regard as my professional family, with whom I had shared many experiences. Nancy and Keith asked to join us. They were clearly concerned that I could do irreparable harm in the way I related the information. That morning, Keith had arrived with a big smile on his face and came over to hug me. 'Don't touch me,' I said, and tears started rolling down my cheeks. I felt that I had no choice but to let Nancy participate, but would not agree to let Keith join us as well. He tried to push his way into the room, and I was forced to almost block him physically. The conversation was very emotional and difficult. Some of the members of my team broke down in tears; many asked questions that I was unable to answer.

Several additional conversations took place, some of which were one-on-one talks with the employees and the external consultants – all against the backdrop of my tense relations with Nancy, and the uncertainty of whether the proposed acquisition would in fact materialise. I also initiated meetings with lawyers, to make sure I understood my rights and knew how to best navigate the situation.

Clients

Another issue with which I had to contend was RJH's agreements with its clients. I met with each of them, accompanied by Keith, to get their consent to be transferred to the new company. To my great personal satisfaction, the very close business relationships that I had built with some of them, who regarded me as their in-house consultant, led

them to prefer continuing to work with me and not with RJH in its new home. Among these were RJH's two largest clients. To me, this was a huge compliment; but it made Nancy and the new buyers furious. I found it difficult to handle their anger, which further strengthened my sense of exclusion. Additionally, I resented the fact that they had forced me to engage lawyers in order to protect my rights and ensure that I receive what I regarded as rightfully mine, thanks to my success as RJH's CEO; the necessity of this act, from my perspective, was equivalent to dealing with something 'dirty'.

I have always found it difficult to cope with situations where aggression played a major role. While I find people who hold power, or places where power exists, captivating and attractive, the inherently hostile aspects of power frighten me. I perceive issues pertaining to money and negotiations as adversarial. My autopilot always directs me to be nice, to apologise for having to deal with these issues in the first place. I therefore often find myself avoiding such scenarios. However, in this particular situation, I had no choice. Years later, only after establishing my own firm, did I identify that subconsciously I was always driven to cooperate with persons who would do the 'dirty work' for me. I recognised my ambivalence: on the one hand, my reluctance to act aggressively and my avoidance of power plays in the business world; on the other hand, my desire to belong to the top echelon, at or near the top of the pyramid, where aggression and power plays are common.

The decision made by these former RJH clients to stick with me encouraged me to open my own company, TLT, where I would be free to operate as I saw fit, where I would make decisions that served my own interests, to where I would belong, and where my place would be secure. Most of the team members who transitioned to the new company left it within six months, joined me, and continue working at TLT to this day. Now, as the owner of my company, from which no one can ever dismiss me, I recognise that belonging still plays a part in how I act. I understand that I both 'belong' (becoming closely connected with individuals) and yet do not (officially) 'belong' to the organisations with which I work, remaining independent consultant. I also have several bosses now – all of whom must be satisfied with the work I do. I thought that in founding my own company I would no longer be faced with the issue of not belonging, since I would naturally feel a complete sense of belonging to my own firm. To my

surprise, I found that as a consultant, the issue of belonging became even more pronounced, arising anew with every client and every project. I additionally had to find my place in the local market and define how the market brands me and where I want to be. On more stable grounds, I invest great efforts to create a sense of belonging among my employees and contractors. Perhaps based on my own needs, I offer organisations tools with which they can handle, at the organisational level, issues pertaining to belonging.

Eight years later

Finally, the transaction was concluded. I was able to persuade my entire team to transition to the new company. Nancy was angered that my refusal to cooperate with her and the buyers had resulted in her having to accept a significantly lower price for RJH than the amount originally offered. To this day, whenever I happen to meet her, I can feel the tension between us. One morning, I was having breakfast with two friends and colleagues who are also studying within the framework of the DMan programme. We sat at one of the popular coffee shops where business meetings are often held. While we were chatting, Nancy walked in. She approached our table and we all rose. Nancy, who knew us all, greeted my friends with a hug. I was embarrassed, said hello, and left it at that. The three of them – my two friends and Nancy – continued talking about a difficult personal situation with which Nancy was currently grappling. I sat and waited for them to finish talking, feeling excluded with every fibre of my being, even paralysed. I relived the price paid for the decision I had made years ago – the anger Nancy aroused in me, but also some pity. It felt as though the event had happened only yesterday. I thought to myself: What an amazing coincidence – if only I could tell her that our story now featured as an important learning narrative in my DMan programme paper. I am now able to observe it from a different angle and understand it more comprehensively; yet I still have many unanswered questions.

Reflections and discussion

The social is made the driving force behind all human interaction. It is the impulse to relate, to communicate, to belong. (Dalal, 1998, p. 65)

In the various stages of the narrative, and also previously in Project 1, I identify two central themes. The first is the motivation to belong (or not) to various groups, which is at the core of inclusion and exclusion processes carried out by my work. Related to this is the significance of the notion of belonging to our personal and professional identities. The second is the dynamics of power relations in which I was involved, whether as beneficiary or as benefactor, which continuously shifted. Exploration from the perspective of the complex responsive process, together with the research of Elias and Scotson (1994) and Dalal (1998), raise the question whether these are indeed separate processes, or rather tangential, or perhaps overlapping, ones?

In Project 2, I attempted to investigate the connection between the concepts of belonging and power through the perspectives of the various theories, and identify how this connection is expressed in the complex environment of organisations. Reflection on my narrative raises numerous additional questions: Is belonging a dynamic of power relations, or a social phenomenon that preserves social order? Is it built on gossip and stereotypes? What comes first: a great change that alters the power relations, and subsequently revises the sense of belonging? – or perhaps a shift in the power relations, and a revision in the sense of belonging, that produce the great change? Was it a change in Nancy's sense of belonging that caused the shift in the power relations, which then led to the sale of the company? Or was it the objective change in her financial circumstances that was behind her decision to sell, aiming to maximise financial gain, and the power relations were only part of the politics that played a role in this process? What came first? Is the sense of belonging a process related primarily to an objective structure, or to an emotional, subjective one? Or is the phenomenon linked to the context of groups? Is belonging a local process, or is it perhaps much broader – a global one?

When I wrote the narrative, I focused on my own belonging. Reflection on my journey exposes a level of complexity in the different types of belonging that I could not see *a priori*. This level of complexity and the multiplicity of participants involved also explain why it was impossible to anticipate how the story would unfold, and how

it would end. Among the players were Hepburn Associates – a national company that continuously sought global affiliation; RJH, as both a member of the global group and a local subsidiary of Hepburn Associates; myself, both RJH’s CEO and an employee at Hepburn Associates; RJH’s employees, who belonged to RJH while being paid by Hepburn Associates; HR-Tech, a national company, which was interested in being acquired by a large international company, and therefore had to associate itself with additional companies; three additional companies that were negotiating their sale to HR-Tech as a result of HR-Tech’s strategic decision; and also the large global company that wished to launch its national operation through a company to represent it locally, and considered HR-Tech a suitable candidate. Preoccupied with my own belonging crisis, at the time I did not take account of any of the other belongings. Other players were no different: each participant had envisioned their own scenario based on subjective assumptions concerning what would happen, and acted upon it; none considered that the other participants’ reactions might be different than those expected.

Mergers and acquisitions (M&A) are among the most complex changes that an organisation might undergo. These are changes that call into question both personal and organisational identities, creating a meeting-point between different cultures. Accordingly, M&A can be studied from the perspective of inclusion and exclusion. While most of these processes are usually meticulously planned, most ultimately fail – not because the plan was not good enough, but due to emotional reasons, which are expressed in a chain of reactions manifesting in many circles and layers; there is no way of predicting what the end of the process will look like (or when the end might be reached). Stacey (2012, p. 122) discusses executives’ inability to predict future events:

The leadership and management tools and techniques of instrumental rationality cannot enable leaders and managers to choose the future of their organisations. Nor can they enable leaders and managers to control the process of realising whatever choices they make. This is because they assume ‘if...then’ causality required for the tools to do what is claimed for them simply does not apply to human interaction. Furthermore, expert leaders and managers have to move past tools and techniques to exercise practical judgment in ambiguous and uncertain situations.

An example of a M&A issue that is usually planned in advance is compensation. One of the questions that I ponder to this day is: How could it be that, throughout the

entire duration of the sale process, I was never offered financial compensation for transferring to the new company? Part of the reason may be that there was a significant gap between the basic assumptions of the parties involved as we entered the interaction. Nancy and Keith did not regard this as a major change; in their view, I would merely relocate with my group of employees to a different, larger context. Yet I felt as though I had been kicked out of my own home, and refused to consider relocation under any circumstances. Theories that locate the need to belong in innate personality characteristics aim at capturing the sense of belonging to the organisation and potential influences over it; this approach assumes a kind of individual motivation that is static and predictable. In contrast, the complex responsiveness approach claims that the motivation to belong continuously changes and thus cannot be anticipated. For myself, I operated under the assumption that the need to belong was universal, a fundamental human need; I therefore considered it a powerful management tool. Consequently, the first thing I did in any organisation I connected with was to intuitively build my sense of belonging.

I was preoccupied with the motivation to belong: Was it an individual need, based on one's specific personality? Was it a social phenomenon? A group-specific phenomenon? Was it based on culture, and hence cross-generational? When reading the current narrative, as well as Project 1, the connection I make between belonging and family features prominently. In order to feel as though I belong, and to make my employees feel the same way, I sensed the need to create a sense of belonging in my professional 'family'. I had a very clear sense of what comprised a family and the rules by which it operated. Given that in my mind the need to belong to a family overshadowed any other need to belong, I wondered why I never considered that there are different types of family – that not all families follow the same rules? After all, when I observe my own nuclear family, my expanded family and other families, I observe many different patterns of behaviour among them. Even my customs and rituals originated in the world of family and tradition, as well as in processes that created my group (family) identity.

According to Elias and Scotson (1994), social order and the creation and preservation of the group are closely related to the concept of gossip. Undoubtedly, part of our identity at RJH was built by differentiating ourselves from other consulting

companies in general and from Hepburn Associates in particular. Additionally, Elias argued that power relations, based on similarities and differences, are central to relationships between people. We define our identity based on similar attributes that we share, which makes us part of 'us'. Similarity is usually expressed in customs, traditions, beliefs, dress code, and so forth. It was quite clear that all of RJH's employees shared the same opinions, as a group, about Nancy, Hepburn Associates and its partners, as well as HR-Tech. We saw two separate groups: 'them' and 'us'. We created this perception, which was not free of stereotypes, and continued developing it, building an ideology of 'us' – the professionals, the 'good guys' – and 'them', the professionally inferior. This distinction was further expressed internally, in a shared language (such as 'in-jokes'), and externally in the way we dressed or the décor of our office.

I always hang paintings on my office walls – pictures painted by my mother, taken from her first exhibition, themed *Home*. At work, we celebrate holidays together with my employees' families, with whom we also share our work projects. We celebrate birthdays and share many personal experiences among us. Part of my anger and insult emerging from the incident with Nancy resulted from my interpretation that HR-Tech and Hepburn Associates lacked family values and were motivated solely by the desire to maximise their financial gain from the transaction. However, I would have been joining an existing situation, an existing family. Why had it not occurred to me to stop, observe, and learn what drove the sense of belonging among Hepburn Associates' employees? What had cultivated the sense of belonging at RJH before I joined it? Why could I not entertain the possibility that Nancy was selling RJH to save her own family? I brought the sense of family into RJH and believed that I was thus creating a team, a group of people – of women, in this case – who even shared similar physical attributes; we had our own traditions, humour, and language. My perspective and innate management style was rare in the business world, as few organisations are guided by family values. Even those that claim to be family-oriented are usually led by considerations of success and profit, and usually maintain a clear distinction between the family and the business.

While most organisations clearly do not foster a family-like ambiance (certainly not in the way I perceive families to behave), I believe that a family component is

found as a cultural element in all organisations. This is especially true for the way my home country's business market operates: the relevance of networking, military service influencing future work opportunities, and companies founded on friendships that often date back to army service. 'A friend brings a friend' is among the most effective recruitment mechanisms in the national market. Organisational belonging, then, is based on prior shared history.

Notwithstanding, at the time, I understood my personal need to belong as a fundamental and permanent personality-based need, and operated under this assumption at both individual and organisational levels. Indeed, to this day, my work with organisations centres on the individual aspects of belonging. I regard my consultant role as gaining an in-depth understanding of the motivations to belong held by the executive who I am assessing or to whom I am providing consulting services. The dominant scholarly discourse on belonging attributes its motivation internally to individuals. According to Abraham Maslow (1954), the need to belong is a major source of human motivation. He described it as one of the five human needs in his hierarchy of needs, along with physiological needs and needs of safety, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. These needs were arranged hierarchically, suggesting that they must be satisfied in order: the need to belong and be loved, according to Maslow, can be addressed once physiological and safety needs are met.

Addressing the question of motivations to belong to organisations, positions, or groups, Edgar Schein (1985) also advocated that deep personal motivations influence our choices on where we feel we should belong. Schein recognised the great variance among individuals and their motivations, and claimed that these motivations represented values and ideologies formed during one's early career. In his experience, with the exception of extreme exceptions, such values and ideologies do not change later in life. Out of eight career anchors that he identified, he noted that two would tend to dominate,⁵ reflecting most of our values and influencing our choices.

I recognise in myself the need to belong in order to feel loved and attain recognition. Part of my inner conflict derives from my newfound realisation that I sometimes thought that in order to be recognised I had to exclude myself and

⁵ The eight career anchors are: Technical/functional competence, Managerial competence, Autonomy/independence, Security/stability, Entrepreneurial creativity, Service/dedication to a cause, Pure challenge, and Lifestyle.

demonstrate that I was unlike everyone else but was rather different, unique. With HR-Tech, this meant not achieving recognition as the head of the company and its senior manager and expert, but rather ‘losing myself’ in a large company – becoming anonymous, no different than anyone else. Reflecting on the narrative, and Elias’s literature on exclusion, allows me to consider this chapter in the completely opposite manner. Was this episode indeed about belonging, the desire to be included; or was it about the exact opposite, the desire to separate and exclude myself? Or perhaps these two are strongly linked, as to belong to one group I had to disassociate myself from the other?

My battle was, in fact, about what differentiated me. I wanted to preserve this special thing that I had built, and I did not want to belong to a global, commercially minded organisation. My dynamics with Nancy throughout the entire period that I headed RJH contributed to my creation of a wall, ensuring segregation. I excluded her throughout our professional relationship; my rejection of her offer and HR-Tech’s offer was no different. I wanted to preserve the sense of belonging that I had created in ‘my own’ company, with the people who I considered to be my group. Thus, when I informed my team about the acquisition, explaining that I would not be transferring to the new company, the crisis was no longer one of belonging but rather one of separation. It was not the personal crisis of each group member, but rather a group crisis of a group faced with the reality of not being able to continue as a group within the large global company.

This leads me to a new question: is the sense of belonging first and foremost a question of identity? How do we come to belong, or cease to belong? There is clearly an emotional dimension, not just a cognitive process of rational categorisation: ‘Given that there are a multitude of places in which one could legitimately be said to belong, [the question is:] In any given situation, what makes one or more sorts of belonging primary?’ (Dalal, 1998, p. 172).

Is identity defined individually or by a group?

In his book *Taking the Group Seriously*, Dalal (1998) compares Freud’s theory with those of Elias and Foulkes in the way that each relates to individuals and groups, discussing what comes first – the individual or the group. Foulkes claimed that the two

points of reference, individuals and groups, complemented each other, while Dalal argued that they are in opposition. At a different interface between the two, Freud generally believed that the social context resulted from individuals' internal drama, while Elias argued that it was the social context that created the internal one. In his view, individuals are pre-conditioned to the core by their communities, even before they are born, and their personality and character are therefore vitally imprinted by the group in which they are raised (Elias, 1970, p. 152). Stacey offers this concise summary of the relationship between the social and individual: 'collective "we" identity is inseparable from individual "I" identity; individuals are fundamentally social, a matter of power relations. This process of power relating with its dynamic of inclusion and exclusion is ubiquitous in all human interaction' (2012, p. 29). It is therefore inaccurate to say that these are two sides of the same coin, because each side instigates the other; the question, then, is: Which side comes first?

RJH's sale was a process that tested the individual need of each of the involved parties – myself, Nancy, my employees, the company's clients – for a sense of belonging. For me, it touched on the fear of losing both my personal and professional identities. More significant, however, was the fear of losing the identity of the group. This leads back to the argument that the structure of the mind – which is where we think, feel, and know (Elias, 1970) – is not something with which we are born. 'The structure of the mind is not universal, but is contingent and partly determined by the themes that exist in the socio-political dimension' (Dalal, 1998, p. 111). 'Mind and thought are not private properties of the individuals, but properties of the group. We have noted how affects are not just internal reservoirs of instinct or whatever, but social processes arising out of interactions. We have seen that individual conscience is not a reflection of a celestial ethic, but more prosaically the internalization of the norms of the group' (ibid, p. 225). 'To take the group seriously,' he concludes, 'is inevitably to take the social seriously' (p. 159).

Another perspective for understanding belonging is its connection, and possible overlap, with the concept of power. The dynamic described in the narrative is one in which an attempt was made to transfer power from one place to another, whereas the main barrier hindering this attempt was belonging. This power partially originated in relationships (with co-workers and clients) and the knowledge that was exclusively

held by me and my team. The notion that belonging – and, by contrast, separation – contributes to the dynamic of power relations is an uncommon perspective in the literature. While traditional (e.g., Marxist) theories perceive power as unequivocal and dichotomous, an element that one possesses mainly as a result of one's place in the hierarchy, the complex responsive process considers it inseparable from another concept: that of belonging. This perspective sheds new light on the narrative described earlier, and on our potential understanding of the complex nature of organisational processes. For example, rejecting notions of dichotomous power, Stacey (2012, p.28) describes power as a dynamic system of mutual dependency:

Reciprocity is an inseparable part of the individual, of who he is. It is a dynamic found in every relationship. If individuals are interdependent, it means they have a basic need for the other, and helps explain why power is a component in every act of human relating. As a result of this dependency, I can't do what I want, because I am dependent on another person or persons, but neither can they. This is what creates the power relations. The division of power is usually unequal – therefore, the more I need you than you need me, the greater the power you hold.

Elias (2007, p. 75) claimed that power is everywhere, thereby refuting the notion that we could all live equally, in harmony:

Power is a relationship. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another. It is structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships ... whether power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is a functional interdependence between people.

Elias's theory rests on two pillars: symbol theory and figuration, focusing on interdependency. Interdependency underlies every occurrence, as everything is interconnected so that one thing affects another. Describing several dichotomies – internal and external, nature and nurture, mind and body – Elias demonstrated how they are not in conflict with each other, but rather interdependent. The philosophical dimension of his theory – expressed in symbol theory, which connects thought, speech, and language – is an outcome of the interdependency of all things. What can be said, thought, and known is but a function of the power relations between individuals and between groups.

'Power, [as] an aspect of figuration, does not exist outside individuals, but merely results from the interdependence between individuals' (Elias and Scotson,

1994, p. 172). These interdependencies are figuratively compared to elastic bands, while figuration – a notion that describes the interconnectedness of human existence – allows one to rise above the dichotomy of the individual versus the group (Dalal, 1998, p. 88). Through these human interdependencies and interconnectedness, both Elias and Stacey connect power to the notions of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, and identity:

Power, then, refers to usually fluid patterns of perceived need and is expressed as figurations of relationships. These figurations are social patterns of grouping in which some are included and others excluded, and it is in being included in this group and excluded from that group that we acquire identity. (Stacey, 2012, p. 29)

Looking at the HR-Tech acquisition, the dominant discourse would focus on the acquiring company as the party with the power – the party that would dictate how best to complete the acquisition. The narrative and organisational reality, however, prove otherwise: in reality, power was continually shifting from one player to another. This sits well with the connection suggested by Elias between the theory of power relations and game theory (Dalal, 1998). In chess, claimed Elias, the two players are interdependent, each serving the other. One cannot understand the moves made by one player without knowing the moves of the other. Similarly, power is relevant in any relationship between people. Society, on the other hand, though built of individuals, is ultimately ‘beyond individuals’.

Games are not limited to chess. There are different kinds of game, different levels of power relations, and different degrees of interdependence. In a game of chess or tennis, when one player is clearly more powerful than the other, s/he has more control over the game’s structure and over the way it progresses. But if we take, for example, two players of similar ability, each will have less ability to control the game or manipulate the other player, and the result will be ‘a game process which neither of them has planned’ (Elias, 1978, p. 82). Social processes unfold in a similar manner: as the number of participating players increases, so the ability to control them and the results decreases.

Prevalent approaches relate to power as the ability of powerful players to realise their desire at the expense of the desires of weaker individuals, and their opportunity to force the latter to do things they do not necessarily want to do.

Foucault dismissed the notion that power could be possessed by a group of people and that it served mainly as a form of oppression and limitation (Mills, 2003). As opposed to Marxist theories that focus only on a unidirectional application of power – from the higher echelons to the lower ones – Foucault focused on the relations from the bottom of the pyramid upwards. His power model explored how power relations permeate all social connections. My narrative supports Foucault’s approach, as the power relations – and the resistance to power exerted – were forces that ultimately created two new organisations. Additionally, the narrative demonstrates that no single person possessed the power. A potential interpretation is that there were no oppressors and oppressed in this story; only a situation of continuous flux. Whatever the interpretation, however, it was clearly not possible to identify who was controlling and who was controlled. As Foucault would see it, power was unstable throughout these circumstances – a factor that could be disputed or undermined at any moment. My strength in this incidence derived from two assets that I held: my ability to transfer my employees and the clients to a new company, and my expertise. These were what made the acquisition of RJH so attractive. That I refused to transfer to the new company was itself a powerful statement in the national market, as it informally conveyed my unflattering assessment of HR-Tech’s professional level. The pendulum of power oscillated throughout RJH’s sale process.

Foucault discussed power as a strategy more than a strength – an element that is continuously executed rather than being attained. Rather than a relationship between an oppressor and an oppressed, Foucault described power as a chain, a relationship that is distributed in society. He saw it as potentially positive or negative – or both at the same time, for different groups: not as a power that restricts and suppresses, but as a productive factor that can create forms of behaviour and events.

Hannah Arendt (1958) also discussed the connection between power, belonging, and identity. She, too, regarded power as a dynamic element that comes and goes. She mentioned that the word power in Greek translates into ‘dynamics’ – that is, potential power – and argued that it distinguished between meaningless and significant human existence. Arendt translated power into the authorisation of the many, which also describes what is done publicly. Authority, she proposed, always comes from the multitudes at the bottom of the pyramid, whose authority is the

human capacity to act in coordination. When individuals act in the public domain, they are authorised by the people to act on their behalf. When a group ceases to exist, its power disappears as well. While Foucault claimed that power is assimilated *a priori* into social relations, and that it is an entity without territory – free of boundaries and found in every product at any given moment – Arendt directed her attention to the manifestation of power in the public domain, which is dependent on the existence of a human group.

Power is a collective quality of the group, and continues to exist only for as long as the group stays together; it cannot be stored and ‘kept for a rainy day’. It is only realised when words and actions are not separated – when words are not empty, but a call to action; when words are not used to conceal intentions, but rather to expose realities; when words are not used to desecrate and destroy, but to build relationships and to create new realities. It emerges among people when they do something together, and disappears once they disperse. The public sphere is a potential space for appearance. At any given moment, a group of people acting in unison can establish power through their deeds or words, a space in which the common interest and the individuals that take part in it appear. Both will disappear when the shared act is completed. The space of appearance and power exist only when realised in an event that can take place wherever a joint interest and human cooperation converge. In both, realisation is unpredictable and uncontrollable (Zertal and Zuckermann, 2004).

Arendt reinforced my sense that power relations in an acquisition process are power relations between groups, each with different interests and goals. My power in different stages of the process derived from the group on whose behalf I acted and to which I belonged. When examining my resistance to transfer to the new company through the perspective of the public domain, I realise that had I joined the new company, my group would have disappeared, and my power would have disappeared with it. The identity of the group as a group connects not only with the concepts of belonging and power relations, but also to those of ideology and values – which were undoubtedly very meaningful in terms of how I perceived the events that transpired and the way I interpreted each participant’s actions. Emotionally, it was the difference in values that led to my unequivocal refusal to belong to the new company and decision to exclude myself from it.

On a professional level, the central area of my work in recent years (which is also the area in which RJH specialised: talent management) is considered elitist because it involves senior executives and is mostly relevant to global organisations. I felt as though I was leading a professional ideology through which, along with my team at RJH, we defined who was similar to us and who was different, who was professional and who was not. Judgment may drive ideology, decreeing what is good, and what is bad; who is included, and who is excluded; who holds the more senior positions; and so forth. There are, of course, different ways to define ideology. For example, 'Ideology is a certain way of viewing the world, a way that is defined by the more powerful' (Eagleton, cited by Dalal, 1998, p. 116). Patterns of inclusion and exclusion preserve the powerful status of the senior and powerful (Stacey, 2012, p. 29). Ideology in organisations remains in the domain of political discussions, and is generally disconnected from the psychoanalysis of groups. Notwithstanding, according to Elias, ideology should be regarded as exerting an influence as powerful as the unconscious mind.

Elias and Scotson (1994) describe ideology as a weapon. As such, a relevant aspect of ideology is the construction of binary oppositions, the most fundamental of which is 'us' and 'them'. Which particular binary oppositions will come to the fore, and what forms they will take, depends on the function they serve. New ideologies are always invisible to the conscious mind, driving and determining behaviour in invisible ways. 'Ideology is a means of preserving the current social order by making it seem natural, unquestionable, by convincing all the participants that it is so' (Dalal, 1998, p. 116). Furthermore:

Ideology helps keep people in their place by making it appear that the places that they inhabit are the natural ones. In other words, by making it appear that the more powerful belong there, and the less powerful belong elsewhere. (ibid, p. 118).

I found it interesting to see to what extent my attraction to a set of values like those I was raised with, and which I practised – my professional ideology – was a decisive factor in determining when I felt included and when excluded, and when I included or excluded others. Looking back, I understand that had I analysed events based on business considerations, much of what transpired – and the actions that I considered reprehensible because they broke up my 'family' – seems justified (as other

players clearly felt at the time). I can even acknowledge that these actions do not necessarily contradict my 'family values' criteria – albeit resulting in a different type of 'family', underpinned by assumptions and experiences that differ from those that shape my own definition of a family.

Managing the dynamics of organisational processes requires an in-depth understanding of changes in the motivation to belong, and of the dynamics of people joining and leaving organisations. In discussing the motivation to belong to organisations or groups, the scholarly discourse predominantly focuses on individual and personal aspects. The underpinning theories do not thoroughly explain the change that has taken place in recent years in the way people experience a sense of organisational belonging, and the frequency with which they join or leave organisations. If the motivation to belong is predominantly related to individuality and personality, then how do we explain the change that characterises an entire generation, like the 'Y generation', in managing their career and motivation sources? The complex responsiveness theory may offer a resolution. Advocates of this approach disagree with the distinction made between *choice* (which is influenced by personal motivation) and *motivation* (which arises from social processes and experience). For them, what merits attention is how different primary anchors develop within individuals, whether this is the result of social interaction and experience, and how these personal motivations take shape, which would vary according to circumstances.

My professional work supports executives and organisations that are preoccupied with the questions of belonging, and seek ways to cope with the changing patterns in such dynamics. I bring into my work with organisations my own understanding of what it means to belong and the connection between belonging and family. In the case of executives, my work aims to help them identify when they feel a sense of belonging and determine what needs to happen in the organisation to create this feeling. In the case of organisations, my work focuses on determining which strategy would best help them handle the big change that is taking place today in processes that make employees and executives feel, or not feel, a sense of belonging. Inspiring a sense of belonging among employees may be particularly important given that not doing so risks increasing turnover rates, the implications of which may be significant with respect to senior executives and talent.

To summarise, in this project I offer the preliminary understanding of belonging as a much broader phenomenon – one that encompasses power relations, ideologies, values, and formation of identity as these unfold in groups rather than in individuals. Based on theories suggested by the complex responsive process school of thought, I question our ability to plan and predict how interactions will unfold and how their outcomes might manifest. I thus bring a different perspective to the question of employees' current sense of organisational belonging and the role of talent management processes as political processes that rest on power relations and have different levels of belonging at their core.

Project 3: Power relations and knowing – their effect on talent management processes in organisations

Introduction

The narrative presented in Project 3 concerns a partnership I formed with my colleague, the senior consultant Professor Gary Davidson, for the purpose of submitting a proposal to a large-scale tender of talent management services issued by a leading strategic organisation. The narrative, which focuses on a conflict that arose as we prepared the offer, demonstrates the complexity of the power relations between us, which characterised our collaboration throughout the years on projects involving similar services.

My choice to focus on this event in Project 3 is a result of the strong links that emerged in my previous work between belonging and power relations in organisational contexts. Power relations are strongly tied to organisational decisions related to inclusion and exclusion of personnel, which in turn affect employees' sense of belonging. Dynamics of power relations drive processes of organisational inclusion and exclusion, so that all three concepts – inclusion–exclusion, belonging, and power relations – are inextricably linked and evolve over time. All three are key dimensions of talent management, my area of expertise. Talent management is an organisational process that informs many other practices that take place in the organisational environment – struggles due to changes in the power structure, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, certainty and uncertainty, belonging and not belonging, and all the various formal and informal processes that serve as the defining foundation of an organisation's identity and activities. Add to this the sensitive nature of talent management processes, their strong connections to political intra-organisational processes, and their far-reaching implications for the futures of individuals, and the result is that talent management is one of the most powerful processes taking place within organisations, in terms of how people working there relate to each other. Clearly, the topic of belonging (exclusion and inclusion) is an important outcome of the talent management process, while talent management decisions are strongly driven by power relations in an organisation.

In writing my DMan narrative, as I probed into the power relations between Gary and myself, hoping to discover what caused the ever-repeating patterns between

us, I realised that there was a connection between our own power relations and our interventions in the organisational dynamics of power relations, which is our field of expertise. In other words, the dynamics between the two of us can be regarded as analogous to the talent management processes in which we were involved as expert consultants. I found myself wondering whether power relation dynamics may in fact be an integral part of talent management.

Furthermore, I realised that despite high costs (financial and otherwise, as I shall explain), I repeatedly involved Gary in my projects due to my perceived dependency on his position as a knowledgeable authority. *Knowing* plays a critical role in talent management from two perspectives. Firstly, talent management is based on the assumption that an objective external expert knows which individuals can be considered talent and which cannot. Secondly, talent management is informed by the belief that a formula can be used to reliably identify and predict potential talent, and that managers or consultants know how to realise this identified potential.

To gain greater insight into the dynamics of power relations and knowing, analysis of the narrative in Project 3 is based on approaches to power relations proposed by various theoreticians in diverse academic fields, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, and political science. In preparing the literature review, I gained new insights into the dynamics of key motivators in the relationship between Gary and myself, and the significant role that power relations play in organisational processes in general – as well as in talent management processes in particular, as I explain in detail below. This analysis of power relations and the concept of knowing in the context of talent management will be further elaborated in Project 4, in which I will take an in-depth look at talent management as an organisational process.

The narrative

It was a day like any other. I was sitting in my office when I received an unexpected phone call. Susan, a partner in a major global accounting firm, PPW, was on the line. She introduced herself, and proceeded to explain her reason for contacting me: the national bank had issued a tender of a large-scale project of talent management services, to be delivered over a three-year period. She added that her firm was very interested in it for strategic reasons. However, PPW could only submit a joint bid with

a company specialising in talent management, which would provide the expertise and experience required to comply with the tender requirements. Susan then stated that my firm had been recommended to PPW as a leading company in its field, and one of the few national companies that could meet the specifications. I felt an adrenaline rush in response to both her compliment and her offer. Susan ended the call by advising me that there was not much time for me to make a decision, as the tender deadline was imminent. I answered that I would gladly bid with PPW, adding immediately that it was important for them to know that I cooperated with Gary Davidson, a professor of business administration and an expert in talent management who had even authored a book on the subject.

Professor Gary Davidson

Gary was a 'brand': a male, a professor, a man of the world, many years older and more experienced than me, with a published book on talent management; he worked as a lecturer in business administration at a leading academic institute. He had a very distinguished appearance, was always impeccably dressed, and drove a luxury car. While not everyone in our field knew him after his many years abroad, those who did recognised him as one of the most reputable and highly priced international consultants in the field of talent management.

Our business cooperation began about five years after his return from working abroad. While at the time he had no local professional connections, I had a broad network of professional contacts in the market and had already completed several large talent management projects. I invited Gary to join me in the project I executed for MedSci, a large biopharmaceutical company. Gary had all the outward characteristics that seem to justify much higher fees than I would normally charge (which were still among the highest in the market). I never voiced an objection to this, although we did the exact same jobs. This resulted in a dynamic of imbalance; yet we continued to cooperate, as we were interdependent. The imbalance of power was apparent not only in Gary's outward appearance and academic status, but also in our interactions at work.

TLT

I received Susan's call about six years after founding my company, TLT. At the time, I had six young consultants on my payroll, with an average experience of three years each, who were mainly responsible for back-office activities involving project management and research. Most of the work involving direct contact with the clients – such as facilitating assessment and development programmes – was carried out by me, with the assistance of eight senior freelance consultants carrying TLT business cards; their scope of work for TLT was significant. They were very engaged with the company on a professional level and also took part in our social events and activities. Throughout the years, business was profitable and expanding. Our clients were among the largest organisations in the country, with employees in the thousands. We mainly worked with their senior management teams.

TLT's field of expertise is talent management processes dealing with an organisation's ability to manage their talent resources strategically, derive insights and make decisions concerning recruitment processes, promotion of employees and executives, and their professional development.

Gary was one of the senior freelance consultants with whom I worked intensively, but his relationship with my firm was completely different from that of other consultants. He always kept his distance from the other consultants in the office and set very clear boundaries between social and professional arenas; I abided by his 'rules of disengagement'. I typically chose Gary for my more prestigious, complex, and politically sensitive projects. These were where I felt I needed his involvement; I felt that the connection with him gave me power. Preferring Gary over the other consultants with whom I worked on a regular basis could have been interpreted as a way of saying that they were not good enough, and they certainly seemed to regard such automatic assignments on my part as a betrayal of sorts; after all, this meant less work for them. Despite the disappointments I had suffered throughout my years of work with Gary, I automatically chose him again for the bank tender that Susan had mentioned. Why did I always do this? It was as though I felt that I was not good enough for high-level projects, was not worthy or powerful enough on my own. Or perhaps it was because I realised that the bank tender involved a great deal of

organisational politics vis-à-vis the workers' union – issues that I avoided handling and at which Gary was very good. I did not want to submit the bid on my own.

Susan then advised me that we needed to prepare the sections of the bid that dealt with content, making sure to meet all the technical and administrative requirements of the tender. We agreed that we would work in parallel for several days, including over the weekend, to meet the deadline. I then placed a call to Gary, giving him all the details of my phone call with Susan. He sounded very reserved. I was surprised to hear that he was familiar with the tender and had, in fact, already met with executives at the bank when they first started thinking about implementing talent management processes in the organisation. I asked him if he wanted to join us in preparing the proposal. As soon as I spoke, I regretted involving him: I could already feel myself adapting to his way of doing things, meeting his demands, walking on eggshells to keep him (and PPW) happy. Why I continued to invite Gary to take part in my projects time and again, despite the fact that I often ended up wishing I had not, is a question I address in the next section ('Analysis of the narrative'). The answer lies in the power relations between us, my need to belong, and the entities to which I wish to belong.

I met with Gary the following day. He claimed not to understand why a firm like PPW would want to submit a joint bid with my company. I answered that such a large company, by international standards, must surely know what it was doing – adding that this tender interested me and I viewed it as an excellent opportunity to cooperate with PPW. This tender had the potential to benefit us both – perhaps especially me, since Gary was already a widely known and respected consultant. Gary contemplated whether he would join us, and finally answered that he would be happy to do so, because 'actually, we really enjoy working together'. However, he clarified that even at this early stage he had already worked out that he should receive the largest share of the money: that I would get about a third, and he did not think PPW would get much – perhaps a small percentage of the payment. I did not argue. In a later call, Gary and I decided to prepare our part of the proposal together and began working on it. The projects that were suitable for inclusion as proof of past experience were, in fact, projects that we had executed together.

As usual, I was the point of contact for the client-partner – PPW, in this case – and my office did all the work based on the proposal structure that Gary and I had devised together. I was used to this working arrangement – a pattern that had become entrenched in our collaboration: I took care of the business relationships and made sure things were on course, while Gary would mainly come into the office for a limited time to develop ideas together, and I would take it from there. As he once said to me, ‘I am the icing on the cake’.

The following morning, after we had started working, I received another call from Susan. She was in Europe at a partners’ meeting, where an ethical problem had arisen that could eliminate them from the tender. The fact that PPW decided not to participate further highlighted the sensitivity and politics involved in the assimilation of talent management processes at the bank and in evaluating senior executives in the organisation. I immediately phoned Gary and updated him on my conversation with Susan. While my employees and I were busy working on the proposal, Gary was walking around one of the colourful markets of the city. He said that while waiting to hear from PPW, we should continue as planned in the meantime. The next day, he left for a weekend in London; he often went away like this, despite an imminent urgent deadline.

Several hours later, Susan phoned me again to say that they had decided not to participate in the tender. I phoned Gary again, updated him, and we agreed that upon his return from London we would meet and finish preparing our bid. He had already mentioned in a previous conversation that we needed to talk about how the money would be distributed among us – a conversation that I tried my best to postpone for as long as possible. As the bank was interested in one senior consultant and two junior ones, he assumed that he would be doing a large share of the work and that the money would therefore be divided among us accordingly. To a certain extent, I was rather glad that PPW had decided to pull out, as I was anxious that PPW and Gary might not find a common language and that this would require me to mediate in their conflict.

I made intense preparations for the concentrated effort required to finalise the bid over the weekend, asking two consultants on my team to come into the office as well. I was immensely proud to think that TLT had such a good reputation that PPW

had approached us for the bid, and gratified to think that there were hardly any other companies in the market that were capable of meeting all of the professional criteria defined by the bank in the tender specifications. I emailed Gary some of the material that we had prepared. The fact that he immediately responded and commented on what we had already written was a clear sign, from my perspective, that he was indeed interested in the project and intended to take part in it. In one of his emails he wrote:

This is excellent. Naturally, we need to insert fictitious names into MedSci's documents, so that the executives we mentioned would not be identifiable. Additionally, in my opinion we need to include a personal report, not with so many words. Also, we need a general explanation page that describes our methodology.

I got up early on Sunday, and automatically, as I do every morning, checked my emails before even drinking my first cup of coffee. I saw that I had received a new email from Gary. I opened it, and read:

I reread the bank tender and it doesn't seem logical to me that we will submit a bid together. They specifically ask for a senior consultant that would sit in their offices two days a week, to build the structure of the process and to perform assessments. So apart from a bit of administrative work, I don't see how our cooperation could be expressed here. Let's talk tomorrow.

I read and reread the email again and again and could not believe my eyes. I felt as though someone had punched me hard in the stomach. A punch that I knew well from previous interactions; and it was now happening again. The same style: the cold tone without even a single personal word, no words that would reflect a sense of belonging, of involvement, not even 'Tali' at the beginning or 'Gary' at the end.

I felt helpless, speechless, overwhelmed with anger; I had no idea how to respond to this abuse. Why had I fallen again into this trap of asking him to join me? Why did I let him treat me this way, never finding the strength to retaliate? Why didn't a red warning light go off in my head when I told him about the tender with such enthusiasm, and he said he had already heard about it? Why had he not mentioned it to me before?

The immediate reaction of everyone around me who heard the story was that I should submit the bid independently. After all, any proposal that he might submit alone could only include projects that we had executed together, and these were all projects I had brought to him. Not for one moment did I consider submitting a bid on

my own: I could not imagine a situation where we would compete with each other, presenting the same projects to the tender committee. How would I have been able to explain this to others?

Gary, on the other hand, took all the material that we had prepared together and submitted his bid without even discussing this with me beforehand. I was left filled with anger, insulted – yet curiously, I was also riddled with a kind of guilt: I was embarrassed to admit to my former partners at PPW what had transpired, and ashamed to face my team. I felt that they thought in their hearts that we were perhaps not good enough to submit a bid, but were too loyal and considerate to bring this up.

I did not prevent Gary from bidding; nor did I stop him using the materials prepared by myself with my own team, and that we had developed together. I did not even charge him for all the work that my company had invested in the preparation of the proposal. I felt incapable of entering into direct conflict with him. A few days later – days in which I was still consumed by anger and tried to figure out how I would move past this – Gary and I held a routine meeting to discuss our client, MedSci. Gary walked in just as he always did, without a hint of acknowledgement that anything out of the ordinary had happened. We sat down, and with my heart beating intensely in my chest, I said: ‘Gary, we need to talk about what happened’.

Gary said: ‘Go ahead’.

I could not get a word out of my mouth, and immediately burst into tears. The insult was so great. I told him that I could not find words to describe my stupefaction at what he had done and the way he had done it. And the same thing that had happened in similar conversations in the past, happened again: he said that he was deeply sorry, but did not think that the tender was suitable for both of us and it was not his intention to insult me. Profuse apologies followed. The fact that he belittled this painful incident with a superficial apology only made things worse, along with my realisation that he had no idea why I was so upset. It was many months before I dared to ask whether Gary had been awarded the tender (he had not). Moreover, in the meantime I had offered him another project – albeit under entirely different terms, with much more caution. But... it was as though nothing had happened: I was again the one to bring the project, to manage the business relationship with the client, while

Gary maintained his respectable position as the 'prima donna'. I felt angry and hurt, and was unable to process the humiliation.

I could not understand why – based on our joint history, and having considerably minimised the gap between us in terms of professional expertise and experience after leading my own company for five years – the pattern of our interaction was unchanged. It was though I had not learned a thing. Early on, I did not see the heavy price that I would pay for engaging in this business relationship. Today, after repeatedly reliving the same pattern with him, I can say that some degree of change has occurred. In the last project on which we worked together, I invited him as my subcontractor, not a partner, and under terms and conditions that I had clearly defined and which differed from the results I experienced with him in the past. Subsequently, however, I refrained from cooperating with Gary altogether. From the person who looked for the wings of another to shelter me, I grew my own wings, and even took other consultants under my wings.

Analysis of the narrative

A key theme that emerges in the narrative (and an issue that organisations frequently address) is the relational hierarchy that developed between myself, my partners, and the other relevant parties in the events described. This relational hierarchy determined how the role of each actor involved was shaped and defined, and how events were presented to my client or affected my branding and marketing efforts with them as well as any future clients.

The narrative begins with an invitation I received from PPW, a company whose reputation far exceeded my own (especially in the international arena), regarding a potential collaboration. The very fact that this company approached me represented a stage in my process of belonging – that is, acceptance and recognition of my brand's value in the marketplace. As in the practice of talent management, the branding of an individual as belonging to an 'elite group of talent' automatically relegates others to lower status. I nevertheless chose to diminish this recognition and exchange it in favour of Gary's 'brand' in my selling efforts. I presented my connection to him, a world-renowned professor, as a selling point and an advantage, as a strength that I could bring with me to the collaboration on the tender. Indeed, it is possible that

PPW's offer partly acknowledged the prestigious projects I had collaborated with Gary on in the past.

I have described Gary as the one who sets the rules and holds the power to decide whether or not I would submit the tender (if he is interested in working on the project together), and which parts of the project I would execute (after making his own choice first), and for what fee (whatever leftovers Gary would leave me). Ultimately, I felt he held the power to submit the bid on his own as though it were all his work. I cooperated, agreed to all the terms he stipulated, and did everything I could to avoid a conflict – all the while fully believing that this was the price I had to pay for the privilege and prestige that I would gain by his participation in the tender.

The process of working on the tender raised many questions about how the dynamic of our relationship evolved yet continued to replicate itself. Our work process here represented patterns that have recurred throughout the projects we have executed together: each of us has had a clear role, and each of us has perpetuated the other's role. Furthermore, my fear of conflict and desire to avoid it at all costs also sustained the deferential role I assumed in this relationship: I consciously preferred to capitulate rather than confront him or compete against him.

Similar to what I discovered in the course of my practice as a consultant in talent management, secondary themes also emerge from this event: broader relationships create complexity that affects and is affected by the power relations of the individuals involved in talent management decisions. Applying this notion to the events discussed here, these would be my relations with the different clients whom I introduced to Gary, and specifically with PPW, as well as with our colleagues and other consultants working for my company.

Power relations

One of the themes to have emerged from the narrative is power relations. Below, I explore this theme from the perspective of different theoretical approaches – ranging from the most traditional, to the more recent approach of complex responsive processes. The dominant discourse regards the organisation as a system, and places great emphasis on the power of the individual players operating in it. In contrast, the complex responsive process approach (Griffin, 2002; Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2001,

2011, 2012; Stacey and Griffin, 2005), based on social processes theories (e.g., Elias 1970, 2000; Elias and Scotson, 1994), takes a reciprocal view of power relations, placing the influence of the social context before the needs of the individual. Based on these approaches, I focus on the themes that appear to be most significant in my understanding of both the incident with Gary and organisational processes involving power relations. Finally, I examine the role that power plays in talent management processes, which relates to the research question of my DMan thesis.

Traditional theories, as proposed by Weber (as explained in Katz, 2012) and Pfeffer (1982), are grounded in modernist thought. Initially developed by Kant, they are anchored in the natural sciences and in the assumption that all phenomena can be measured in terms of causes, results, and validation. To a significant extent, the modernist approach to organisations is derived from principles defined by Weber, Taylor, and Morgan (discussed in Katz, 2012), who perceived organisations as machines, hierarchical systems with clearly defined roles and expertise, as well as distinct differences in status as some positions hold more power and others less. This approach reifies power as a 'something' that is somehow 'held', and raises the obvious questions: How does one initially attain power? And how is power then preserved? The modernist approach assumes that the interactions and relations formed within organisations are based on a system of social codes that someone had the power to define. Placing its emphasis on control and meticulously planned business results, it takes no account of complex processes that cannot be predicted.

This approach is critiqued by the complex responsive process school of thought, which proposes an alternative understanding of organisational processes – one that includes politics and power relations as factors that are both enabling and constraining at the same time. Although Stacey (2011) suggests thinking about the patterns of interaction that occur in organisations either as systems or as responsive processes, he also states that 'we can think of these as different ontological levels or simply as different degrees of detail being examined' (Stacey, 2011, p. 31).

The modernist and complex responsive process approaches comprise two almost diametrically opposing perspectives by which we may understand power relations in organisations, each leading to different conclusions regarding the phenomenon. When exploring the theme of power relations on the basis of both of

these approaches, it is clear that power relations are closely related to many organisational variables and processes, such as *status, organisational culture, decision-making, conflict, interdependencies*, themes of *exclusion–inclusion, knowing*, and *talent management*, each of which interacts with organisational power relations in a different way. I will explore the views of the various theoreticians advocating each of these approaches, and try to explain the events described in the narrative from their perspective, as well as the connection between what arises from the narrative and organisational processes in general. Each of the theories illuminates the connections between organisational variables and power relations in a different way, and ultimately helps to explain how the narrative represents a microcosm of power relations in talent management processes. Therefore, based on the literature, I review how various scholars have interpreted the connections between power relations and each of these topics. Applying these views to the narrative and to organisational processes as a whole, as we shall see, offers different interpretations of the connections between each of these topics and power relations.

Power and status

One of the most visible and common manifestations of power in organisations is the preoccupation with status symbols. This was also the most obvious, seemingly objective explanation that I initially found for the division of roles between Gary and myself, and for the benefits that I had gained from our joint work despite its cost – as described in the narrative. However, I later began to question the objectivity of status symbols, since this explanation was anchored in the traditional view of organisations. For example, according to Pfeffer (1982) or Taylor (1992), who regard organisations as systems, Gary had more power in our relationship, due to his experience and academic status as a professor – power that was an exogenous factor in our relationship and independent of time. Gary also benefited from socially accepted external symbols associated with his standing and status – like an expensive car, and the title of professor. I deferred to Gary's higher-status power, even believing that the gap between us was justified, and desired very much to be associated with these status symbols through him – to gain power through this association.

Associating external status symbols with power and authority is a phenomenon we see in many organisations. A small – yet symbolic – example was that although I had been working with MedSci long before he joined me, and I was the project manager (Gary was in fact working for me), when we arrived at the company's headquarters he was always given immediate access to the parking lot inside the compound, without even showing an ID card, while I always had to deposit my ID card and was then directed to the remote parking area. This was partly my own doing: I perpetuated the perception of Gary as responsible for the professional aspects of our work, while I handled the administrative aspects. Gary happily accepted this perception, which our clients then also adopted. This made it extremely difficult for me later to change this impression and position myself as a professional in my own right.

Pfeffer (1981) represents the traditional approach to power relations, explaining them through a shared understanding of clearly visible, objective status symbols, and arguing that a person's resources in the organisation define his or her effective power within it. From my own experience in organisations, however, this perspective provides an incomplete understanding of power relations in organisations by failing to take account of organisational politics, key interpersonal interfaces, and the organisation's situation and the history of relationships within it.

Bourdieu (1990, 1992) also discussed power relations from the perspective of status, but viewed through the lens of domination and political power. In my view, Bourdieu's explanation is less simplistic, since it focuses not on visible manifestations of status symbols or their objective interpretations, but on the social processes that give them meaning. Through his study of inequality and segregation of status in social environments, he attempted to understand social processes that were beyond the 'objective illusion', as he phrased it, which endows power according to objective assets (academic ranking, gender, etc.). He examined power ascribed on the basis of stereotypes and clichés as well as economic, cultural, and intellectual wealth. Intellectual wealth (knowledge and specialist expertise) is what Gary and I offered our clients within the framework of our talent management consulting services. While I relied on Gary's scholarly status, Bourdieu argued that academic prestige does not necessarily arise from research or intellectual accomplishments. He proposed that it is gained by individuals who consciously or unconsciously negotiate the patronage

system and fully exploit all the privileges to which they are entitled by this system, or by their cultural capital. I can now see in the narrative, and through our shared working history, that Gary knew how to use his patronage to his advantage, and operated from the habitus associated with his social milieu, amplifying the distinction between us.

Bourdieu 1990 explained habitus as a system of schemes of action, reception and evaluation that are assimilated in the socialisation process in which our interests are grounded and from which our power relations are driven. He thus considered habitus as one of the sources of our interests, which are expressed in power relations in social settings, claiming that it produces distinctions between social status groups by creating groups that have shared tendencies with respect to status. In the narrative and in organisations in general, status symbols comprise a part of the organisational language, whether transparent or not. Theories grounded in the concept of the organisation as a system attribute power based on considerations of place in the hierarchy, control of resources, status symbols, and so on – as if these have clear boundaries and objective dimensions. Bourdieu calls into question this objectivity of status in organisations; he does not refer to status symbols *per se*, but rather to the social processes taking place behind the scenes.

Based on the narrative, there are clearly elements of power and status that are static, such as academic degrees or external appearances, and the social meaning attributed to such elements is indisputable. However, this limited view of power and status fails to explain how the dynamics of our power relations shift over time as a function of changes in our mutual interdependence and our relationship with our client, for example.

Mowles (2011) proposes that authority is transmitted through the symbolism of language. He builds his understanding of leadership and authority on Bourdieu's ideas and concepts concerning the symbolic language that leaders use to gain influence. 'The truth of a promise or a prognosis depends not only on the truthfulness but also on the authority of the person who utters it – that is, on his capacity to make people believe in his truthfulness and his authority' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 190). This explanation certainly portrays the situation as I see it: there is undoubtedly something in what Gary transmits, and in the words he uses, that makes one believe that what he

says is the absolute truth. In the incident described in the narrative, without being requested, I invited Gary to join me in submitting a proposal for the bank tender, and used his status symbols to promote my services. Notwithstanding, even when equipped with the views of Bourdieu and Mowles concerning the symbolic use of words, I believe that status as a representation of power fails to illuminate the true complexities of power relations.

Power and organisational culture

In this section, I attempt to analyse power relations with respect to their cultural context. My personal experience in organisations and my work in the area of talent management shine a light, among others, also on status symbols that are ascribed to talent; however, these are always translated in a cultural context. Status symbols that are attributed to talent in one organisation can be expressed entirely differently in another.

Schein is a leading researcher in the field of organisational culture. He articulated a traditional perception regarding the formation of power relations, which he assigned to cultural conceptions (Schein, 2010). He showed how power distribution and authority allocation within organisations are influenced by organisational culture. Every human group or organisation starts with founders or leaders 'who have preconceptions about how things should be run and, therefore, impose rules that initially determine how authority is to be obtained and how aggressive behaviour is to be managed' (Schein, 2010, p. 101). Schein demonstrated this idea through two very different organisations: the first, a pharmaceutical company – a hierarchical organisation in which formal rank, status, job description, seniority, loyalty, and compliance were of great value, and as a result formed the basis for a very formal system of power allocation. His second example was an electrical engineering company, a much more informal distribution of power in which ideas were welcomed from anyone in the organisation, and assessed on the basis of merit – a process involving values, personal abilities, openness, the right to participate, collaboration, and constructive criticism.

Schein pointed at organisational mission and task as a major means by which to distribute power. Power allocation, argued Schein, is a derivative of culture, and can

therefore vary among groups that differ in the dimension of 'power distance' (Schein, 2010, p. 151) – the degree to which people in a hierarchical situation perceive a greater or lesser ability to control each other's behaviour. For example, people perceive more inequality between superiors and subordinates in countries high in power distance than those low in power distance. Similarly, workers in organisations based on unskilled and semiskilled occupations demonstrate a greater power distance from management than those in organisations in which most employees serve in professional and managerial capacities (Schein, 2010, p. 151).

External status symbols – such as car type, or location and size of office – are clear manifestations of the organisational culture. Such symbols also influence how executives are evaluated by the organisation and remunerated. One would expect that the power relations in organisations heavily characterised by status symbols would reflect this: employees and executives would retain power and attribute power to others based on their perceived status, and follow the accepted codes.

Focusing on criteria that relate to power and its allocation, I recognise that the power relations between Gary and myself can, indeed, be explained to some degree from an organisational culture perspective. What codes and cultural assumptions do I bring with me into these power relations? Which does Gary bring with him? And what happens when these two cultures collide? As an example, given my propensity to develop a familial relationship with my clients as a fundamental value that guides me (and is indeed a cornerstone of my company's culture), the fact that Gary follows a value system based exclusively on business or financial considerations sets us on a collision course. However, to avoid the risk of losing Gary as the partner who handles issues with which I feel uncomfortable and incompetent, I learned to live with this conflict. Organisational culture, however, does not appear to be the core from which our power relations are derived, as it leaves the following questions unanswered: What is the impact on our power relations of the value systems that each of us brings to our work and, by extension, to our relationship and to our relationships with our clients? Moreover, which is the dominant culture that drives us to act? Is it our experience and habitus, as discussed by some researchers (e.g., Bourdieu, 1993; Elias, 2000), with which we enter the organisational context; or is it the organisational culture, as defined by Schein (2010), which has clear and specific boundaries?

Although many organisations seem to believe that talent is culture-dependent, from my experience over the years, I tend to see it as generic. My interpretation is supported by the fact that the tools we use in assessment processes are based on cross-cultural benchmarks that are applicable to multiple industries. Schein's theory (2010) on culture as a central organisational theme expands my understanding of the connection between status symbols and power relations in organisations. However, it does not sufficiently explain the power relations between Gary and myself as reflected in the different types of consulting we provided, the types of decision we had to make, and our understanding of our mutual responsibilities when intervening in talent management processes.

Power and decision-making

The connections so far described between power and status symbols, and between power and organisational culture, are based on organisational structure and one's place in the hierarchy – and on the reactions they generate; much less emphasis is placed on processes and relationships. Lukes (2005), a political and social theorist, looked at power from a much more relational perspective, focusing on decision-making processes – both overt and covert – where conflict is an underlying element. His perception of power was based on an assumption of mutuality in relationships – recognising the other parties' power and influence, as well as the group's. He proposed that power relations should be observed in three ways: decision-making power, 'non-decision'-making power, and ideological power. He directed attention to decision-making processes in which there is an overt conflict – when there is an alternative between several courses of action and a decision must be made, or when there is a non-decision. A non-decision is a 'decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker' (Lukes, 2005, p. 22).

What I find particularly interesting in what Lukes called 'the three-dimensional approach to power' is his focus on the ability to influence people's wishes and thoughts, rather than control their behaviour – even to the extent of persuading them to want things that are opposed to their own self-interest. This is achieved by shaping their reality so that they feel constrained to comply, with no explicit manifestation of

power, constraining 'the choices of others, coercing them or securing their compliance, by impeding them from living as their own nature and judgment dictate' (Lukes, 2005, p. 85). He thus suggested that power is most effective when least observable. Lukes assumed that within this process, one has ideological power – the option to make choices that reflect one's ideology and identity. Deliberating how domination is created in places where there is no active intervention, Lukes raised the question: What makes A's affecting B significant? Or, based on the three-dimensional approach to power, who has the power to create the reality that influences others?

Lukes, like proponents of the complex responsive process approach (e.g., Stacey, 2012), critiqued the view of power as an inherent capacity, facility, or ability, describing it instead as an ongoing and shifting relationship. His starting-point was the observation of individuals and behaviourist processes that take place between individuals or between groups. Although Lukes's view is closer to an approach that includes social elements and regards power as relational, his focus remained on observable processes, and his analysis centred mainly on individuals or groups of individuals.⁶ Reflecting on the narrative, I ask myself: What means did Gary use to influence and dominate me, make me willing to do almost anything in order to benefit from being associated with him? Can his influence on me be explained through the perspective of Lukes's concept of power as domination? What comes across very clearly in the narrative is that Gary's domination was the result of aggressive, overt power, and therefore Lukes's theory of the influence of covert power does not explain the situation in my relationship with Gary. However, I do find this theory relevant to my practice, talent management, and to my understanding of how decisions are made in organisations.

More complex views of power

I have by now examined the main theme of my dissertation – power relations in organisations, and how these are expressed in talent management – from the viewpoint of three theories. The first concerns status symbols and ownership of resources that produce a static imbalance between various players. The second underscores the language and symbols of organisational culture as understood within

⁶ Since writing this, I have developed a more nuanced understanding of his theory of power.

the very clear boundaries of the organisation itself. Finally, the third looks at influencing processes that take place without active intervention. These theories share a predominant emphasis on individuals (although some relate to social aspects of power relations) while regarding organisations as systems. According to these theories, power dynamics in organisations in general – and in the narrative in particular – should have remained static, unchanged; yet this is clearly not the case – as I eventually chose to break away from my collaborative relationship with Gary, thereby changing the power relations. Moreover, the fact that the pattern repeated itself with other clients, and is one that I have witnessed in many organisations, also demonstrates that the dynamic underlying my professional relationship with Gary is not a unique or isolated phenomenon. How, then, can it be explained? The complex responsive process approach provides a much more comprehensive explanation for my relationship with Gary, as well as for wider circles of power relations and processes taking place in organisations in general. Below, I describe the main elements of this approach and then discuss three additional connections that derive from this school of thought, which appear to be significant to the understanding of the narrative: conflict; inclusion and exclusion; interdependencies and knowledge.

Elias (1970, 2000; Elias and Scotson 1994), whose theories helped to inform the complex responsive process perspective, viewed the social arena as the key driving force of power relations and belonging in organisations. He looked at power in organisations from a significantly different perspective compared to traditional theories – seeing it not as an innate attribute or an ability that one has, but rather as something that arises and is continually renegotiated in every human relationship. In this dynamic and nonlinear process, he saw no place for questions such as: What comes first, the individual or society? or, Who is the character and what is the background? According to Elias, one cannot consider power relations as independent from external, social forces: ‘what we attempt to conceptualise as social forces are in fact forces exerted by people over one another and over themselves’ (Elias, 2007, p. 17). The difference between this view and that of Lukes (2005,) is that according to Elias, social forces are beyond the direct control of any individual or group.

A key concept in Elias’s observation of processes that continuously produce change and undergo change themselves is *figuration* – a notion that describes the

interconnectedness of human existence. Through this concept, Elias overcame the dichotomy of the social versus the individual contexts, using the analogy of elastic bands to describe the interdependency between individuals. For him, interdependencies characterising relationships involved cooperation and competition: in our ongoing efforts to cooperate and compete with one another, we are both forming and being formed. The outcome of this interdependency, then, is a system of *constraints* and *enablers* – key terms in the understanding of power relations, in Elias’s approach.

The theories on which the complex responsive process approach is based have helped to transform my understanding of power: I no longer see it as something that Gary holds with no reciprocity in our business relationship, but recognise its complexity and the situations in which power was transferred from him to me, and vice versa. The process itself developed and changed over the years that we worked together; therefore, its beginning and end are correspondingly before and after the main event that I have described in the narrative. Taking Elias’s view (1970), it would be impossible to ignore the historic accumulation of gestures and responses in much broader and more complex figurations, which have been perpetuated in the communication between us, as evident in the narrative.

Conflict and power relations

Elias (Elias, 1970; Elias and Scotson, 1994) identified a connection between power relations, on the one hand, and conflicts of interest – as well as conflicts of values – on the other. In this he was joined by others, such as Stacey, who pointed out that ‘in communicating with each other, human beings inevitably co-construct patterns of power relations and in the inevitable inequality and difference these power relations generate conflict’ (2012, p. 23).

The complex responsive process way of thinking reflects a change in the perception of conflict: rather than something destructive to be avoided, it is an inevitable aspect of human relations that can be negative, positive, or both, depending on the context. In contrast to approaches that promote the view that power is something held by someone, Elias regarded power as a functional relationship: ‘when one person (or group of persons) lacks something which another person or group has

the power to withhold, the latter has a function for the former ... people or groups that have functions for each other exercise constraint over each other' (Elias, 2007, p. 78). Thus, according to Elias, no one is completely powerless and power may still be imbalanced, but it is the situation that drives the power equilibrium. In his view, the more dominant the social influence and the interdependencies, and the more dominant the conflict, the stronger its dual role as both an enabling and a constraining force would be felt. It is important to emphasise that constraint does not equate with lack of influence or a state of powerlessness: 'power is another way of saying that humans are constrained by others – by people and things' (Dalal, 1998, p. 90). At the same, its enabling aspect typically presents new opportunities to involved actors.

Interdependencies and power relations

The complex responsive process school of thought focuses on understanding relations as interdependencies that continuously develop and change. Whereas traditional theories would have defined me as unilaterally dependent on Gary, with him holding power over me, the complex responsive process school of thought would examine our interaction through our interdependency, which continuously recreated our power relations. Each time a crisis occurred, something changed in our interdependency or in our dependencies in other interfaces of our work. The dynamic was one of changes in dependency, an adjustment to Elias's 'elastic bands' (Elias and Scotson, 1994).

Reflecting on our own 'elastic bands' of interdependencies, presumably Gary and I each gained more than either of us lost in this professional relationship. For myself, our professional connection was very appealing, as it served as a bridge to the international market. Equally important, the association with Gary allowed us both to present ourselves as having extensive (joint) experience, although mine was not as rich as his. Consequently, it helped me to attain very high professional standards – fees, work terms and conditions that I would not otherwise have dared dream about. For him, I was the door-opener to organisations; I brought the work in and had the platform upon which to manage large-scale, complex projects.

Inclusion–exclusion processes and power relations

An issue that adds depth to the narrative, and to our understanding of power relations in organisations, is the observation of power relations and the dynamic of entry and

exit. The entire narrative may be viewed as a series of entry and exit processes: the invitation by a major company to participate in the tender; my request of Gary to partner with me in the tender; my decision to exclude the other consultants, who therefore became irrelevant to the project; and finally, Gary's act of excluding me from the tender bid.

What was it that allowed me to bring Gary into the project, and what was it that ultimately enabled him to remove me from it? Elias (1970, 2000; Elias and Scotson 1994) devoted considerable attention to the processes that create or allow inclusion and exclusion, which he analysed through terms such as gossip, stigma, time, and history. The relationship between these concepts is demonstrated in the story of 'Winston Parva' – an account of tense relations between an established group and outsiders in a fictional local community, described by Elias and Scotson (1994) in their book *The Established and the Outsiders*. The story reinforces the observation of power relations as a dynamic process and demonstrates how unbalanced power relations were created, with no apparent functional cause. This is a deviation from the traditional theories mentioned earlier, which referred to visible processes, such as expressions of culture, status symbols, and decision-making. The story of Winston Parva, in contrast, represents a mechanism of taboo and gossip, stigmatisation, and monopolisation of power – processes that create a polarity of 'them' and 'us' – which supports the creation of groups not only in the community, but also within organisations. All of these forces manifest in the narrative – in my relationship with Gary; between Gary and the other consultants working for my company; and between Gary, myself, and PPW – the company that invited me to join it in the tender – and the prospective client.

In most organisations, the term 'politics' has a negative connotation. Elias and Scotson (1994), however, insist that politics, or power relations, are intrinsic to any group of individuals and thus warrant close attention. In their view, power relations are not the politicisation of events, but rather the impulse to depoliticise. In the story of Winston Parva, they attribute the differences between the groups' status and power (the established group and the newcomers) not to differences in their status, religion, colour, or other observable attributes, but rather to their different history in Winston Parva. Adopting this perspective, I feel compelled to explore the role of history in my

relationship with Gary. My responses, and Gary's too, were based on our history – on the status quo that became fixed in all the projects that we had conducted together over time, in which I typically perceived that he held more power than me. What did Gary do to maintain this disequilibrium, to ensure that he held more power?

Throughout the years that we worked together, every few months something would happen to demonstrate this imbalance and the strong interdependencies involved. It might have been a casual statement made by Gary, or an email from him complaining that our collaboration was not generating a high enough income for him. There were also instances where he concealed something from me – usually additional interfaces with the client organisation, aiming to differentiate us and our contributions, and which caused a trust crisis between us when revealed. Whenever I tried to push our relationship in a more egalitarian direction, he would push back, insisting that I was of lesser value and therefore held less power. This repeated pattern and our occasional crises preserved, and perhaps even reinforced, his power.

Elias and Scotson (1994) regard the passing of time as an important factor, so that events are always part of an ongoing process rather than an overall, one-off incident. Relating to an event as a process undermines explanations proposed by psychoanalysts that focus on the motives and internal characteristics of the group while also challenging the Marxist theory, in which power relations are built into the structure of the situation. While explaining that 'some of the power differentials are the outcome purely of the structure of the situation' (Dalal, 1998, p. 15), Elias and Scotson (1994) stress the importance of time and space in this process. This approach, as well as Stacey's (2012), perhaps best explains the power relations between the participants in my narrative, our interdependency and the elastic bands between us – each forming and being formed in the relationship.

Knowing and power relations

Based on the complex responsive process approach, which focuses on complex relations of interdependency, and on the connection with talent management, I attempt to understand what the interdependence between Gary and me is anchored in, and why a leading company like PPW would want to join forces with TLT, a small company. In the field of talent management, and in systems characterised by great

complexity and uncertainty, the value of having knowledge is growing. Bourdieu and Foucault both discussed the connection between knowledge, expertise, and power relations.

Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1993) viewed knowledge and expertise as a source of power, which seemed to strongly support the essence of the professional relationship and interdependencies in organisations. This view can also explain the nature of organisations' dependency on external consultants, and the power conferred upon those responsible for talent management within the organisation. This understanding of power relations as based on an interdependency that involves knowledge leads me to wonder why, over so many years, despite my considerable accumulation of knowledge and experience, and despite temporary situational fluctuations in the power relations between myself and Gary, we both still acted as though I was subordinate to him – as though my own expertise had not increased with time? Why did we always end up in the same place, following a pattern that I failed to break – 'selling' Gary as the professor who had the capabilities that I lacked, agreeing to a division of roles that was in his favour, and accepting that his fees would be higher than mine? Not once did I confront him on these issues or attempt to change the overall pattern. Yet this view of events stands in contrast with both Bourdieu's view of change (1990), as well as the complex responsive process way of thought that regards power as continually renegotiated in ongoing relations.

Bourdieu believed, as cited in Mowles's perspective on leadership, that 'a leader is constantly renegotiating their authority with those they lead; it is not a static given' (Mowles, 2011, p. 107). Like Elias, Bourdieu (1991) equated relationships to playing a game. He used the term 'fields of specialised production' to describe situations in which experts, when developing their field of expertise with others, have an interest to 'play the game' of their professionalism. The analogy of playing a game is highly relevant to the narrative because it represents interactions between people. Contrary to some orthodox conceptions of leadership, according to which leaders possess certain attributes, this analogy proposes dynamic processes between people, where all participants are continuously adapting themselves and their actions.

Bourdieu compared these interactions to a marketplace in which each participant attempts to maximise the value they gain from the interaction. In a

marketplace, the seller is dependent on the buyer. However, as opposed to linear relations, Bourdieu described a dynamic in which the powerful is the one who must convince the powerless. Mowles (2011, p. 108) summarised the implications of this on leaders and leadership: 'in establishing themselves, leaders speak into this discourse in a way that tries to establish their authority in processes of mutual recognition that need to be constantly renewed between leaders and those they invite to follow them'. The connection between power and knowledge helps explain the dynamics between myself and Gary: part of the game we played was manifested in the power relations between us as consultants interfacing with clients, in talent management processes – which, as explained earlier, are among the most sensitive, political, and aggressive processes that an organisation might experience in its lifetime.

Foucault (2001) claims that the mechanisms of power and their effectiveness largely derive from the impact witnessed on people of experts' claims to knowledge. Foucault's overall aim was to produce a *micro-physics of power* – 'thinking of power, as a capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their very actions, attitudes, discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (cited in Lukes, 2005, p. 89). Foucault connected the concept of knowledge with that of truth: truth, in his view, is 'a thing of this world' – meaning that truth exists or is given and recognised only in worldly forms through actual experiences and modes of verification. Truth is thus a serious force in our world, the presence and effects of which must be investigated in the history of our societies (Foucault, 2001, p. 18).

This concept of knowledge and truth resonates with me. In my consulting work of talent management, I have often been expected to eliminate ambiguity and present 'a single truth' – that is, a clear-cut assessment of specific executives' potential for success in the organisational hierarchy. One of the crises that accompanied the rise of postmodernism was the loss of clear and objective facts: the 'truth' gave way to more ambiguous interpretations and perspectives – to a reality that changes and is transient and unpredictable. These postmodern nuances introduce considerable uncertainty and complexity into the organisational discourse, which now demands an acknowledgement that organisational understanding derives from social structuring and patterns of discourse – some of which are influenced by powerful entities in an

attempt to manipulate perceptions of reality to suit their own agenda and preferences. Truth, in this view, is a process in which value is constantly attributed to new alternatives, destabilising the status quo. Uncertainty, however, holds power as a generator of movement that shapes concepts and produces solutions that are only temporary (Katz, 2012).

The need to meet client organisations' expectation of precise answers, which would determine the professional future of executives, helps to explain my fear of being left alone to bear this burden, and my perceived need for the interdependent relationship with Gary despite its drawbacks. Gary, from my viewpoint, was an anchor of knowledge who was prepared to give definitive and clear-cut answers – which I found very difficult to do on my own, as I was reluctant to offer such simplistic judgments. Yet, given client expectations, I was willing to pay the price of working with him. As I analyse the narrative, I realise that I myself am also an anchor of knowledge for the consultants on my team – although I hope that they do not pay the kind of price for it that I did.

The development of the concept of knowing – from something that is possessed by an individual, to a process of meaning dynamically created through independent yet interrelated engagement between individuals – casts new light on the narrative. My association with Gary enables me to provide the definite, unequivocal answers my clients expect, despite my innate difficulty in doing so, and it allows me to stay in my comfort zone (on a personal level, the need to belong often comes at the expense of confrontation). Perhaps even more importantly, at a professional level, I am still trying to answer the question that I have been deliberating for a long time, and which has intensified during my DMan studies: Can we ever really *know*? When we conduct assessment processes and reach the point at which we are expected to predict the future potential of executives, Gary always projects certainty, whereas I find myself questioning our ability to know anything so absolutely. I doubt our ability to know and predict when we cannot tell what the future holds. We are developing executives who will function in a future that is shaped by (and at the same time shapes) multiple variables. While I struggle to understand what in the environment will influence and shape the executive undergoing the evaluation, through our association Gary has shown me how to behave as though I actually know the answer.

Observing my relationship with Gary – as well as with others who were affected by the incident described above, including the consultants in my company and PPW, through other internal and external interfaces – from the angle of the complex responsive process way of thought has been a meaningful step in my new understanding of power relations and organisational processes of inclusion–exclusion. The analogy between power relations and interdependencies ('elastic bands'), and the constant changes taking place, has highlighted knowledge as the impetus for movement not only in my personal power relations, but also in any organisational process that involves politics, either overt or covert.

Talent management and power relations

After finding that power relations could not be sufficiently explained from the perspectives of traditional theories that regard the organisation as a system, I turned to the complex responsive process school of thought, which combines theories taken from a variety of disciplines – psychology, sociology, philosophy, and politics. This approach regards power relations as concurrently enabling and constraining, and sees ongoing dynamics – involving continuous change – as increasing complexity and reducing the ability to predict. Expanding this approach beyond the narrative, to the broader perspective of processes taking place in organisations, highlights how impossible it is for executives to manage, control, and predict in a complex reality that is uncertain and undergoing continuous change. In the narrative and in organisations in general, such uncertainty only reinforces the accepted value of the knowledge and expertise that we, as talent management consultants, bring to the table, and the apparently blind faith of management teams in our purported ability to give conclusive answers. This aspect of power relations between us as consultants and the organisations we serve became apparent to me as I wrote the narrative, read the literature, and progressed in my analysis.

Talent management is an organisational process that intensifies the need to know, to take a risk, and perhaps to enter into conflict with the organisation. Talent management is ultimately based on decision-making – on deciding who is included in the group of talent and who is excluded from it. Knowledge plays an important role in talent management, since designating individuals as talent signifies that losing them

could have potentially grave consequences for the organisation's performance. Who influences the norms that determine which decisions are made, who is identified as talent? Who ultimately has the real power to decide?

The narrative described many of the exclusion and inclusion processes that are inherent in identifying talent, and which are often expressed in organisational talent management processes. Before examining the interface of power relations and knowledge on the one hand, and talent management on the other, it is important to consider the definition of talent management as found in the literature. Smilansky (2006, p. 7) defined these processes as

an integrated set of corporate initiatives aimed at improving the caliber, availability, and flexible utilization of high potential employees who can have a disproportionate impact on business performance. ... Talent management processes are designed to ensure that the business improves its competitive advantage.

The most fundamental principle guiding our work, then, is that 'talents', or those recognised as having 'high potential', were 'groups and individuals that take on a disproportionate share of their company's business performance and generate greater-than-average value for customers and shareholders' (Gold et al, 2010, p. 248).

Smilansky's definition takes us back to the basic assumptions of traditional management theories, which attribute power to managers. This is well described in Pfeffer and Sutton's *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (1999), and they make a statement that perfectly captures my feeling about how managers relate to their job: architecting organisational systems that establish the conditions for others to succeed. They help define success, as well as identify relationships and processes that will lead it (cited by Lawler, 2008, p. 215). Like the critique of the objective definition of who holds more power and who holds less as presented by traditional theories, I also challenge the notion that any individual can be blessed with certain inherent attributes that categorically define them as 'talent', as one who belongs. The literature of Elias, Mead, Stacey, and Mowles presented above, together with my own observation of power relation processes in organisations, undermines the notion that managers as individuals can be attributed with the power to control or to lead others to succeed.

Summary

In this project I have explored various theories that explain the concept of power in organisations based on the systems approach and, alternatively, the complex responsive process perspective. Based on the writings of researchers advocating these schools of thought, I have explored the connection between the organisational themes mentioned above and power relations. I have examined how this link influences how I understand the power relations between Gary and myself. These analyses have contributed to my understanding of my practice – talent management – and thus led me to a new understanding of the dynamics of power relations as they are manifested in organisations.

However, each of the theories discussed in the current project only partially explains what for me is currently the most significant issue at the core of the dynamic of power relations, as described in my narrative: my continued deference to Gary, continuing to value his professional reputation above my own, despite recognising my own considerable expertise. For example, reflecting on the narrative, I find myself critiquing my inability to create a different configuration when the pattern is imprinted so strongly in each of us, in our gestures and our automatic, subconscious responses. I am unable to choose a single explanation for my handicap, only a combination of several explanations. I believe that each of the theories discussed in the analysis contributes a unique yet incomplete perspective on my relationship with Gary. For example, when investigating explanations of the processes described in the narrative that drove the incident concerning the bank tender, I find that I cannot ignore the psychoanalytic perspective: Gary's overbearing personal characteristics cannot be downplayed – they had been repeatedly expressed in different situations, and are among the reasons why I assigned him the professional role he had at TLT. Similarly, the fact that I had instigated and maintained this status quo between us was the result of my personal need to belong to what was branded as high-level professional expertise in talent management, and my reluctance to risk any confrontations that might jeopardise this.

The narrative reflects one of the most important elements of talent management: identification of talent, and others' recognition of this identification. In our relationship, is it possible to determine which of us – Gary or I – is the talent? Is it

simply the one who is most knowledgeable, or are other factors at play? Closely related to the identification element of talent management, the concept of recognition expands the perspective from which talent management processes, as they take place in organisations today, can be analysed and critiqued. Writing the narrative and analysing it, reading the literature and receiving feedback from the learning set has led me to a more critical appraisal of organisations' perception of talent management and the organisational processes that support the identification of talent. How does one recognise talent? How is it that some individuals are recognised as talent, while others are not? Who defines the criteria for judging all this?

Most theories that consider recognition regard social processes of recognition as a system that provides those living in it with all the normative sources required for evaluation. In other words, all of these theories, in their different variations, incorporate into talent management an element of interpretation. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains:

Because we are socialized into a specific recognition order we also internalize (via the exchange with and through the view of others) a given space of (historical) reasons that shapes our practical identity and our normative expectations springing from this identity.⁷

I believe that talent management involves both an element of others' recognition of an individual and a certain ongoing redefinition of that person, in which there is inevitably a tendency (of both parties) to perpetuate the current view. This can debilitate one's potential by effectively restricting the freedom to change. In a way, this can be said to have characterised my situation in the relationship with Gary. In Project 4, I will further explore different approaches to understanding recognition as a crucial element in discerning talent, through an analysis of how the field of talent management has developed and evolved into what it is today. This will contribute to a new understanding of the practice, relying on changes in the understanding of relations and processes taking place within organisations, as expressed in Projects 1, 2, and 3.

⁷ Retrieved 5 May 2014, from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* website: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/recognition>. Accessed 3 June 2017.

Project 4: Finding a way forward in the absence of ‘objective’ certainty

Introduction

Talent management (TM) assessment, and the judgment process within it, are the main concern of the encounters I describe in this project, building directly upon my previous work in the DMan programme. In my earlier projects, I focused on organisational processes encompassing the passing of judgment and belonging as part of a changing dynamic of power relations. In Project 1, I discussed the home in which I was raised, where the language was critical and judgmental, and there was a clear definition of the groups to which it was advantageous to belong. In Project 2, I dealt with the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as the main process in power relations, in an organisation that functioned like a family: where the relationships were informal and lasted for many years, and where employees enjoyed spending time together – for example, in celebrating holidays. In Project 3, I explored the power relations between myself and Professor Davidson, a consultant with whom I occasionally partnered, focusing on the role of ‘knowing’ in TM and how our relationships were influenced by the power of knowing.

Reflecting on the processes of evaluation and judgment in the organisational context (mainly Projects 2 and 3), I recognised the gap between the theory behind well-established TM methodologies and their application in practice. My work on Project 3 increased my sensitivity to the way I handle organisations’ expectations regarding the judgments that I pass. They expect that I should ‘know’ and provide one ‘correct’ answer to their dilemmas. While at first I regarded TM as a clearly defined set of systematic processes, a scientific exercise of sorts (Smilansky, 2006) that I continue to implement similarly in most organisations, through my participation in the DMan programme I came to see it as a much more complex process involving relationships, politics, and the history of power relations. Questioning the basic assumptions underlying the theories described by the TM literature, I am now aiming to explore the facet of judgment in TM processes.

TM involves assessment processes that result in judgment (known as ‘objective assessment’ in TM literature; e.g., Smilansky, 2006, p. 67) as they attempt to shed light on the ‘impact of key roles or “pivotal talent segments”’ for the purpose of ‘optimizing

investments in human capital [and] maximizing the efficiency of decisions around talent management' (Vaiman et al, 2012, p. 928). This judgment is passed in the form of an unequivocal recommendation regarding the merit of including a manager in a high-ranking group of talent (based on suitability to fill specific roles) while predicting their future potential. Examples are offered by Charan et al (2011) in their book *The Leadership Pipeline*, where they describe models, tools and methods that have been (successfully, in the authors' view) implemented at General Electric and many other organisations. The authors found that an accurate assessment of leaders was the best predictor of business success.

To fulfil the TM promise, my consulting firm, TLT, implements standardised methodologies and assessment tools, much in line with those utilised by other consultancies. These are based on the assumption that there is a single truth for each assessor in relation to an assessed individual, organisation, and culture. TLT, as an external consultant, is expected to assess and rank key executives, assign numerical values to their competence and potential, and set the course of their professional development. All of this, however, is directly related to the context: we do this to support the organisation's decision-making regarding promotions, dismissals, and appointments as well as in support of strategic decisions impacting the organisation's potential to handle future challenges.

In Project 4, I describe a broad organisational process the goal of which was to assess the ability of an overseas subsidiary to handle strategic changes and dramatic growth. While the goal was defined by the corporation's headquarters, the process, which is still in progress, is fully based on my firm's TM expertise. The client expects me to provide individual assessment of competencies and potential for each of its managers, as well as a development plan considering potential future roles of each assessed manager. Additionally, I am to provide a general 'readiness for change' score for the subsidiary as a whole. Reflecting on this experience, I feel uneasy with the client's expectation to provide clear-cut results, as I find that there is insufficient empirical evidence to validate the methodologies I normally use. Additionally, my work on the current project had revealed several limitations that touch upon the very essence of these methodologies.

TM assessment is perceived as rational and objective (Smilansky, 2006). However, in my experience, it is also highly sensitive, political, and emotional. Following my participation in the DMan programme, I now devote considerable attention in my assessments to the emotional aspects of the assessed individuals and my relationships with them, and attribute less importance to strict adherence to methodology. This is strongly demonstrated in the narrative chapter of the current project, where I describe emotions and relationships far more than work methodologies. As I simultaneously participate in the process and observe it at the same time, I perceive – in line with the complex responsive processes school of thought (Mowles, 2011, 2015; Stacey, 2001) – that I am taking part in a complex interaction with some influence, but no control, over its results.

Dewey's (1998) writings about pragmatism, detailed in the Analysis section, and the work of researchers (e.g., Martela, 2015; Watson, 2010) who have examined organisations based on his approach, broadened my perspective on the emotional aspects of judgment. Where I once regarded these aspects as being separate from rational thinking, I now acknowledge their integral role in research, a necessary element in the quest for the 'truth'. Reflecting on Dewey's work on judgment and interpretation, especially his book, *How We Think* (1910), allowed me to better understand my role as an assessor.

In the narrative of the current project, I focus on two meetings that were part of the subsidiary's readiness assessment, as these centred on a process of reciprocal judgment – my judgment of the client, and their judgment of my company's work. The complexity of these meetings, and all the occurrences that led to them, prompted for me fundamental questions about the practice and underlying assumptions of the methodologies we, as consultants, implement to reach a definitive recommendation, which we often present as the single answer to the client's question.

In the next section, I review traditional approaches to TM based on extant literature while as part of the Analysis, I critique their related assumptions and methods, which aim to arrive at a single truth. In the final part of my Analysis, I propose alternative approaches that offer a new understanding of assessment and judgment, the two elements of TM that I investigate in this project. Inquiring whether there is indeed a single truth raises additional questions concerning the assessor's

position in the processes of assessment and judgment as well as about the power relations that involve the inclusion or exclusion (that is, consultants' recommendations based on these processes) of specific employees and groups of employees.

Talent management

In the late 1990s, the economy was thriving and firms competed fiercely over talent as companies scrambled to hire and retain the employees they needed. During this period, as organisations grew exponentially, compensation packages became more generous, mobility across firms became easy, and employment agencies and job vacancies outpaced head hunters' efforts. Even after the collapse of the dot.com bubble, the ensuing financial crisis and spreading recession did not ease the war over talent. In 2011, the World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group, a leading strategic consulting firm, recommended that firms increase their talent pools by instituting systematic processes to manage the risk entailed in the shortage of talented workers (Tarique and Schuler, 2012). These included workforce and career planning, adopting a global rather than local perspective of organisational talent, introducing 'brain drain' prevention measures, implementing mobility-supporting procedures, and hiring from new population groups (e.g., older individuals, and individuals with disabilities).

The literature (Fernandez-Araoz, 2014) distinguishes between four distinct eras in the evolution of TM processes based on the scope of skills sought. First, only physical attributes were considered (dig a canal, fight a war, harvest a crop): we would choose the strongest, healthiest people we could find. Next were added intelligence (IQ, verbal and analytical competencies), experience, and past performance as measured by tests and academic degrees. Core competencies were then added to the toolkit, representing specific characteristics and skills that help predict outstanding performance in future roles. Finally, in the current era, the emphasis has now been turned to potential – the ability to learn and adapt to a changing environment/strategy (Fernandez-Araoz, 2014). It is my contention, following the current project, that it is time for a new era – one that places talent assessment within its organisational, situational, and relational context.

The events described in the narrative have led me to question assumptions underlying the dominant TM discourse. I therefore offer next a brief review of main streams in the TM literature and some of the underlying assumptions that are the anchors of the TM processes and methodologies that are commonly implemented today. In light of these experiences, the Analysis section offers a critique of current TM assessment methodology, leading to a new, emergent perspective on TM.

Talent management research

TM is still a relatively new field. Because this body of research is in its infancy, it 'still faces some difficult issues around its definition and intellectual boundaries' (Vaiman et al, 2012, p. 926). The number of studies in the field of TM has only recently begun to increase. The book *The War for Talent* (Michaels et al, 2001) constituted a landmark in the TM literature in that it addressed TM as a distinct field. Between 1990 and 2013 there was a sharp increase in the total number of publications in leading business magazines on this topic, but the scholarly peer-reviewed literature continues to lag behind. The large majority of articles and the considerable number of books published in recent years were written by leading consultants, people who make a living from providing TM services to organisations, or by executives holding the power to define groups of 'talent' in their organisations and basing their writing on their own experience. While the literature seems to have evolved from being a marginal topic to one attributed greater importance, only few academic papers in the past decade identify 'TM' as a keyword.

Some approaches to TM consider the economic and non-economic value created by TM at the individual, organisational, and societal levels (Thunnissen et al, 2013). Several theories indirectly address TM, such as those that relate to the top echelon of human capital, workforce differentiation and segmentation, and human capital theory. These theories address the ratio between an individual's contribution to the organisation and the organisation's investment in talent, explaining how organisations make decisions concerning 'A' players and invest differently in different groups of employees (Michaels et al, 2001).

Most of what we know about TM comes from research that was conducted among large and mid-size multinational companies, especially US companies.

Moreover, most of this research focused mainly on talent planning and deployment (Michaels et al, 2001; Tarique and Schuler, 2012), as well as talent sourcing (Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Smilansky, 2006; Vaiman et al, 2012). The literature on TM is dispersed within several disciplines, each of which is based on different basic assumptions, and each defining this term and its implications on organisations differently, as detailed below. The variation in TM definitions and implementation partially accounts for the paucity of TM research (Vaiman et al, 2012). Despite the broad range of approaches to TM, a brief review can help shape our understanding of the field at large.

Most of the streams in the TM literature on are anchored in **psychology** and focus on individual differences in personality, expertise, and competencies. The purpose of psychology-based TM assessment tools is to evaluate personal parameters and predict future performance. As a discipline, this field generally disregards the social aspects of the organisation as a system of interdependencies, its cultural context, situational factors, and the evaluator (or judge, in the context of this work) as a participant in the process (Dries, 2013).

Assessment and evaluation methodologies deriving from **occupational psychology** (Dries, 2013; Fernandez-Araoz, 2014; Smilansky, 2006) focus on assessing performance, classification, and advancement. There is, however, insufficient empirical research to support these methodologies and to validate resultant assessments. Furthermore, a question arises concerning the objectivity of these processes, as they may be interpreted as aiming to change results rather than produce future predictions.

Educational psychology (Bloom, 1985; Dries, 2013; Gladwell, 2008), which embraces Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent,⁸ claims that talent is an innate gift and therefore there is no point in developing talent within organisations. Most of the research in this field was conducted on children and adolescents, and was not validated in adult populations or in organisations.

Positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) focuses on how individual strengths and achievements define a person as an above-average 'talent'.

⁸ See for example http://giftedstudentliteracy.weebly.com/uploads/5/7/6/9/57698719/8778665_orig.png. Accessed 3 June 2017.

According to this discipline, the main challenge in TM processes is finding the optimal win–win employee–organisation solution in terms of efficiency and performance.

Social psychology research is concerned with the study of positions, beliefs, feedback, and stigmas; the addition of elements taken from a social perspective is its main contribution to TM. Social psychology literature proposes examining the dynamic ways in which expectations and judgments shape what is manifested and discernible as ‘talent’, rather than taking an interest in the talent itself.

Human resource management literature operationalises talent as capital, focusing mainly on the contribution of talent to the organisation in different aspects of capital including human, social, political, and cultural. From this perspective, capital is assessed and quantified by its relative contribution to the organisation (Michaels et al, 2001; Smilansky, 2006).

All these approaches follow a similar flow: the use of an assessment methodology to determine who is considered ‘talent’ – who is included in the talent pool, and who is excluded from it. More specifically, TM consultants typically follow the premises of occupational psychology as well as positive psychology. As I demonstrate below, the perspective of social psychology is often overlooked although it offers key components to our understanding of TM processes, recommendations, and outcomes. Notwithstanding, my growing acquaintance with TM literature shows this body of research is so limited that it does not support definitive conclusions.

TM research is both qualitative and quantitative. Much of the quantitative research is based on descriptive statistics, with little correlation analysis. These methods are inadequate to substantiate arguments and validate theories. The researchers themselves call for further studies to provide statistical proof of hypotheses and measure the connection between TM and organisational effectiveness (Clutterbuck, 2012; Tarique and Schuler, 2012).

In addition to the absent empirical validation of TM, its antecedents and its consequences, researchers disagree on whether TM is a phenomenon or underpinned by a theory. The tendency of TM literature to slide off into vague but appealing rhetoric has caused some commentators (Charan et al, 2011; Lawler, 2008) to question its merit and describe it as merely a managerial fashion. Management fashions are characterised by conceptual ambiguity that is not yet legitimised by sound evidence

and robust theory (Iles et al, 2010, cited by Dries, 2013), combined with an underlying sense of urgency created by fashion-setters (e.g., consultants, business schools, management gurus). The relatively slim body of research on TM, combined with the narrow focus of most of the work, shows that companies are still far from dealing with talent issues on a daily or a strategic level. An additional drawback of the field is the evident discrepancy between practitioner and academic interests in TM, which could nevertheless offer significant opportunities for theory building, methodological advances, and fresh empirical work.

The narrative

Background

As mentioned earlier, at the centre of this narrative are judgmental perceptions as they emerged during two consultancy meetings held with MedSci, a client company that commissioned TLT to assess their subsidiary in Turkey. We discussed the outputs of the broad organisational assessment process that TLT, my consultancy, would carry; yet from the moment my team and I arrived at the offices of the Turkish subsidiary, we were shown exceptional hospitality by Tavi, the general manager, and his team.⁹ I sensed immediately how this welcome fostered a shared sense of belonging among my team members, perhaps even some degree of loyalty to the Turkish group. I remember thinking that my recognition of the power Tavi held over me could be an important diagnostic factor to which we should pay attention. While I accepted his hospitality with open arms, I wondered if its emotional consequences might compromise our professional work. Would it influence what we chose to report and subsequently recommend? My gut feeling was that the managers reporting to him might be feeling the same way.

Reflecting on this later, I recognised that I also connect with others by forging a sense of belonging and commitment within what I perceive to be a company operating like a family. Project 2 described such a scenario. The main question explored in the current project, then, is how this dynamic, which is taking place here and now in the process of assessment, might facilitate or undermine the so-called 'objective'

⁹ All names have been altered to maintain confidentiality.

appraisal. In the Analysis section, I present several theories that support the necessity of emotional processes in completing the full picture of the assessed organisation.

The assessment: The paradox of the predictable and the unpredictable

Some controversy arose when my team and I prepared our assessment reports: we had each observed different things, despite being in the same place at the same time. While this disparity could be attributed to our different histories and prior experience, it impeded our attempts to reach consensus regarding scores or a definitive recommendation. Tackling these differences, we eventually agreed on final scores that we would report. We all acknowledged a sense of obligation to the subsidiary: the gracious hospitality shown by Tavi and his team members made it difficult to voice serious doubts about his capabilities and express our true sentiments.

The report was submitted to Ray, MedSci's divisional manager. All three members of my team participated in the meeting. We had prepared a detailed report on each of the assessed executives as well as on the subsidiary at large. The report included the rationale underlying the assessment, the work process, our general impression, a score for each of the six criteria forming the basis of the assessment, a summary of our professional opinion concerning each of the four executives assessed, and a proposed action plan. I felt stressed, as though I myself was being assessed. Would Ray be favourably impressed by our work? Would he prefer strict recommendations, or subtler, more ambiguous ones? Would our findings diverge significantly from his own interpretation? I was concerned that if he was not pleased with our work he might discontinue the project, which intended us to cover seven additional countries.

I opened the meeting by explaining how I intended to present the findings. Ray closed the report booklet, looked directly at me and asked: 'Can Tavi manage Turkey?' I answered, 'It's not that simple; it's not black or white,' but he continued: 'I am asking you straight: can he manage Turkey?' Then he added: 'Can he manage the Turkish subsidiary after the upcoming merger with Alai?'

While we were finalising the report, news had broken of MedSci's major acquisition of Alai, a company with a well-established Turkish presence. This meant that while we were assessing the level of preparedness of MedSci's Turkish subsidiary

and whether its executives could be classified as ‘talent’, the context of our assessment and its results had already changed. We had set out to generically assess the subsidiary’s general manager and his team, but now had to consider them in relation to the executives of another company, who were as yet unknown to us. I asked myself: How can we know? How can we assess readiness for something that is yet undefined and unpredictable? How can we guess what the next step should be? What is ‘the truth’ in a situation like this? Preoccupied with these questions, I noted that in similar past situations my first instinct had been to join forces with another consultant, Professor Davidson, who projects an image of confident authority (as described in Project 3).

Left to fend for myself, my dilemmas reflect a tricky aspect of TM processes: the client’s expectation that we can anticipate the chances of success in relation to future challenges. There is, however, no way of knowing how relevant our current findings might be in a year or more. This purported ability to predict the future has been critiqued by various authors. In *The Talent Wave*, for example, Clutterbuck wonders, ‘if succession planning works, how do the wrong people often get to the top?’ (2012, p. 228). The instability and unpredictability of social life, led Mowles (2011, 2015) to acknowledge that there is more than one possible future that could be created, since reality is ‘created or maintained dynamically in everyday activity as people improvise together’ (Mowles, 2015, p. 117). These views may explain the tension in our meeting with Ray, who expected accurate predictions.

Ray also wanted to know whether Jane, the marketing and sales manager at the parent company, could replace the general manager of the Turkish subsidiary. While we all agreed that Tavi should be replaced, it was difficult to categorically state whether Jane was suitable for the role. With adequate preparation, we felt she could be ready in a few months; but there was a high risk of her leaving the company if not promoted. In addition, we knew nothing about the general manager of the acquired company, who would also be a candidate for managing the merged subsidiary.

As I struggled to answer Ray’s explicit questions, I wondered why we had been assigned such a comprehensive project if all that interested him was a small part of it. I also tried to decipher what he did not know that I did know; and if he did know what I knew, why was it not verbalised? These thoughts raised a broader issue – one that we

often encounter in TM processes: responsibility. Who is ultimately responsible for the decision made upon our recommendation: the assessors, or the client? Responsibility was a central concern in the negotiation of my agreement with the parent company for the services rendered in this project. The company had insisted that I take full responsibility for the results, including any potential lawsuit filed by employees who feel unjustifiably dismissed from the company following my recommendation.

At this stage of the meeting, Ray began to lose patience. Commenting on the low assessment scores of the appraised executives and of Turkish subsidiary as a whole, he declared: 'If these are the subsidiary's scores, all of the executives should be dismissed, and the subsidiary should be closed'. My instinct was to say that we were wrong and perhaps apologise for presenting such a dismal view. Instead, I took a deep breath, and said: 'I am raising a question regarding the executive's exclusive responsibility for organisational success and asking about the responsibility of the leadership at the parent organisation, of which the subsidiary is a part'.

'What do you mean?' Ray asked.

This was the first time in the meeting that I touched upon soft, wider issues we had encountered while making the assessment. I conveyed feelings shared with us by the subsidiary's executives – that the subsidiary had been abandoned, that it did not receive the necessary support, and that it was left on its own too soon. The transition from being authorised to make only payments less than \$3000 to being given unlimited responsibility was a difficult one, involving much anxiety despite the strong desire to succeed. I felt Ray softening. Consequently, he scheduled a one-day trip to Turkey within the month.

I left the meeting with a heavy heart, feeling helpless and wondering whatever might happen next. I felt anger rising within me, directed at Ray, suspecting that I had been an unwitting participant in some 'game' of which the assessment processes comprised only a part. Was this entire massive effort necessary? Was the assessment a valid piece of research, or just a political game of power relations?

Struggle and competition in complex relationship and dependency processes may be viewed as a game, the rules of which evolve as the game evolves: two or more players test their strengths against each other, and in the process continually redefine their power relations (Elias, 1970). During the meeting, I tried to step back from our

work and observe the 'players' who were present in the room and those who were not; I wanted to understand whether this was indeed all merely a game. Would the company make use of the answers we provided? We knew what Ray wanted to hear (validating his frustration with Tavi), but to what extent did this awareness affect our assessment of Tavi? How would each player's move change the assessment and its results?

If, as Stacey (2001) contends, novelty arises through spontaneous improvisation, then attempting to measure potential abilities to realise a future strategy is rather futile. Stacey suggests that managers' attempts to predict the future is a way of distracting themselves from the frustrations and gaps of the 'here and now' and that planning ahead helps preserve existing power relations. This could explain Ray's impatience: perhaps he wanted to play for time, ensuring that Tavi was aware of his being under scrutiny, particularly in light of the uncertainty regarding his subsidiary. Perhaps Ray was even more concerned with that than with the desire to know whether Tavi could continue as general manager; indeed, Ray might have formed his opinion on that long ago. What does this say about the need for the process? What is the organisation's hidden interest when investing in a process the results of which may have been decided in advance?

Before leaving the room, Ray thanked me and my team, adding that we had done excellent work. What did that mean? That we had said what he wanted to hear, or perhaps what he already knew? It was clear to me that Tavi's fate, and that of the subsidiary in general, would be determined not by the assessment process that we had implemented methodically and professionally, but rather by business developments, history, and political issues – all factors that we could not predict and that our assessment had not addressed. I realised how success is mainly measured from the perspective of the managers, who have effectively preserved their interests and defined entry barriers to each management echelon, as well as by the authors who define talent assessment and future potential for success in their books and articles. These players all profit directly from sustaining the notion of a process conducted by external expert.

Delivering feedback: The paradox of involvement and detachment

I was not looking forward to my next meeting with Tavi. While packing, in a moment of panic, I made a spontaneous decision to delete the scores from the report I would be submitting to him, leaving only the text describing the assessed competencies. I felt that the numerical scores were harsher, more definitive, and perhaps harder to accept. These scores are anchored in a school of thought that argues that there is one objective, measurable truth that applies regardless of the assessor arriving at it. In contrast, the pragmatic approach, to which I subscribe, recognises the fallible abduction in the process of inquiry – the principle that humans may err in their conclusions (Martela, 2015). I felt that the scores I had deleted could be of limited value, as they falsely implied that such assessment is an exact science. In addition, I felt the numbers would be a distraction, diverting us from trying to understand together their actual significance. Wondering whether the decision to delete the scores was prompted by anxiety regarding the discussions ahead, or whether it was the right professional choice (thereby reducing resistance and enabling a dialogue that would eventually become part of the assessment process itself), I finally decided to eliminate the scores pertaining to individual managers but leave those of the subsidiary. I reprinted the reports and left for the airport.

Although providing Tavi's own assessment was a key reason for my travel to Turkey, it seemed that we both preferred to defer it to the very end of my visit. I started that meeting by asking him how he felt about what had happened during the two months that elapsed since our last visit. He started talking, his words flowing like a river that could not be contained. He talked about the subsidiary, his employees, and all his efforts to handle a complex situation. He also talked about the assessment process and how he initially thought that we would be like any other consulting company: that we would arrive and tell him what he should do, and then leave, and nothing would happen; but he discovered that we were different. He had recognised that we had arrived to observe the situation and to think, together with his team, how a transformation may be set in motion. He also said that I was honest and frank enough to declare that I had not come with a ready solution and that I did not yet know the right way forward. I had to smile to myself, realising how I was already being influenced by the complex responsive processes way of thinking, arguing for scepticism

about the predictability of the future. Was this an opportunity to ‘work live’ with uncertainty? Tavi continued to describe how I invited him, and then his managers, to examine the situation together and agree the basis for an action plan. I wondered to what extent was this true. Did we really arrive at the results together; or did we manipulate the discussion, arriving at the results we hoped for? Tavi’s reaction led me once again to regard the entire process as a game. My ability to focus on his words diminished as my discomfort rose.

I recognised that in the interaction between us, I experienced him similarly to how he is described in our report: a manager who leads the company as though it was his family, engaging other managers based on personal relationships and social activities, rather than on their value and contribution to the business. When I reflected on this discussion later, it seemed to me that I could have completed his assessment process without any questionnaires or interviews, but merely based on our discussion, in which all the issues revealed in the assessment were clearly apparent. I could see myself transitioning from experiencing the situation as an external consultant to experiencing it as an employee, a colleague interacting with Tavi and reacting – not from the objective perspective of the consultant, but emotionally. I also realised that had I felt more secure, I could have demonstrated each point in the assessment by its expression in the dialogue between us. I sensed my internal conflict between the desire to rely solely on the apparently objective results of the assessment questionnaires and the emotional involvement that Tavi had brought about in me. Contemplating what makes a good and successful manager, and specifically a subsidiary general manager, I relied on my habitual thinking – that is, on the many personal prejudices that I bring with me to the process based on prior experience (see Jackall, 2010).

I also thought about a comment made by my second supervisor in the DMan programme, Doug Griffin, when I used the word *feedback* during the learning set with respect to projects written by my colleagues. Doug suggested that I replace this term – which seems to describe a mechanism, rather than an emotional process – with the word *response*. At that moment, I experienced an epiphany: I suddenly understood that I must examine the response aroused in me by what they had written in order to see what I could learn from it, rather than provide feedback – which is, in fact, a

judgment on what is good or not. I realised I should be responding to the interaction within the context of the relationship.

Going back to Tavi, as I became more impatient, his personal assistant popped her head in the door to say that my taxi would be picking me up an hour earlier because of unexpected stormy weather. Less than an hour remained, and I had not yet begun presenting the report. I assertively interrupted Tavi's monologue, saying that if we could not complete our discussion due to the short time remaining, we could continue over the phone. I was perhaps relieved that something would remain open, presenting me with an opportunity to soften the blow. I felt as though I was walking on eggshells, careful not to distress him. Something in his paternal style, his effusive hospitality, and his praise of our work made me think that he would not be able to take it; it diminished my ability to engage in a direct, professional development dialogue. I suddenly realised that the dynamic of my conversation with Tavi made me impatient to share my response with him, yet at the same time also inhibited me from doing so. It was the very same pattern described in Project 2 in my relationship with Nancy and my employees: a dynamic of power relations built by creating a sense of belonging.

As a manager, Tavi, like myself, attributes enormous value to human relations and to their social, family-like aspects. I felt it was important to see where he stood emotionally. I told him that I sensed that he was moving between two extremes: one in which he had a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, the other where his energy level was diminished by anxiety and a sense of inadequacy. I saw him cringe and even thought I noticed tears in his eyes: I realised that this was how he felt perceived within his own organisation. He responded that in the past two years the organisation had led him to question his competence, as his energy was mainly directed at defending the subsidiary's positioning and place within the parent organisation. Rather than contributing business added value (as would be expected of a subsidiary general manager), Tavi felt paralysed, opting instead to operate mainly on an interpersonal level to maintain a positive atmosphere in his organisation and present his boss with an image of the Turkish subsidiary as a successful company. The importance of staff morale notwithstanding, it became Tavi's primary focus at the expense of actions that would support business success. When I reflected this back to Tavi, he became silent.

Seeing that we only had a few minutes left, I decided not to give him the written report until we had had another conversation. Finally, he said: 'I agree. This is what the parent company taught me. I need help'. I promised that I would send him the report upon my return to my home country and that we would discuss ways to improve his effectiveness in his current role, if he wished to stay in it. We hastily said goodbye as I ran to the taxi that was waiting outside.

On the way to the airport, I was again concerned about the ability to 'know'. Why was I unable to tell Tavi the whole truth (if, indeed, there is such a thing)? The meetings I held in which assessment results were discussed now led me to devote much attention to the method upon which we base our assessment as well as our responsibility for the results. The idea of the process as a political game raised ethical issues that bothered me even more than the question of responsibility: if I was so insecure about the results deciding Tavi's future, was I not engaging in an unethical process? Did I conduct a 'pure' assessment of Tavi, or was the assessment tainted by the effect of the game in which Tavi himself was also a player?

Reflecting on my part in this game, as I led the conversation with Tavi, presented me with a new perspective on the shift from being detached to being involved. Mowles (2015, p. 57) proposes that working in organisations, 'we are constantly called on to make judgements about how much to play the game and how much to call the game into question'. Aware of my discomfort with processes that necessitate saying difficult things and my reluctance to take direct responsibility for Tavi's (or other managers') fate, I was disappointed that I had allowed our ongoing conversational gestures to affect my choice of which issues from the report to raise and which not to mention. My sense of personal involvement, resulting from my beliefs and my own history, as well as my natural bias for close, affectionate connections, had found its way into my spontaneous decision-making process.

This may be inevitable: as Dewey (1958, p. 7) noted when refuting a clear separation between researcher and object studied in the context of daily life activities, the subjective and the objective are paradoxically intertwined. Moreover, our mental maps and prejudices might be more pronounced when assessing high-ranking, senior executives (Jackall, 2010). In this professional consulting process, I had certainly found it difficult to distinguish between being a (fully immersed) 'swimmer' and being

'airborne' (taking the higher perspective), to borrow Elias's (2000) terms. The values expressed in Tavi's behaviour of family-like familiarity and unconditional loyalty are ones with which I easily identify. Additionally, I felt that my attempts to lessen the undeniable tension between Tavi's country and mine at the time of the assessment had also influenced my ability to remain distant and detached in our dialogue, focusing only on pure, generic assessment criteria. This would be acceptable, even embraced, by the pragmatic approach, according to which one's subjectivity must be considered as an integral part of the research process; only by including subjective perspectives and acknowledging their subjectivity can one arrive at the full, all-inclusive picture that represents a persuasive version of the truth.

I considered the extent to which my participation in the DMan programme was responsible for raising these doubts regarding my involvement and detachment and how it allowed me to carry out the assessment process in a self-reflexive manner, paradoxically being both involved and detached. I was encouraged by Tavi's feedback (or, should I say, response) that my consulting style allows for not knowing the answers. In Project 3, I considered not knowing a weakness; yet here, in this process, the client perceived the ability to not know as a strength. I realised that I was now less afraid of not knowing, and no longer anxious that I cannot claim to know what exactly must be done.

Analysis

To critique the judgment process that takes place in TM assessments, I use three key sources:

- The book *Developing Executive Talent: Best Practices from Global Leaders* (Smilansky, 2006)
- The Potential Model of the consultancy agency, Egon Zehnder International¹⁰
- Recent Harvard Business Review publications (Fernandez-Araoz, 2011, 2014; Ready et al, 2014).

¹⁰ Egon Zehnder is the world's leading privately held executive search and talent management consultancy, with more than 400 consultants in 69 offices across 41 countries.

This choice derives from the fact that a great extent of my assessment work and terminology are based on Smilansky's writings (Smilansky, 2006), as well as on Egon Zehnder's research and methodologies.

Traditional TM approaches

Smilansky is something of a guru in the field of TM. His book is based on his practical experience in addition to qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews with HR executives in large organisations such as PWC, British Telecom, Aviva, Barclays Bank, and Dell as well as interviews with senior managers who are consumers of TM processes. My acquaintance with Smilansky goes beyond the literature, as we had worked together in the past. I have found that joining forces with him has contributed greatly to clients' positive perceptions of our joint capabilities in leading large-scale assessment projects in global organisations.

Like most traditional TM literature, Smilansky (2006) adopted a hierarchical approach, perceiving that organisations aim to primarily maximise the benefit gained from their workforce and therefore emphasise tools used to map management leadership. He defined TM as

an integrated set of corporate initiatives aimed at improving the caliber, availability, and flexible utilization of high potential employees who can have a disproportionate impact [e.g., greater-than-average value for customers and shareholders] on business performance. [...] Talent management processes are designed to ensure that the business improves its competitive advantage. (Smilansky, 2006, p. 7)

Following the lead of McKinsey & Company – the first consultancy to add talent assessment to its managerial agenda – Smilansky suggested focusing on assessing the 'organisational elite' – future leaders who may become successors to key positions. Fernandez-Araoz (2014, p. 5) noted that being bright, competent, and valued for contribution are insufficient traits for talent; to be considered 'high potential', individuals must also possess 'the ability to adapt to and grow into increasingly complex roles and environment'. Taken together, these sources imply that the professional core of TM is to assess the future potential of senior members of the organisation to fill key positions based on their proportional contribution to the business. This view encourages a hierarchical organisational structure, innately endowing members of this echelon with more power than others.

Egon Zehnder's Potential Model combines core competencies, motivation, values, and learning – both cognitive and in terms of correctly reading situations and adopting appropriate behavioural responses. This is the foundation of what are seen as best practices and leading assessment processes in the TM arena. Tools used in the assessment processes include in-depth competency-based interviews conducted by one or two interviewers, self-reporting questionnaires, and interviews of referenced individuals. Reports are written based on data analysis for each assessed individual. Where a large group of managers are evaluated, insights pertaining to the organisation as a whole are also provided. Recommendations and action plans for both individuals and the organisation follow, including talent-based succession planning.

The hierarchical model of Egon Zehnder defines the competencies required for an individual to climb up the organisational ladder to top senior positions, which are considered 'talent'. Based on research conducted jointly by Egon Zehnder and the Harvard Business School, Fernandez-Araoz (2014) critiqued the exclusive or central dependency on the core competencies method as they rely on past performance as a main indicator of future success. In the age of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), past performance is no longer a sufficient criterion, and potential must be defined as the ability to acquire new capacities assessed by levels of motivation, curiosity, insight, engagement, and determination. The ultimate TM goal nevertheless remains: to predict future potential. Smilansky (2006) suggested that TM assessments may be objectively performed for the purpose of addressing a secondary organisational goal: to manage and control the development of organisational talent.

In line with the above, scholarly articles on TM, typically published in journals such as the *Harvard Business Review*, are often based on the view of talent as capital that is directly connected to business results and success (Pascal, 2004, cited by Dries, 2013), increasing the power and influence ascribed to those deemed as talents. The definition and differentiation of talent as well as the measurement of its relative organisational contribution focus on the study of individual characteristics (e.g., Fernandez-Araoz, 2014). Future predictions of potential rely on the accurate anticipation of capacities and attributes that are likely to be in greater demand given trends within the global business world. The paucity of empirically validated studies regarding assessment tools used to gauge individual organisational contribution may

account for the gap that I have witnessed between consultants' recommendations and organisational reality.

Critique of the assessment method

In Project 4, I focus on judgment processes that are a key component in assessing differential individual organisational contributions. Methodologies described by traditional management literature are based on uniform, one-size-fits-all assessment tools that pay limited and insufficient attention to culture, history, and social differences (e.g., Watson, 2010) or to employment hierarchy (managers versus low-level employees). Their goal is to arrive at a single truth, expressed as a score (number), a relative score (comparative ranking), or a clear-cut recommendation. This result is achieved by measuring competencies in a zero-sum approach that does not address potentially contradictory, yet co-existing, capacities such as collaboration/competition, global/local, collective/individual (Ready et al, 2014).

Reflecting on past consultations, I see little correlation between my company's recommendations and the realistic unfolding of the future potential we assessed. With MedSci, for example, we were asked to identify the top 100 executives, based on criteria of the then CEO. Once the CEO was replaced, our results became obsolete as the incoming CEO had different priorities; he even dismissed some employees that we regarded as having high potential and promoted others who we thought were low performers. Countless circumstances could change focus and criteria, thereby undermining the paradigm that asserts the ability to predict and control all influencing factors (e.g., Thomas, 2012). MedSci's acquisition and following merger in Turkey changed not only the circumstances and required competencies of the Turkish general manager, but also had a major impact on the business in Turkey. This development rendered our assessment results practically irrelevant.

While I base most of my work on the methodologies described above, my experience demonstrates that they do not fully address complexity – organisational context and business market conditions, business and individual histories, relationship and interactions between the assessed and the assessor, and cultural aspects. They additionally disregard variance between assessors resulting from personal histories, worldviews, and paradigms. Smilansky (2006) exemplifies this omission in his

perception that such data obstruct 'pure', objective assessment. I find that these methodologies not only paint an incomplete picture but that they are also based on flawed assumptions – for example, that future potential can be accurately predicted. The aspiration to impose a standard approach by applying linear, uniform assessment criteria in global organisations comes at the expense of a more profound understanding of the relationships and history that are unique to each organisation and which are likely to be more important and relevant in future predictions (Lewin and Regine, 2000). I thus concur with Thomas (2012, p. 41): 'in most circumstances, we are unable to garner enough information about all of the relevant variables to warrant the drawing of watertight conclusions about the veracity of any proposition we may make'.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that my meetings with Ray and Tavi, detailed above, revealed that the method we had implemented did not produce the expected definitive result. Our assessment methodology did not consider the emotional reactions of staff or the subsidiary's 'emotional' history reflected in the need to escape from the traumatic experience of being at risk of closure and the strong, subconscious motivation to prove it was the best, related to other subsidiaries. This methodology also disregarded the effect of strategic decisions made by the parent organisation. Most of these scenarios, where multiple factors are involved and affect the situation, are difficult to predict. Unless they are explicitly shared during the assessment process, they cannot be guessed, leaving the assessor in the dark with insufficient pertinent information to hand.

A key question in assessment processes is the direction in which assessors build their understanding of the story surrounding the assessed. Traditional managerial processes focus first on the personal, psychological characteristics of the individual managers and only then portray the connection between them and intra-organisational behaviours and interfaces. Critical of individualistic approaches to understanding social relations, the complex responsive processes school of thought, based on ideas developed by Mead (1934), Elias (1970), Dewey (1998), and Stacey (2012), focuses on the investigation and understanding of patterns and figurations of interdependencies in the organisation in which the individual is embedded. In a nutshell,

the figuration of interdependent human beings cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly. In many cases the opposite procedure is advisable – one can understand many aspects of the behaviour or actions of individual people only if one sets out from the study of the pattern of interdependence, the structure of their societies, in short from the figurations they form with each other. (Elias, 1970, p. 73).

One reason to conduct the assessment ‘top down’ – which means starting with the social context of each individual participant, rather than assessing the individual alone – is the constantly evolving dynamics of social processes, viewed by Elias (1970) as a game that takes place within the framework of norms and regulations. The greater the number of players, the greater their dependency on other players and their moves and thus the greater the level of uncertainty and chaos. I subscribe to this point of view, regarding Tavi as a player in this game, being both assessor and assessed, playing in a field with multiple other players – some old, some new, and others unexpectedly changing due to the acquisition. Tavi attempted to decipher the reciprocal relations in this game of which norms and rules were new and foreign to him; he found it difficult to be certain of ‘the right thing to do’ as his history with other players was limited. Sensing that he did not see the full picture, he was afraid to take risks despite yearning for change. His fear of losing control drove his desire to preserve the organisational figuration, seemingly unaware that as ‘the moves of thousands of interdependent players intertwine, no single player nor group of players acting alone can determine the course of the game, no matter how powerful they may be’ (Elias, 1970, p. 147).

Alternative approach: Pragmatism

Broadening the perspective of assessment to include all the process participants, their histories, interactions, and any other pertinent context data opens the door to a new understanding of the role of the assessment. Embedded in pragmatism, this is not a novel idea in itself, but its application to TM processes has yet to be suggested. Adding the perspective of the pragmatic school of thought (following Dewey, 1910, 1938, 1998, 2004; Dewey and Bentley, 1949) further redirects the goal and purpose of TM assessment. The principle underlying Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy is ‘making a difference’, measured by impact (James, 2010, p. 14) where truth is something that ‘happens’ to our ideas when ‘our everyday life experience provides the context in which science acquires justification, meaning and value’ (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 4). While

this approach was not originally developed for organisations, its emphasis on the interconnection between theory and practice significantly affected my thoughts regarding the judging component of my practice. The guiding principle of the pragmatist movement is that belief is expressed in action, experience and thought, and its significance derives from actual results. Pragmatic thinking thus opposes the idea of a single truth ('the possibility of ever reaching absolutely certain and final knowledge is ... closed for a pragmatist' – Martela, 2015, p. 540) but acknowledges the possibility of doubt while recognising the social nature of the investigation (Brinkmann, 2013). The search of significance is conducted in a three-phase process (Dewey, 1910). First comes interpretation – distinguishing that which is significant from that which is not. Interpretation is then placed in context. Finally, it is cast with doubt, offering investigators the opportunity to reflect on their decisions and critique the situation.

From Dewey's perspective, we judge and assess jointly, in an overall context. The amount of information amassed by the assessor does not necessarily correlate with the quality of judgment, as 'to be a good judge is to have a sense of the relative indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation' (Dewey, 1997, p. 104). It is the assessor's cleverness that will determine the quality of the assessment process. Although Dewey did not refer to organisations, I find that his writing can easily be generalised to TM processes, as he encouraged people making judgments to be willing to leave room for doubt and avoid the limitations of dogmatism, rigidity, prejudice, caprice, passion, and flippancy, as well as the trap of a routine and habitual modes of understanding based on evolved meanings derived from past experiences (Dewey, 1997). This is important advice considering that TM assessment always takes place in a situational context and involves substantial risk, given that the assessor's ability to assess guides subsequent organisational decision-making. Assessment and judgment, then, are highly specific, tailored to the assessed organisation – the exact opposite of the traditional one-size-fits-all approach. A cautious assessor may opt to appease. Was I aiming to appease when I chose how to provide feedback (respond) to Tavi?

Though I appreciate Dewey's approach, it does not easily lend itself to empirical scientific investigation, which I endorse. Dewey himself noted this discrepancy: 'science as a whole makes itself useful for society precisely because it allows

researchers to remove themselves from the struggles of day-to-day existence and instead attempt to find more general insights that in the best case enormously refine [...], expand [...], and liberate [...] the contents and the agencies at the disposal of common sense' (Dewey, 1938, p. 66). Some HR practitioners believe that valid identification of talented employees requires no formal assessment policies, nor even a formal definition of talent, because organisational decision-makers tend to overestimate the validity of both intuitive judgment and paper-and-pencil tests. The idea that personal judgment can be more valid than formal testing, as long as the assessor is experienced, is known as 'the myth of experience' (Dries, 2013).

Pragmatists describe the investigation and reflection on experience as a long-term social process that is influenced by many factors, including the centrality of language and symbols, which are always subject to interpretation. Mowles (2015, p. 51) added to this investigation the paradoxical dimension of detachment and involvement, which emerged in my meeting with Tavi. According to Mowles, the ability to be detached while at the same time remaining involved renders the assessor's reflexivity an opportunity rather than a drawback, since active participation results in additional information that could be valuable in the assessment process (and was indeed in the case of Tavi). This information, warned Martela (2015), may be inaccurate or misconstrued, leading to fallible abduction. The most we can hope to achieve in light of fallibilism (Dewey, 1938, p. 40) is an ever-evolving 'warranted assertability' (ibid, p. 7), or a 'framework of intellectual resources and rules for navigating our way in the experiential world in which we are embedded' (Martela, 2015, p. 553).

Being embedded in the world means we can never truly eradicate our involvement in the assessment process. This implies that different researchers yield different results. Moreover, our understanding evolves as our interpretations widen our horizons and shape our worldviews (Martela, 2015), so that even the same researcher at a different point of time might yield different results (Dewey, 1925). Results would also be impacted by the individuals setting objectives of organisational development and initiating the research in the first place. Keeping these factors transparent to the assessor's audience could remedy this limitation. Moreover,

researchers are encouraged to reach out to other stakeholders to establish different ways of making sense of their experience (Thomas, 2012).

The researcher, or the consultant-assessor, is thus an active participant in the process, objective and subjective at the same time (Mowles, 2011). To better understand this experience, Morrell and Learmonth (2015) called for management research that recognises the importance of drawing upon vast bodies of knowledge and learning from humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, human culture, and narrative, to produce heterogeneity, pluralism, and fuzziness without which we might 'end up "knowing" things we don't know' (p. 526). This call, however, contradicts a key objective of evidence-based management – namely, parsimony: the necessity 'to reduce, simplify, gloss, flatten or sideline problems and situations that are inextricably contextual, messy, unique [...] or socially complex in dozens of other ways' (Morrell and Learmonth, 2015, p. 528) as part of making sense of the world. From a pragmatic viewpoint, knowledge does not support the representation of reality, but rather provides insights that can enrich our understanding and ability to act in a manner appropriate to our environmental context. Following this approach, reality exists separately from the human perception or interpretation of reality; no absolute truth or correct theory can explain a particular phenomenon. Applying this idea to the business world, Morrel and Learmonth (2015, p. 529) further suggested that 'an appreciation of the difference – not knowing for certain even what approach to take to a problem – is what should keep us as scholars, thoughtful and critically reflexive in the kinds of knowledge claims we make'.

In light of the above, managerial choices would be best explained (or judged) in the light of social structures, managerial interests, interests of groups within the organisation, values, emotions, conflicts, ideas and conflicting perceptions, power relations, competition for resources, and remuneration. They should also be assessed against their influence over the development of existing management practices in the organisation while considering the bureaucratic evolution of the organisation, especially of the higher echelon (Jackall, 2010; Watson, 2010). While new, post-bureaucratic HR management practices may seek to balance principles of discretion and control, they nevertheless continue to reconstruct traditional patterns that perpetuate power differences as well as social, economic, and political inequality

(Jackall, 2010). I often witness this delineation of the organisation by Watson (2010) in my practice, who calls for more analytical and critical work to challenge the self-understood assumptions and acknowledge the existence of additional driving forces that affect the organisational reality.

Drawing on my own experience, I concur with the critique of our assessment methodologies and reject the notion that as consultants we can predict and provide a single truth – especially when this is based on a universal, non-specific method implemented worldwide. Assessment processes and findings are influenced by the assessor's history and emotions, as well as by organisational politics; there is no single truth. In the case of MedSci's subsidiary, ultimately, it was market forces combined with the dynamics of power relations and organisational politics that prevailed. Focusing on the assessment of individuals paints only a partial picture that can only be complemented by other crucial components; it is impossible to conduct discourse with no situational references (Dewey, 1998). Subjective interpretations of each player in the game results in multiple truths, so that flexibility and doubt are key components of the assessment: 'pragmatist inquiry is thus about the strategic usage of doubt in a way that serves the inquiry in reaching satisfactory warranted assertions to the problematic situation in question' (Martela, 2015, p. 557).

To date, most TM assessment processes in organisations are led by external consultants or psychologists specialising in assessment and in career and organisational development. Their goal is to observe the organisation from a broad perspective and to identify a strategic group of 'high potentials' that represent corporate assets. Their work rests on uniform criteria that are mostly aimed at comparing one individual against another. Their work is carried out under the assumption that they are not swayed by intra-organisational political considerations, as they are considered objective. In the eyes of organisations, these are all advantages as the tools ensure uniform (and hence equivalent) evaluation, based on identical criteria for all while offering a benchmark to the organisation in relation to other, similar organisations and discrete from the unique characteristics (and internal politics) of the organisation. My experience reveals an additional, latent reason for organisations to assess their workforce: removing responsibility in bearing bad tidings to key individuals whose performance is not up to par. In the case of MedSci, I had

asked myself if we in fact conducted an investigation to answer a doubt or if we merely rationalised existing beliefs, submitting to Ray the result he wanted to hear and upon which he had already decided? I am confident that Ray was well aware of Tavi's inadequacies, but felt more comfortable having his views validated and communicated by an external consultant. This is how we consultants are drawn into the ongoing organisational political game (Mowles, 2015). Managerialism, as a set of structured tools for strategy design and performance evaluation, is misleading, offering a promise it cannot deliver when we utilise these tools as though we can enforce control or make predictions; it is a game of prediction we can never win (Mowles, 2011).

The sources cited in this work questioning the assessor's ability to operate objectively, even when employing well-defined, uniform criteria, have led me to reflect on my own participation, emotions, gestures, and responses during interviews. This reflection ultimately served as additional useful data in my assessment – mainly realising how my emotional reaction to Tavi revealed to me how he works. I no longer worry that emotions are improper or unethical factors in the process. I now understand that my emotional involvement in Tavi's assessment is the reason I found it difficult to provide him with feedback: I was unable to respond authentically from the situation in which I found myself during the meeting. Adhering, at the time, to the notion of objectivity as defined by natural scientists, I could not see my role as an active participant in the kinds of complex social network that become obvious when taking a relational approach to the study of social interaction. Understanding and embracing pragmatism, I have learned that emotions cannot be eliminated, should not be discarded, and are, in fact, a valuable component in the quest of objectivity. Participation may have been the reason for differences of opinion among my team members (myself included). As Dewey (1958, p. 9) put it, we cannot regard ourselves as observers who see one objective picture; we must take into consideration our participation, with our own values and emotional involvement. I would add that we must also consider the participation, values, and emotional involvement of other stakeholders and co-assessors.

The 'human factor' – the history, emotions, habitus of the assessor – is just one of many factors that we cannot control. Critiques of the traditional view of TM assessment have strengthened my criticism of TM consultants' apparent lack of

awareness of the extent to which judgment (influenced by participation) plays a role in their assessment. Observing assessment processes from a pragmatist perspective offers a much broader understanding of what actually takes place in TM considering the limited ability of assessors and investigators to judge objectively, due to beliefs already formed in the past. I find two points in the various pragmatist streams of thought that require further elucidation. The first concerns issues of ethics. Is TM ethical, given that judgment processes often determine the fate of assessed managers in the organisation? Can recommendations be given with certainty and conviction, when so much in the assessment process itself remains open to interpretation? The second ambiguous point is about the ability to benchmark. If assessment results are context-dependent, how can we compare managers in global, multicultural organisations? How do we account for both cultural and individual histories and variation?

Discussion and conclusion

Project 4 originated in questions that trouble me in my practice of TM, given that it is based on judgment and assessment. Project 2, which dealt with power relations, had already changed my view on organisational TM processes. Whereas before I regarded these as structured professional mechanisms, I came to recognise their political nature and grounding in the dynamics of power relations and the pattern of (and sometimes need for) inclusion or exclusion. Project 3 further strengthened my realisation that the belief that we, as consultants, can provide correct answers is deeply ingrained in power relations. In Project 4, I cast doubt on the theoretical underpinnings of TM as a whole – our ability to ‘know’ and produce a single truth, the ultimate goal of TM consulting. This has led to additional questions touching on the core of TM – my participation as an assessor in the process, the power relations and political processes that ‘interfere’ with the assessment process, and expansion of the scope of data pertinent to the judgment process that takes place within the assessment. I find that the questions raised by pragmatism concerning the role that subjectivity plays in achieving objectivity in scientific research also apply to judgment in assessment processes.

Writing Project 4, and casting doubt on the ability to know, reinforced my misgivings about a business partnership on which I had relied due to the authoritative certainty it provided. With my new understanding of the role of subjectivity and flexibility in the assessment process, I no longer feel that I require a cloak of certainty or that certainty, equating to conviction, is indeed beneficial in obtaining an assessment that is truly reflective of reality. Questioning the concept of a single truth, doubting the assessor's objectivity (or perhaps even the need for objectivity), and challenging the assessment method that I and many others employ, led me to observe TM from a new angle. The question whether we consultants can indeed provide our clients with a single, definitive answer to their dilemmas lies at the core of the narrative, and challenges the foundation underlying currently prevalent methods used to assess talent within the framework of TM. My colleagues share the widely held belief that objectivity is the opposite of emotions and political involvement; perhaps this explains why organisations engage external consultants to provide answers. As I progressed with Project 4, my understanding of my work as an external consultant changed: I came to see that objective and subjective judgment co-exist, both making necessary contributions to the assessment process.

Traditional management literature devotes significant attention to the long-term and rather abstracted perspectives on various aspects of organisational life, assuming that managers have control over them. Most of the assessment tools that I have described reinforce managers' illusion of being in control. The institutionalisation of these devices and methods, which discourage asking questions and expressing doubt, has been called 'functional stupidity' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Notwithstanding, the alternative reflexivity, which has been discussed in length in the analysis section, should also be used with caution, bearing in mind that it can also be disruptive, and as such might also drive the illusion of control (Mowles 2015, p. 69). Reflecting on the narrative, I can turn my new perspective on the significant role of reflexivity into a tool of practical judgment to be used in my professional work as an assessor. This would require me to broaden my awareness in order to reach 'an intuitive understanding of the thematic, narrative patterning [the organisational] conversation' (Stacey, 2012, p. 113). However, if each situation is unique, and if each assessor brings their own personal interpretation into the process, the question arises:

How can one generalise in order to gain organisational insights? How can we consultants assess employees of different cultures based on a single scale, and extrapolate our findings as generic – comparable across different organisations and countries? How can we offer useful recommendations (predictions)?

To overcome the limitations of TM assessments, I believe that additional, non-traditional elements would facilitate a more flexible and dynamic picture, of which doubt and uncertainty are an integral part. A possible solution is to consider assessment as a continuous process that occurs within a broad context in which the individual is embedded, rather than attempt to isolate the individual from their situational context. In this respect, my meeting with Tavi was illuminating as he shared his feelings and weariness, placing his behaviour in context. Using this knowledge in my assessment changed my final judgment: acknowledging my emotional participation in the process was what allowed this information to surface in the first place. I now believe that greater emphasis should be placed on the assessed managers' thinking process, encouraging them to reflect on the link between thought and behaviour, as well as on the assessor's thinking process and emotional response, encouraging them to investigate the truth both subjectively and objectively. Regarding assessments as a continuous, dynamic, reciprocal process involving culture, history, organisational context, and relationships is a considerable shift from current TM paradigms. Allowing for doubt and uncertainty where confidence currently lies, changes the role of TM assessment. Pragmatism opens the door for an ever-evolving art of inquiry, scientific or applied (Dewey, 1929).

TM assessment methods may be limited, but methods like self-report questionnaires do have some value. The attempt to create uniform scales and support a high-level perspective for mobility within the organisation provides a measure for benchmarking. The notion of generalisation (including in research) is imperative for our understanding of different phenomena. While the subjective experience is unique, our psychological processes are less so, giving validity to qualitative explorations. I believe that focusing on the subjective, uncertain facet of assessment – that is, the element of judgment in TM – can help push the profession from a temporary managerial fashion to a discipline with broader impact. Nevertheless, I expect that finding valid qualitative ways of investigation into TM assessment would be a lengthy process, necessitating the participation of the expert community as judges of the new, less definitive, and more flexible propositions.

Synopsis

Introduction

In the DMan programme, I was encouraged to participate in emergent research, as reflected in the structure of this synopsis. Revisiting the projects once again has led me to demonstrate movement in my thought: from an instinctive yet rather nebulous preoccupation with the importance of ‘belonging’, to a profound awareness of how processes of judgment, inclusion and exclusion underpin the entire practice of talent management.

Before embarking on a critical review of the four projects, it is important to recapture my starting point: the traditional discourse on talent management. Most definitions of talent management are fairly similar. One typical and popular example (Smilansky, 2006, p. 7) defines talent management as

an integrated set of corporate initiatives aimed at improving the calibre, availability and flexible utilization of exceptionally capable (high potential) employees who can have a disproportionate impact on business performance ... talent management processes are designed to ensure that the business improves its competitive advantage through the effective utilisation of a small number of exceptional individuals in key leadership positions.

Most definitions are based on basic assumptions of the traditional management literature – seeing talent management as one more strategic process in which managers plan, control and maintain the existing hierarchy, predicting long-term outcomes for the organisation and for individuals. Consultants practising talent management are involved in three main processes: (1) Strategic thinking and planning – relating to key people in the organisation as strategic resources; (2) Assessment – using tools, reports and scores to judge who is included in/excluded from the talent/high potential group; and (3) Development – creating individual career development plans and leadership programmes for those individuals identified as having high potential.

We cannot ignore the fact that the practice of talent management, as it is currently designed, has the potential to exclude people who do not match the ‘cultural norms’ of high-level executives. This raises questions about the involvement of assessors and the role of talent management as a practice that serves the interests of

the 'elite' populations in organisations. I will elaborate on the ethical implications of this in the chapter on ethics.

Traditional publications on leadership development in global organisations have provided the mainstream literature introducing theory, scholarly development, and a critical perspective on the practice of talent management. I was surprised to note the paucity of research on talent management; most books on the subject simply offered tools and techniques, or described the success stories of some of the leading (top 100) companies in the world.

In the first part of the synopsis I will describe which theoretical perspectives most influenced my research and led me to engage critically with my practice. In the next part, I review and critique Projects 1–4. At that final stage of my research, critically reviewing and reflecting on the original shape of the projects demonstrates the movement of my thought since first writing each narrative. I can appreciate that the research was a gradual process of developing my knowledge and understanding, and notice how I gradually became accustomed to practise and experience reflection and reflexivity, while resisting the temptation to refine the authentic observations of my earlier narratives, which form a rich source of important data – a key discipline of the DMan methodology.

[A framework for critically engaging with talent management](#)

The complex responsive process school of thought is part of a broader critical tradition in management, as it draws on the philosophy of pragmatism and process sociology. Both approaches offered me a valuable perspective for examining the application of talent management in organisations.

Pragmatism was developed primarily by Charles Pierce, William James (considered 'the father of American psychology'), and John Dewey to facilitate the exploration of how human beings acquire knowledge and how they experience the world. Pragmatists investigate the gap between what we think and what we know, which emerges from 'a flow of disordered experiences' (Dewey, 1910). Knowledge, according to pragmatists, comprises 'true ideas' that are verified through practice; and practice, they claimed, should take primacy in all sciences, philosophy, ethics, and pedagogy. Since knowledge emerges from experience, pragmatists see the truth 'not

[as] a static and substantial property of ideas but [as] something that happens to our ideas' (James, cited by Brinkmann, 2013, p. 25). Furthermore, belonging to a particular human society, where a conceptual framework and a language are shared, significantly influences the way we experience and the meaning we create from it (Dewey, 1910).

The complex responsive processes way of thinking first emerged in the UK around 2000, when Ralph Stacey began to collaborate with Patricia Shaw and Doug Griffin, challenging traditional management theories taught in MBA programmes and business schools. The theory has since spread its wings, influencing scholars in additional academic institutions and countries (e.g. the work of the Dutch scholar, Thijs Homan [2016]). Drawing on pragmatism, process sociology, and complexity sciences and inspired by the works of Elias, Mead, and Dewey, their main hypothesis was that organisations are not systems but ongoing patterns of human interaction, or iterative processes of cooperation and competition (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). It is through these, they argued, that people handle complexity and uncertainty in organisational life, co-constructing their future. The complex responsive processes approach became part of a substantial but minority tradition critiquing the assumptions of managerialism that are often taken for granted, such as routine executive development programmes, processes aimed at defining organisational vision and strategy, engaging with consultants, setting values, and following best practices (Mowles, 2011). Instead, it proposes that the act of relating within organisations is expressed in processes such as communication, power relations, ideology, and values and evaluative choices, which are all present in any relationship and social figuration.

Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw stressed that meaning emerges through a gesture–response dynamic within interpersonal communications, where the gesture can never be separated from the response (Stacey et al, 2001; see also Mead, 1934). Accordingly, the linear model of sender–receiver communication gave way to a more complex model through which meaning and social objects emerge (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). The complex responsive process viewpoint is thus a process theory in which the mind is not regarded as an internal world of the individual, and the social arena is not regarded as a system, a field, or a matrix outside the individual; it is the interaction itself that is considered to construct further interaction, in self-organising processes where patterns emerge simultaneously of collective and individual identity (Stacey,

2003). In other words, through the prism of the complex responsive process approach, organisational processes previously understood as linear emerge as complex; and processes that appeared to involve autonomous individuals emerge as social.

Critical management approaches based on the notions of the century-old philosophy of pragmatism continue to emerge and challenge the traditional discourse on organisations. Both Martela (2015) and Watson (2010), for example, drew on pragmatism to explain organisational research and processes, calling for research on alternative forces that influence organisational reality. Similarly, Brinkmann (2013) focused his attention on everyday practices at work – specifically, how to cope with the changing world in which we participate as creatures whose actions are inseparable from the development processes of organisational culture, nature, and relationships. Consequently, diverse researchers (e.g., Jackall, 2010; Alvesson et al, 2017; Spicer et al, 2009; Watson, 2010) have investigated organisations based on the assumption that no single, absolute truth can be located. This view was not limited to pragmatists and followers of the complex responsive processes approach: Hannah Arendt, for example, supported this idea, stressing that the absence of objective truth does not negate the subjective truthfulness of the players involved in social interactions (1958, p. 290).

Relevant to talent management and the component of judgment within it (the main focus of this thesis), the complex responsive processes approach emphasises the social aspect of organisational processes, whereby participants and stakeholders create situations and interactions while also being created (changed) by them at the same time (Elias, 1970). We thus examine the sequence of actions and responses as processes that cannot be viewed in isolation. This extends the prism of inquiry to new disciplines, offering a wide lens through which the researcher may conduct the organisational inquiry, interpret the events and their underpinning motivation, and subsequently generalise from the specific organisation to the study of organisations at large.

Martela stressed the value of doubt and uncertainty when researching organisations, since ‘the possibility of ever reaching absolutely certain and final knowledge is ... closed for [the] pragmatist’ (2015, p. 540). In other words, different talent management assessors might arrive at different results, based on different interests and varying interpretations of what they might consider desirable or

undesirable values. Moreover, in every situation, humans judge and act – consciously or unconsciously – based on norms, values, emotions, and ideology. Our norms are the obligatory restrictions that have emerged as generalisations and become habitual over the course of a history of social interactions, while values are voluntary individual and social compulsions with which we choose one desired action or norm over another, giving meaning to life. The norms, values, emotions, and ideology not only form part of our experience, but become integral to our identity (Elias, 1970).

Despite the lack of predictability in local interactions, global patterns may be discerned through them, emerging ‘as repetition and potential transformation at the same time’ (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 8). While the experience is limited to the ‘here and now’, the local interaction bears cyclically on time: we act in the present with expectations for the future, and drawing on our past experience. The past influences our perceptions of the future, and the future influences our perceptions of the past: ‘Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 29). From the complex responsive process perspective, the past and future co-exist as a process of transformative causality, as opposed to the traditional linear model of if–then causality (Bates, 2016). This notion is particularly pertinent to the practice of talent management, where we assess future potential of success based on past performance.

In order to appreciate the contributions of complex responsive processes and pragmatism to the field of talent management, I had to familiarise myself, relate, and critique traditional literature in this field, drawing on traditional theories and the dominant management discourse. The intersections between these clusters of information are where the arguments presented in my work have emerged. In this work, then, talent management was critically assessed through the principles described above. Abandoning the notion of a single truth in favour of understanding meaning as created through social interaction, as well as recognising its interdependence on the broader context within which the interaction takes place and the cyclic influence of time, have combined in the current research to bring new meaning to the professional practice of talent management.

Critical review of Projects 1–4

As mentioned in the Introduction, the raw data of my thesis are the four projects that I have written during the DMan programme. These remain unchanged, exactly as I originally wrote them. This section represents one more turn of reflection and critical review of how I thought and understood my research at each stage. This exercise enables me to observe my movement of thought and how the emergent themes came to form my overall argument about talent management and processes of judgment of inclusion and exclusion in organisations.

Project 1

The main objective of Project 1 was to understand how different events in my life and career have influenced and created the ways I behave and think in my work; what Mowles (2017) would call my ‘intellectual CV’.

Through the process of writing, the notion of *belonging* emerged as a common theme among various relationships in my life. I began to recognise the extent to which I have always tried to create relationships that feel familial – with colleagues, employees, and others: relationships characterised by unconditional belonging, ambiguous boundaries between working relationships and friendships, celebrating holidays together, and full immersion in each other’s private lives.

I ascribed my need to belong to two factors: one, the way I was brought up – with strong family values, in a close-knit family living in a small neighbourhood; the other, simply being from a very small country with a painfully intense shared history. The small population means that networking is a crucial factor in one’s professional growth.

Writing Project 1 was a process that challenged my thinking on my career development and choices, offering a new understanding derived from an interest in the contextual and the history of how I got to where I am. My first draft resembled a typical article on the development of talent management, my practice. The transition to a reflective analysis on why I had chosen talent management as my professional discipline, and my underlying thoughts and behaviours, was far more complex than I had anticipated for an apparently simple writing task. It required intensive feedback from my supervisors and from learning set colleagues; a high level of reflection and

reflexivity; and tough, honest self-negotiations concerning what was important and what was not.

Such careful discernment improves with practice. In hindsight, I see that even my final version of Project 1 demonstrates only a limited understanding of the deep connection between my personal history, including the various groups to which I belong, and the way I thought and practised – for example, my awareness of the price I pay for the efforts ‘to belong’ is something that only developed and changed my understanding in the process of research, when writing Projects 2, 3, and 4.

Practising reflection and reflexivity represents a significant change in the way I consider my practice. Throughout the DMan, we hone our skill of reflecting on what we observe and experience (in the narrative, in the community meetings, in our work), as well as the skill of paying attention to what we find significant and why – skills that I now recognise as crucial in the process of assessment.

Reading Project 1 again, I realise how uncomfortable I feel – even physically – when noticing how judgmental I was in my writing, and my attitude towards its meaning and interpretation. Rather than asking questions, I was opinionated. I saw things in black-and-white – apparently unaware of the whole range of complexities – when describing events, relationships, and interactions. An example of this was my belief that a good company is one that is managed as a family; or my assumption that there is a correct model for identifying future potential, the core of my practice today. This is interesting given that my entire thesis is focused on judgment, critiquing the way I am involved in ‘judgment processes’. My discomfort when re-reading Project 1 derives from having acquired a different understanding of the process of judgment – one that leaves room for doubt and alternative perspectives. Reading the literature on paradox (Mowles, 2015) has given me a new perspective on dichotomies in general – not just acknowledging that there is a ‘grey area’, but recognising that apparently contradictory extremes are not necessarily working in opposition, but co-exist as part of the complexity of organisational life.

My judgmental position is apparent not only in the language I used, but also in my view of talent management as an idealised process with just one mode of application – seeing the organisation as a system and talent management as a linear process, based on an assumption that power relations are dictated by the formal

hierarchical structure of the organisation. My research has led to a new understanding of power that shatters traditional assumptions about power in organisations. Concepts such as seeing power as a 'social process' (Elias, 1978) and as 'complex interdependencies' (Dalal, 1998) shifted my thinking as I considered the wider implications of such views on the practice of talent management, which is further explored and developed in my research.

When writing Project 1, I related the theme of belonging very much to my own individual needs and preferences. Through exploring the meaning of belonging from multiple perspectives – psychological, sociological, and philosophical – I have come to understand belonging as more of a social process. The complex responsive process theory sees the ongoing interactions of social relations as being at the core of understanding organisations: we cannot clearly differentiate between what is individual and what is social, since each co-creates the other (Mead, 1934; Elias, 1970).

Project 1 raised the theme of belonging as a significant pattern in my thinking and approach to practice. Reading for the first time about the complex responsive process perspective gave me new insight into belonging as a dynamic process of power relations – a theme that I developed in Project 2.

Project 2

Project 2 was my first narrative about my experience of being involved in an organisational process. In our research, we are encouraged to write a narrative¹¹ that clearly conveys an issue that concerns the author; in my case, this involved themes related (albeit indirectly) to my expertise in talent management. In Project 2, I described a merger and acquisition process, involving many local interactions, that had significant and unpredictable consequences both locally and globally.

The narrative began when I received a phone call from my boss at the time, Nancy Bowman, requesting me to meet with her urgently. Nancy and I shared a history that left me with feelings of dependency and indebtedness towards her. The owner of a group of companies including RJH, a consulting firm that I had managed, Nancy informed me that she had decided to sell RJH in order to overcome her financial difficulties. She explained that she felt less involved in the company since I had become

¹¹ I will elaborate on narrative inquiry in the 'Research method' section of the synopsis (p. 138).

general manager and started running it like my own family. That had marked the onset of a complex process, characterised by a change in the sense of belonging of all the players involved, as well as changes in the power relations and interdependencies between them. The outcomes of the process were reminiscent of the ‘butterfly effect’ described by Stacey (2011, p. 239).¹²

In writing Project 2, exploring my own and others’ sense of belonging, I increasingly came to see it more as a process in which power relations and identity are inextricably linked. Re-reading Project 2 now, I notice how I was increasingly influenced by the complex responsive process school of thought, especially by reading Elias (1970, 1994). As the project developed, I no longer perceived the experience of belonging as a distinct, static and private phenomenon, anchored – from a psychological perspective – in personality; instead, I came to view it as a complex, dynamic, ever-changing social phenomenon that is based on current power relations. Analysing the narrative from the viewpoint of complex responsive processes highlighted the fact that power relations are social, dynamic processes and demonstrated how complexity derive from interdependence among the players. Power, argue both Elias (1970, 1994) and Stacey (2012), is innately connected to the sense of belonging. With power referring to ‘fluid patterns of perceived need’ and ‘expressed as figurations of relationships’ (Stacey, 2012, p. 29), and with its omnipresent balance ‘wherever there is a functional interdependence between people’ (Elias, 1970, p. 74), power defines social patterns of grouping, inclusion and exclusion, and hence also of identity, through processes of communication involving ongoing interactions of gesture and response.

Elias’s ideas yielded new insights into the connection between power and belonging, while Stacey, drawing on Elias, applied this approach to complex organisational processes. I began to understand the importance of belonging in the relationships I build with work colleagues, and to see this as a dynamic process of inclusion–exclusion (Elias and Scotson, 1994). The local situation of the acquisition, and all its emotional repercussions, demonstrated how change in the power configuration – involving gossip, different ideologies and values (Stacey, 2012) – are key triggers for

¹²Stacey cites an example where complex interdependencies led to unexpected events such as clients refusing to move to the new company, a consequent shift in the company’s financial equity, and even further ramifications for the global companies involved.

shifting the dynamics of power relations and influencing judgment of who should be included/excluded. When I re-read Project 2 now, I am more acutely aware of the emotional undercurrents and the importance of history; writing it has clearly helped to shape my current recognition of the hidden processes of talent management.

On reviewing Project 2, I can see how my judgmental perspective – with adamant clarity about who the ‘good guys’ (me, my consultants) were and who were the ‘bad guys’ (Nancy, Prof. Davidson) – is based on the habitus of the original groups and communities in which I was included. Bourdieu refers to habitus as knowledge, the way we understand the world, our beliefs and values; he emphasises the way habitus is always constituted in moments of practice, as here ‘the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation ... [which produces] practices’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). I recognise how this concept of habitus, as defined by Bourdieu, is intimately connected to the sense of belonging: by unconsciously creating a company based on the same practices, shared history, values and even sense of humour, to strengthen the sense of belonging to ‘my company’, I excluded Nancy and the other employees in the parent company.

While working on Project 2 and exploring the themes of belonging, while also considering idea of habitus, two events unfolded in ‘DMan real life’ to illustrate this very process: a war in Israel where ‘we’, the Israeli group, felt excluded from the wider DMan community; and the discussion in the community meeting, asking the group to approve our going home one day earlier – something highly unusual in the history of the DMan programme – to celebrate one of the most important Jewish holidays. I am mentioning both experiences here, as part of the process of revisiting Project 2, because they shed further light on the question of belonging and the link between power relations, belonging and my Israeli/Jewish identity.

Reading the works of Dalal (1998) and Elias (1970), and reflecting on a ‘sense of belonging’ from a much wider, non-psychological perspective, further shifted my thinking on belonging in a significant way. I resonate with Dalal’s (1998, p. 225) explanation:

Mind and thought are not private properties of the individuals, but properties of the group. We have noted how affects are not just internal reservoirs of instinct or whatever, but social processes arising out of interactions. We have seen that individual conscience is not a reflection of a celestial ethic, but more prosaically the internalization of the norms of the group.

These encounters perfectly illustrate how processes of inclusion–exclusion are involved in power relations and political processes, which were co-created in our interactions. My new awareness of the importance of my national identity/context shed new light on the concepts of power, identity, politics, and belonging as viewed through social and political perspectives, as well as through the lens of theories of identity formation (Elias, 2000; Griffin, 2002). In Project 2 I notice a meaningful shift in my perception of myself in relation to my social context, raising the question of whether it is even possible to separate one from the other.

Another learning set discussion opened my mind to new possibilities concerning the notion of belonging as it relates to family. My unexamined belief in the good, positive, and protecting value of family was challenged by my colleagues' very different experiences with their own families. I had considered the need to belong as something an individual either does or does not have; but now I began to appreciate the extent to which belonging is governed by dynamic social processes.

Elias (1970, 1994) suggested game models as an interpretive framework for exploring such relationships and interdependencies, while Mead (1934) influenced the way I understand the communication process: how mind, self, and society operate simultaneously in social interactions that are reciprocal in nature. Discarding the oversimplified notion of linear sender–receiver communication, I became aware of how I am constantly changing others while being changed by them at the same time (Stacey, 2011). This represents a paradigm shift in my understanding of organisational processes that has already had a significant impact on how I practise talent management, as I will describe in the section on 'Contribution to practice'.

When writing Project 2 I still assumed that we all, judges and judged alike, share similar understandings and act from similar places – an assumption that is deconstructed in Project 4, following exposure to the philosophy of pragmatism and Dewey (1984), and later, authors from the critical management tradition drawing on similar ideas, offering a new understanding of what objectivity means in the absence of the foundation of absolute knowledge and truth posited by the traditional discourse of organisational processes (Martela, 2015; Watson, 2010; Jackall, 2010). Certainly, I no longer hold the view – so intimately embedded in Project 2 – that talent assessment is an objective analytical process. Project 3 illuminates the practice of

talent management from another perspective: power relations and the creation of knowledge.

Project 3

In Project 3, in an effort to decipher how I think and act in relation to others and how this affects what is going on in my practice, I explored my professional relationship with Prof. Gary Davidson, a well-known figure in talent management with whom I had collaborated for many years on complex, global projects involving senior executives. The reflection and analysis in Project 3 concentrate mainly on understanding the relationships between us, and how these were co-created by power relations. I do not call into question his expertise in the field, the value of the content he presents, or the way he worked (which I followed). Nor do I question his objectivity (something that I only address later, in Project 4).

In the narrative, I describe being invited to participate in a tender and almost automatically suggesting that he join me. Gary accepted my offer but, after several weeks, unilaterally decided to submit his own bid, based on the proposal I had worked hard for weeks to prepare – as he announced in an email one Sunday morning:

I reread the bank tender and it doesn't seem logical to me that we will submit a bid together. So apart from a bit of administrative work, I don't see how our cooperation could be expressed here. (Project 3, p. 66)

Even two years later, I still feel angry – mostly at myself, because I now see how I participated fully in co-creating those relationships and was responsible for the consequences; perhaps also because I recognise similar dynamics in relationships I have in other areas of my life, and the high price I pay (or believe I must pay) for belonging where I want to belong.

In Project 3, themes that began to emerge in Project 2 become clearer: hidden narratives of whether I myself can be considered 'talent' or not, how I am being judged, and the role of stereotypical judgment in those processes. How good I feel when one of the leading companies asks me to join them; on the other hand, how much I judge myself as somehow insufficient without Prof. Davidson's leading input, and consider my consultants inadequate to take his place. Why had I invited Gary to join me in the first place? What in our relationship made it possible for him to act the way he did?

Probing deeper into the concepts of power relations and belonging, and the connection between them, I can reflect now on a repetitive pattern in my relationships with others, which emerges in different ways in all projects. In all my research projects, I notice how I am constrained by the conflict between pleasing in order to belong, and following my ethical principles; between being dominated in order to be included, and dominating others. Perhaps this is another manifestation of what I described in Project 2 as the conflict between 'Big Tali' (the 'good' girl) and 'Little Tali' (the 'bad' girl). Seeking an explanation for this through analysis of further literature (Arendt, 1958; Bourdieu, 1984; Elias, 1991; Foucault, 1982; Lukes, 2005; Stacey, 2011), which emphasise the social perspective on power relations, I appreciated the insights of Lukes's ideological dimension of power in which the powerful are able to make the powerless behave in certain ways without coercing them to do so; this resonated with the way I felt dominated by Prof. Davidson. I was also surprised to discover that I also tacitly dominate others: for example my supervisor, reflecting on my work, commented that creating an organisation that is managed as a 'family' is a subtle way of exercising control, since everyone is expected to behave like a family member.

When I first started the DMan, I shared the traditional view of organisations as hierarchical systems that operate in a linear way – that is, based on 'as if' processes, where the roles and responsibilities of each managerial level in the organisation are clear-cut – but through writing Project 3, I came to understand power relations as a dynamic process that enables and constrains others at the same time (Elias, 1970), while processes of inclusion–exclusion are simultaneously co-created (Elias, 1994). For the first time, I came to recognise paradoxes as part of organisational life (Mowles, 2015): two apparently contradictory forces can co-exist interdependently.

The best example related to reflecting on Project 3 is the paradox of conflict as simultaneously enabling and constraining. With my revised perspective on power, I began to discern some positive aspects of my conflict with Gary (and continue to notice these subtle benefits, nearly a year since I stopped working with him). I can cope with more conflict, as I recognise the potential for conflictual situations to arise naturally during any process of development. I find that (with varying degrees of success) I am better able to let go of my habitual sense of responsibility to solve the conflict or to do anything to prevent it. From the perspective of complex responsive

processes, the appropriate way to contend with this ever-present threat of conflict is not avoidance or attempting unilateral resolution, but negotiating together by exploring potential ways of moving forward. In other words: conflict, as an external manifestation of our internal differences, offers us an opportunity to better understand ourselves through the other, through mutual reflection; it is in this exploration and negotiation that novelty lies (Stacey, 2007).

Working on Project 3 undermined my habitual belief in a single, correct answer that reflects absolute truth. In an age of uncertainty (Katz, 2012), prediction is impossible. The complex responsive process way of thinking on organisations strengthened my criticism of our ability to know, to predict (Stacey, 2001), and to control (Mowles, 2011), organisational processes using traditional tools or linear flowcharts and conceptual models like change management (Kotter, 1996). Linking my critique of the way Prof. Davidson represents the power of knowing, to rethinking the possibility of predicting future potential in the case of my practice, is supported by the complex responsive process perspective on 'time'. When describing complexity, Stacey and Griffin (2005) acknowledge that the movement of time means that all situations are paradoxically both stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable, known and unknown. This partly explains why managerial tools are not measurably linked to the organisation's success, and there is rarely correlation between the results of talent assessment process and what happened in reality.

Looking at Project 3 retrospectively, and deepening my familiarity with the pragmatist philosophy as part of my work on Project 4, I began to consider pragmatism as a new perspective through which I might develop a new understanding of talent management and what it means. This is informed by Dewey's (1958) definition of knowledge as a dynamic process, rather than an artefact in anyone's possession. Until I saw knowledge this way, I had somehow assumed that Prof. Davidson was the one who had the 'ability to know' – which, in my eyes, is what gave him his power and became part of his identity.

Talent management is one of the most political processes that can take place in any organisation, given its wide personal and strategic implications and the fact that it involves intense political and power relations. Therefore, an individual authority's interpretation of 'knowing' is significant in its impact. Project 3 pushed me to explore

the act of judgment that occurs in talent management when ‘knowing’ who is included in (or excluded from) the privileged group of ‘talent’. In writing it, I found myself preoccupied with ethical dilemmas and anxious about how involved I am in my practice as an ‘external’ consultant, and how I exercise power in my consultancy work (Mowles, 2011), adding it to my reflection on how I am involved in relationships in general. The shift in how I consider the process of ‘knowing’ now enables me to question the judgment process as exemplified by Prof. Davidson and his authoritative decisions. While offering some answers to these concerns, this new perspective also raised further questions, mainly ethical, regarding the objectivity of our judgments. Reflecting on Project 3 now, I notice for the first time where my ambivalence about my practice arose – concerns that I sought to address by investigating judgment further in Project 4, specifically searching for critical literature on talent management. To my surprise, this critique still leaned on traditional assumptions about organisations – mainly focusing on adaption to conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. The key articles (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Reis, 2015) offered tools and methodologies to overcome such uncertainty – exactly opposite to the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating.

Reviewing Project 3 again, I see how my developing critique of scientific research relates to my growing concerns about assessment methodology. Questions around objectivity, the attempt to locate ‘one truth’, and my own participation in the assessment process, all underlie my ambivalence about the practice of talent management. Project 4 presents a narrative describing a project in which I engage directly in a process of talent management, focusing on the process of judgment (‘assessment’).

Project 4

In Project 4, by focusing mainly on the consultant’s judgment of who is included/excluded, I write more directly about the actual processes involved in the work rather than the themes it raises. The assessor (or consultant, in my case) is an active participant, influencing the outcomes of the process while also being influenced by the process as s/he makes this judgment (Dalal, 1998; Elias, 1970; Stacey, 2012).

Project 4 describes a broad global talent management process assessing the ability of an overseas subsidiary to handle strategic changes and dramatic growth. The narrative is based on events from two meetings that formed part of the subsidiary's readiness assessment, as these centred on a process of reciprocal judgment – my judgment of the client, and their judgment of my company's work. The complexity of these meetings and the events leading to them raised further questions about the fundamental assumptions of the methodologies that we, as consultants, implement to reach a definitive recommendation, which we often present as the only answer to the client's question. Yet the very concept of objectivity and the notion of presenting a single, absolute truth have been subverted by my reading on the philosophy of pragmatism – a perspective that offered some insight into what I am 'showing' in Project 4; such as how, a minute before leaving for the airport on my way to meet the executive I had assessed for a feedback session, I erased all the scores from his report, leaving only the verbal description of behaviours. I suddenly realised how the scores could lead us into debating numbers, rather than paying attention to what is going on in the local interaction. The other process of understanding was around the history and the context in which the process took place and the relationships were embedded; this is where I began to doubt whether any act of judgment can be objective. Following Dewey (1910), and other schools of critical management (Brinkmann, 2013; Alvesson, 2017), the question in my mind shifted from *Is it objective?* to *What does 'objectivity' mean?* I came to realise how, as a participant in the judgment process, I cannot be an 'outside' observer; indeed, the subjective is an unavoidable aspect of exploring the objective.

I no longer consider talent management as a scientific exercise, but rather as a complex process involving strong dynamics of power relations. It is a matrix of people who come from different histories, practicing different habitus – combining past and present to co-create the future. This has local and global political/organisational, as well as personal, implications. A short narrative (below) describes a moment in the day I returned from a DMan residential, while working on the synopsis. I suddenly became aware that I was doing something different – mainly arguing with my co-facilitator's assumption that there is an objective way to interpret and respond:

I landed, quite sick, and three hours later joined the first day of the workshop. It was a torture ... Still, it was very successful, and the good thing was that I spent a big part of the day in a co-facilitation with another consultant who specialises in customer interfaces. I felt myself sitting so uncomfortably with many things he said – very traditional language of sales people. Finally, I decided to intervene. It was when he led the session on creating intimacy as part of the sales meeting process. He gave some examples of how someone can make a statement about himself, what kind of questions you can ask in return in order to connect with who that person is, and what information you must acquire in order to create intimacy. Then he gave a long monologue on how this involves just listening to what someone says, without any judgment: ‘We can’t judge’, he said, ‘we have to be objective ... this is why I am teaching you how to respond to each of your customer’s answers’. I excused myself, saying (with some humour around our ‘marriage’ as consultants working together for so many years) that I have to disagree ... and said: ‘of course there is judgment. This is a social process ... and you would pick from what someone says something that is totally different from what I would pick ... and you will create different meaning; and I guess that knowing that I’m telling you something, regarding our shared history, I will say something different about myself’ ... and then I found myself talking to them (he probably wanted to kill me!) about how important it is to reflect on how we react and why – and how we make meaning by also reflecting with others about the meaning of culture (because there were various different nationalities in the room). I smiled to myself; it was a small moment of satisfaction from being able to experience a change in the way I understand processes in organisation – I argued with my colleague’s easy certainties and his faith in objectivity.

Underlying dominant practices in my profession is the traditional belief that objectivity and subjectivity are contrasting opposites and that we consultants must ‘fight’ against ‘contaminating’ our work, and the process of assessment, with subjectivity (Smilanksy,

2006). We are somehow meant to transcend the power relations of organisational members.

With hindsight, I can say that my method of inquiry (the assessment) as described in Project 4 is akin to the notion of scientific inquiry as developed by the pragmatic school of thought. Though not writing specifically about organisations, Dewey (1910, 1984) – together with more recent researchers, such as Watson (2010), Alvesson and Spicer (2016), Jackall (2010) and Flyvbjerg (2001) – researched organisations based on the assumption that there is no single, absolute truth; they acknowledge the role of common sense and the researcher's participation in the inquiry. This helped me to see a correlation between the DMan method of inquiry and the assessment process in talent management: I suddenly realised how practising reflection and reflexivity will enhance the judgment process, by including more relevant information (Alvesson et al, 2017).

To some extent, Project 4 supports my argument that talent management is not an analytical exercise; but some challenges remain. Global organisations that are spread across multiple locations and whose structure is often the result of mergers and acquisitions need an assessment to inform crucial decisions on relocation, versatility, and mobility. A more nuanced approach that relies more on reflecting on the interactions between assessed and assessor, given the broader picture and context, is incompatible with the useful practice of benchmarking – comparing individuals and assessors (each group separately) on a scale – and thus limits our ability to make concrete recommendations for future careers and mobility, or to indicate further strategic implications of the assessment results.

The reflections within each project are inevitably limited by my perspectives at the time of writing. Significant ethical issues concerning the very essence of my practice, specifically my role in judgment, are raised in Project 4 without being resolved; I take the opportunity to address them further here in the synopsis.

Research method

Learning to see – habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgment, to investigate and comprehend the individual case in all its aspects.

Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 66

The DMan differs in several key aspects from typical social science PhD programmes. The research approach reflects the main ideas of the complex responsive process school of thought, which are implemented throughout the programme as we students experience, reflect, and theorise together as a research community. Key characteristics of this approach are:

- *‘Taking experience seriously’*: Students base their research on their experience as described in four reflexive narratives, providing the data from which our knowledge unfolds empirically rather than deriving from *a priori* knowledge and assumptions.
- *Reflection and reflexivity* are considered key processes to ensure the quality of our research – deepening our insights, sharpening our critical thinking, and increasing the validity and generalisability of our findings.
- *‘Taking the group seriously’*: Since comments and responses from fellow students are considered vital input, students are intensely involved in different study groups throughout the research and writing processes.

In this section I elaborate on each aspect of the methodology, noting its challenges and comparing it with more traditional methods. Finally, I describe the ‘mind shift’ I experienced through this process of inquiry and by applying the DMan research method in my professional practice.

‘Taking experience seriously’: Reflexive narrative inquiry

The DMan invites students to ‘take experience seriously’ as a research method, exploring our respective professions through our past and present experiences. Research conducted within the DMan programme rests on the qualitative research method of the narrative (Andrews et al, 2013; Connelly and Clandinin, 2000), in which students base their research on their experience as described in four narratives (‘projects’). Reviewing the wide spectrum of research methods, this approach is

located on the radical edge of interpretive qualitative methods – what Alvesson (2009) calls ‘radical reflexivity’.

We do not set out to locate the research question through an orderly literature search to identify scholarly gaps waiting to be filled. Rather, as narrative-based qualitative scholars we aim to ‘look carefully at materials from [our] own life in order to be able to understand the larger social world’ (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 2). The research question is expected to gradually emerge through our reflections on our practice as described in the four projects, which serve as our raw data. Indeed, key themes first become apparent in the first narrative, in which we mainly reflect on the history of our development into who we are today. The research themes are then developed from one project to the next, while key research arguments are gradually formulated and crystallised during the writing of narratives and through subsequent reflection and reflexivity (see next section). Thomas (2012, p. 39) describes the methodology of writing narratives and reflection and reflexivity as ‘intelligent noticing’, in which our experience and the way we participate in relationships are the main data for inquiry. The goal is to develop critical thinking and movement of thought regarding our practices as we challenge underlying assumptions about management and organisational life.

Comparison to other qualitative methods

Alvesson (2009) explained generalisability in terms of knowledge or research findings that resonate with our ‘general knowledge’ of what is ‘fairly typical’. Within the DMan research community, ‘generalisability’ is understood as someone’s shared experience that we immediately recognise as relevant to our own, applicable to other contexts.

The DMan method of inquiry is reminiscent of qualitative research methods such as action research, participative inquiry, case studies, ethnography (Watson, 2010), auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006) and at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009). Among these, our DMan narratives are closest in nature to auto-ethnographies. Ethnography, used mainly in anthropology, is the systematic observation-based study of a society from the perspective of the subject of the study. It is an art of describing, and while it may be ‘more than a science, [it is] no less accurate or truthful for that’ (Ingold, 2014, p. 385). Ethnography research is a field-based study that aims to

understand the lives of specific cultural groups as manifested in interviews, symbols, artefacts, language, and observation. Looking at social relations, culture and power, this research method tends to seek a common denominator among patterns within the group. The ethnographer, present in the daily lives of those who host the research, can observe individual participants in their home setting and day-to-day activities. The ethnographer's interactions and personal relations shape key aspects of the fieldwork process. Ethnographers do what it takes to understand meaning-making: spending months on site talking to employees, managers, and union representatives, hanging out at the cafeteria, attending meetings, and so on – to get a sense of their everyday lives. It is this type of fieldwork that generates 'thick description' (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 231).

Auto-ethnography is a 'memory work' (Alvesson, 2009) that includes the researcher as an active, nearly equal, participant in the study while emphasising personal meaning and subjective aspects, including cultural histories, of the experience (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). To ensure its value, researchers should be aware of their own role duality in the study, take an analytic-reflexive stance, be visible and present in the text, engage with others to prevent self-absorption, and refine theoretical understanding of social processes. Auto-ethnographers thus recognise the various ways by which their paradigmatic background and life experiences influence the research process and final findings. Auto-ethnography as described by Anderson (2006) appears to be the most similar to my method, focusing on the researcher's experience in a setting in which he/she is a natural participant, involving significant reflexivity and broad theoretical inputs, as well as exploring a wider social context for applicability of the ideas. My method differs, however, in its engagement with a community of researchers who play an active and ongoing role in challenging and critiquing my work. Also, although the traditional methodology of anthropologists is participant-observation – where they both participate and observe, themselves and others – ethnographers do not usually write much about themselves; whereas auto-ethnographers do. However, the emphasis is on writing about 'the Other' – even if understanding them entails reflexivity and gauging what impact the researcher has had on their own research.

The validity of ethnographic texts is based on their credibility (Cunliffe, 2010): they must be authentic enough to be recognised by the reader, convincing them but possibly also prompting them to think in new ways about their own experience at the same time (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993).

Writing narratives

Narrative research on organisations has produced a rich body of knowledge while providing a way to explore the meaning of the organisational experience. The usefulness of narrative is that it has ‘the potential to dissolve the duality between traditional scholarship and subjective experience in a way that is methodologically sophisticated and theoretically justified’ (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 180). The goal of narrative research is not to find a single truth, but rather to pursue meaning (ibid). Narratives thus unveil networks of conversations, facilitating the emergence of different meaning through social and political sense-making processes; they ‘provide a methodological position through which to engage not with a presumed neutral “real” world but with complex nuances of the “lived” world’ (ibid, p. 180). They are particularly suited for the study of the ‘experience of bodily interaction between people [as they are] patterned primarily as narratives of relating between self and other (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 9).

Narrative thinking draws on Dewey’s two criteria of experience – continuity and interaction (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 32). A feature of narrative is its ongoing explorative nature: themes change as the narrative progresses. With the DMan narrative-based methodology, the phenomenon being researched is assumed to continuously undergo change while also imposing change, as two inseparable processes. The researcher’s role in this scenario thus includes an inquiry into their own thought process, its progress, and its evolution. The DMan dissertation unfolds through the four projects, demonstrating the evolution of the researcher’s thinking and their ability to observe and gain new understanding

The narratives we write are ‘problem’ driven; in the detail of the narrative are expressed the main themes that emerge through personal experience. As Flyvbjerg explains, ‘Narrative inquiries into organisations do not – indeed, cannot – start from explicit theoretical assumptions. Instead, they begin with an interest in a particular

organisational phenomenon that is best understood narratively (2006, p. 380).

Understanding the context in which experiences take place facilitates a better assessment of what is going on and what should be done next (Stacey, 2012).

Generalisation and learning are then derived from personal, subjective experiences of the researcher as a participant rather than an observer or spectator. Learning from experience confers special value, as noted by Dewey (1929, p. 155):

The forces that have influenced me have come from persons and from situations more than from books – not that I have not learned a great deal from philosophical writing, but that what I have learned from them has been technical in comparison with what I have been forced to thinking upon and about because of some experience in which I found myself entangled.

The narrative nevertheless is ‘not any arbitrary account in that it must make sense to others, resonate with the experience of others and be persuasive to them’ (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 224). In writing a narrative, authors must reflect upon their choices of inclusion and exclusion to better understand why their narrative may be of interest. This allows them to distinguish that which is transferable (i.e., can be generalised) from the specific event to the general context – or, in my case, organisational processes. In my research, I realised how the main themes arising in talent management practice – power relations, and processes of people being excluded and included in ‘branded’ groups in organizations, such as high potential and top talent – are recognised by my colleagues in my country as well as within the DMan community. The question of the assessor, and the question of their objectivity – involving notions of being involved and detached – emerged strongly from my four narratives as part of my experience of specific situations. Yet in discussions within my learning set, and the wider DMan community of researchers, it became possible to generalise their specific local processes to group dynamics in other organisations. The literature on the main themes, as well as on talent management, also supports the feasibility and potential value of generalising from my research into my own experience and practice of talent management to understanding talent management in other organisations. Yet we are cautioned against attempting to transfer scientific methods that are applied in the realm of natural sciences to that of social sciences, lest we try ‘to play different games by the same rules’ (Thomas, 2012, p. 38).

Most mainstream organisational research within the positivist paradigm seems to be characterised by what Flyvbjerg calls 'Physics envy' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 1) – the fear that taking a non-rational, non-scientific approach to research runs the risk of inconclusive and unsupported findings. Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 38), drawing on Dreyfus and Bourdieu, argues that epistemic approaches to the natural sciences are not ideal for studies of human behaviour, since human interaction must always be studied in context; it is pointless attempting to reach universal explanations.

The capacity to observe relationships between the individual and the global, between personal and collective history, requires what Mills (1959, p. 7) describes as a 'sociological imagination' – that is, the ability 'to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two'.

Increasing validity and generalisability: Reflection and reflexivity

The complex responsive processes approach guides our DMan research towards the investigation of interpersonal interactions and the complexities and interdependencies they involve. It advocates consulting various intellectual traditions and drawing on different perspectives when thinking about the problems people face in organisations, since the solution to social problems may be 'beyond the ability of any one discipline to solve' (Morrel and Learmonth, 2015, p. 529) – thus offering an alternative to the evidence-based management approaches that are so prevalent. Consequently, similar to other professional doctorate programmes, the DMan encourages 'pluralism, critical reflexivity, questioning basic assumptions, [and] intellectual flexibility' (Morrel and Learmonth, 2015, p. 530).

To develop our critical thinking skills, we are asked to challenge underlying assumptions about our respective professions while exploring alternative views. We develop our interpretation by focusing on what people are doing and thinking, how they make sense of their world; and also on how we ourselves make sense of how our research subjects make sense. Critical thinking involves questioning what we are doing and how we understand what we are doing. We might ask ourselves: How do we think? What assumptions and prejudices do we bring to our work, to the way we think about our work, and to our work with others? We attempt to understand not only

others, but also our own place in the narrative and in the relationships described in it. In other words, we aim to explore what we take for granted, expose and challenge our habitual thinking, and uncover what has so far remained invisible to us – prompting changes in our thinking as we remain ‘thoughtful and critically reflexive in the kinds of knowledge claims we make’ (Morrel and Learmonth, 2015, p. 529).

Reflection and reflexivity ‘draw attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer’ (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 8); they are two connected but separate activities (Mowles, 2015). To reflect means to think deeply about a subject: ‘reflection is the intellectual and emotional exercise of the mind to reason, give careful consideration to something, make inferences and decisions and find solutions’ (Stacey, 2012, p. 111). In the process of reflection, we ‘recapture our experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it’ (Alvesson et al, 2017, p. 13).

Reflexivity is defined as the ambition to carefully and systematically take a critical view of one’s own assumptions, ideas, and favoured vocabulary and consider whether alternative ones make better sense (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). Being reflexive is a process of becoming aware of the history of the traditions of thought in our communities, which are reflected in our interactions (Stacey, 2012). In order to reflect, one must detach from involvement; whereas reflexivity requires us to think about how we are engaged, ‘bringing ... reflection back to ourselves [so that we] may be changed by it’ (Mowles, 2015, p. 60). Inviting us to understand how we create meaning, reflexivity is epistemological by nature: it helps us think about how we are thinking, decipher how we know what we know, and identify our habitual ways of thinking about the world. We might ask ourselves questions such as, ‘What do I think of this issue? Am I seduced by a particular vocabulary? Or, do I have fixed ideas?’ (Alvesson et al, 2017, p. 14).

Since the researcher and object of research mutually affect one another not only in explored interactions but also in the reflexive process, subjects and objects are inseparable and simultaneously present (Mowles, 2015). This implies that researchers can never be merely observers, as they are participants in an experience that is co-created by them. Together, reflection and reflexivity allow the researcher to take

notice of the various ways by which they are involved in the situation. The residential weekends, and the continuing work with my learning set and supervisors (see section on the learning set, p. 147), offer yet another layer of reflection that significantly enhanced my ability to think critically on what I do.

Literature

Reflection and reflexivity are essential processes when seeking to understand the local situation and determine its generalisability to organisational life (Stacey, 2012). Through these practices, we become aware of the interplay between philosophical positions and research practice (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). While in many dissertations the literature is a separate chapter, in my research the literature is woven throughout the thesis from the beginning to end 'in an attempt to create a seamless link between the theory and the practice embodied in the inquiry' (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 41). As we students reflect on our respective practices in the local interaction and engage with theory and responses from our community of researchers, we are able to generalise. Our goal as DMan students is to develop the practitioner's skill in paying attention to the complexity of the local, micro interactions in which we are engaged, because it is in these that wider organisational patterns emerge (Stacey, 2011). Moreover, 'one can only understand an organization from within the local interaction in which global tendencies to act are taken up' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 9). Reflection on the narratives allows for more propositional themes to emerge, which we might then relate to theories that are seen as generalised descriptions of experience. The necessity of being both involved (to practise reflexivity) and detached (to practise reflection) helps our subjective experience to acquire wider value and applicability.

The diverse research literature – from the complexity sciences, pragmatic philosophy, sociology, and psychology – offers a broad range of intellectual traditions for the researcher to draw upon when conducting the inquiry, interpreting events and their underlying motivations, and finally when generalising from the specific organisation to the study of organisations more broadly. This wide research angle acknowledges the value of what Morrel and Learmonth call 'socially distributed knowledge', which 'captures the idea that the solution to a problem may be beyond

the ability of any one discipline to solve'; they emphasise that never knowing for certain what approach to take to a problem 'is what should keep us, as scholars, thoughtful and critically reflexive in the kinds of knowledge claims we make' (2015, p. 529). In this way, exploring the range of perspectives expressed in the literature enhances our way of making sense of complexity in organisations and supports generalisation and validity.

Personal dimensions in research may be seen as instrumental also for our understanding of more general issues about culture and society (Brinkmann, 2012). Under the DMan research approach, we use narratives that evoke emotional responses, and include 'emotions and fantasies of the researcher' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). At the same time, however, we generalise and validate through comparing theoretical perspectives on wide social phenomena and understanding and interpretations generated from Projects 1–4. 'Taking the group seriously' – residential weekends

Students and faculty alike in the DMan programme meet face to face every three months for what are known as residential weekends. Three student group frameworks are available: community meeting, community discussion (when we discuss faculty inputs, students' presentations, outside speakers occasionally) and learning set.

Students participating in these sessions are senior managers and consultant who come from different professions, each at a different stage in their research (that is, we do not start and finish together as a group). All participants are experienced in working in or with organisations. During our weekend convention, as a group, researchers and supervisors alike reflect on the process of learning and researching with the objective of developing our understanding about how individuals and group relate to each other in organisations. An important role of reflecting together is to provide group support for critical reflection. Responses from personal and collective identities on what we may be taking for granted are significant in their impact on movement of thought – the very process that the complex responsive process approach aims to achieve.

The community meeting

This is an experimental think tank that examines organisational group processes. At community meetings, students and supervisors alike sit in a circle, face to face, with no agenda and little facilitation unless faculty input is anticipated. Faculty members will simply point out connections between the occurrences within the group and organisational life, and will also guide our attention to unconscious processes or intervene by bringing to the surface issues that are difficult to discuss. The large group meetings provide 'a lived experience of the emergence of themes organising the experience of being together and the power relations they reflect' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 26). The meeting is designed with no particular end in view, so that we are not driven to get anywhere specific (Mowles, 2015, p. 173). Rather, we are merely required to pay attention to what is important in the moment, and discuss the dilemmas and anxieties that arise there and then.

The way we work in the community meetings is influenced by the group analytic tradition (Stacey, 2003; Mowles, 2017). The emphasis in community meetings is on discussion and reflection rather than problem identification and resolution (Mowles, 2015, p. 173). What we students learn and experience through this collective reflection, we are then expected to implement in our own research.

The learning set

This is a small study group that is part of the wider research community. Each learning set comprises three or four members, a supervisor from among faculty members, and a second supervisor. As in the wider community, members of the learning have reached different stages of the DMan programme. The learning set is thus a dynamic group – changing as students come and go, while the same supervisors remain. In the learning set, we discuss and comment on each other's work and reflect on issues that have risen during the community meetings, our learning sets, and our research work. Students then reflect upon their work through the perspectives of their colleagues.

As in all research, questions of validity and legitimacy also arise from the complex responsive framework. Since the DMan research involves subjective reflection and interpretation of personal experiences, we cannot expect objective validity. Projects thus evolve through multiple iterations. Learning set members comment on

peers' work in writing prior to the scheduled Skype calls (four to six times a year), or weekend residentials. In this process, our interpretation must be justified 'in terms of a wider tradition of thought that the community being addressed finds persuasive, or at least plausible' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 27). The fact that others in my learning set, who have come to know me and my research over a period of time, have engaged critically with my interpretations is a crucial determinant of the generalisability of my work: their responses helped me to evaluate how much sense my ideas make to others, as well as helping me to make sense of my own experience.

The learning set experience has also deepened my reflection and reflexivity upon how I respond to others, mainly through commenting each other's work. For example, as mentioned in Project 4 (p. 104), Doug Griffin, my supervisor in one of the learning set sessions, recommended that I use the word *response* rather than *feedback* when offering comments to another learning set member. He explained that because a response originates in emotions and values, reflecting on it together can contribute to the process of paying attention to differences in individual perspectives. This simple yet effective suggestion inspired me to break my habitual ways of thinking about my practice, greatly impacting the way I work today: I now observe how paying attention to my emotional responses makes a difference to the way I deliver results, as well as how they are received.

The 'problem of reflexivity', and the ways in which our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others, are issues that have long concerned sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers, acknowledging that as social researchers, we are integral to the social world we study (Denzin, 1997). With the underpinning assumption of the complex responsive processes approach that interactions are perpetually changing while also effecting change, we researchers must also include an understanding of how our thought process evolved and progressed over time during our research. Thus, rather than producing a conclusive dissertation at the end of the programme, our raw materials are collected across the narratives we write in the different projects, each of which demonstrates the evolution of our research and our thinking, and our ability to observe and gain new insights. We additionally critically reflect on our projects – both individually and with the help of our DMan community – several times more after all four projects have been completed. The research products,

then, are ‘interactively emergent interpretations of the researcher [asking themselves]: “how do I understand my daily experience with regard to my research domain after I went through the whole research journey?”’ (Homan 2016, p. 505).

Reflection upon the narratives, combined with study of the literature and responses from the learning set, revealed how others understood my narratives and created meaning from them. This, in turn, allowed me to determine the generalisability of processes underpinning the documented events – based on our collective experience – from the specific interaction to processes that take place in organisations more generally. Such widely informed reiteration of the narrative enriches it beyond personal experience, increasing its quality, validity, and transferability (or extent of generalisability). I concur with Brinkmann that ultimately, all ‘inquiry depends on human judgement’ and that ‘good social and human science research goes beyond formal rules and encompasses more than technical methods’ (2012, p. 49); it does not focus on the techniques, but rather on the research question and available data.

The ‘mind shift’: Applying the DMan research method to my practice

There is additional special meaning to the research method employed in the DMan programme due to its tangency with my own profession. As a talent manager assessor, I must investigate, inquire and research into both the individuals and the organisation involved in the assessment process. The DMan method of research introduced me to alternative concepts that I could immediately apply in my work, and which significantly impacted the way I perceive my participation in the process of judgment within talent management. Approaching my investigation within organisations differently has profoundly enriched the quality of my observations and significantly enhanced the value my clients derive from the intervention or assessment process. The research methodology, and the resultant changes in my understanding of my practice, are rooted in the phronetic tradition (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This focuses on the how people use ‘practical judgment’ to resolve the challenges that arise daily in unpredictable local interactions; it takes a pragmatic perspective on scientific inquiry, dismissing the notion that objectivity is possible in any process of social engagement. This perspective

contributed greatly to the formulation of my key arguments, as I will explain in that section.

Reflexivity continues to challenge my idealistic paradigms on talent management, allowing me to sidestep into different alternatives, assess their value and adequacy, and determine what I might take with me as I move forward. In particular, my ongoing participation in the learning set and the large community of researchers helped to dispel my unexamined belief in the good, positive, and protecting value of family: my colleagues related very different experiences with their own families. Through our collective reflection and their responses, I could see how my idealised perception of family had actually served dynamics of power relations in my professional life. Whereas I once considered the desire to belong as an individual need, through the interaction and responses from my supervisors and learning set members, I began to appreciate the extent to which belonging is actually governed by dynamics of social processes.

Two narratives express the deep impact of the community meetings, partly described in my critical review of Project 2, both pertaining to the research theme of belonging and both relating to my identity as an Israeli Jewish minority within the DMan community. Emily, one of the most veteran students in the community meeting, responded: 'You're here unless you die' – words that still echo in my mind, highlighting the implications of my cultural associations and the segregation of our minority identity among the broader DMan community. Emily's response was related to a community discussion (the first of its kind in the history of the DMan programme) about whether we Israelis could go home early to celebrate one of the most important holidays in the Jewish tradition: Passover (*Pesach*). Reflecting on this episode together with my supervisors, almost two years later, I could see how we experienced it differently; we are each 'pre-conditioned to the core by [our] community ... imprinted ... by the group in which [we are] raised' (Elias, 1970, p. 152). Another episode, which took place very close to Passover, had even greater personal significance: the war.

The war

During the July residential, war broke out in Israel. Amid reports of sirens, falling rockets, our families running to shelters, and my daughter being drafted into the army,

we four Israelis desperately sought whatever scraps of information we could from within the confines of the residential – often reverting to Hebrew in our stress. The result: we excluded ourselves as a group.

Just as we had found ourselves united by Pesach without necessarily sharing any religious views, so we were now united by this traumatic experience regardless of our individual politics. Yet in the binary sense of inclusion–exclusion, we became simply the ‘outsiders’ – excluded by our very different experiences, outlook and even language.

One consequence of perceiving our identity at this point primarily as Israeli Jews was that our DMan colleagues made assumptions about the wider historical, social and political connotations of this, such as our attitude towards the suffering of the Palestinians. They began asking questions about Israeli/Jewish ways of life, even calling into question our parenting values: how could we send children off to Poland (a national tradition, commemorating the Holocaust)? How could we let our children join the army?

My new perspective on belonging deepened still further when I returned home, to a war zone. Although the war was covered in the international news, few of our DMan colleagues or supervisors asked after us.

Later, when my Israeli colleague raised in the community meeting our distress that no one seemed to care about ‘the Israeli group’ (mentioning just one person who had responded, and implying that the others should feel guilty), I was amazed by everyone’s indifference. Worse still, some took sides in the conflict – excluding us further by assuming us all to be willing participants of a country doing terrible things to the Palestinian population. As I am also deeply uncomfortable with the Israeli government’s policies in this regard, I sensed that I was being stereotyped and found it hard to defend myself against these (spoken/unspoken) assumptions.

Now that some time has elapsed, concluding my arguments and doing another turn of reflection with my first and second supervisors, over a glass of wine, in my last residential of the programme, I can finally integrate this dramatic example of how we all have different perspectives and historical frames of reference through which we interpret events and choose our actions. Instead of feeling anger or indignation, I acknowledge the profound subtleties of involvement and ambivalence.

These two episodes (Passover and the war) perfectly illustrate how processes of inclusion and exclusion are involved in power relations and political processes that were co-created in our interactions in the community meeting – conversations that continued over dinner, in the bar, and in the learning set.

Through these experiences, I learned that aiming to ‘find the values that unite people’ (Martela, 2015, p. 556) in this diversity of opinions, ‘the pluralist interpretation of pragmatism’, is not necessarily counterproductive (p. 555). This point of view helped me address my concerns about being ethical in my practice and legitimised the productive use of doubt in my work. The pragmatists’ perception of scientific inquiry, coupled with the ideas that Dewey expressed in *Experience and Nature* (1925), portray the process of human judgment as ‘intellectual craftsmanship’ (Mills, 1959, p. 195). Instead of following prescribed steps in the search for that - ultimate and absolute truth that is the traditional goal of talent management, this perspective implies that we should aim to be good craftsmen: ‘avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959, p. 224).

Some methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Using narrative is an unconventional approach to academic research, raising questions about validity and subjectivity for many. These are the same limitations that challenge my practice – the assessment phase in talent management. However, certain aspects of the methodology mitigate against the limitations of using narrative as the ‘raw material’ of research, as I explain in the next section.

Key arguments

Three main arguments emerge from my research that have most contributed to the shift in my perception of my work as a talent management consultant, and my profession at large:

- Argument #1: The process of judgment, central to talent assessment and management, is not an analytical, linear communication between the assessor and the assessed but rather a relational and social process, which involves power relations and a dynamic of inclusion–exclusion.
- Argument #2: The assessor is not an objective observer, but a participant who is simultaneously both involved and detached; in the absence of objectivity (in

the sense used by natural scientists), the assessor must rely on practical judgment.

- Argument #3: Talent management's traditional promise of future-oriented focus and reliable predictions is illusory, given that all participants are continuously merging their ongoing experiences to spontaneously co-create the future in unpredictable ways.

The first argument – in which I reframe talent management and the process of judgment as a social process of inclusion and exclusion – leads to the other two arguments, which are themselves closely related to each other. Below I elaborate on each argument and how the process of research, as described in previous chapters, led me to these conclusions.

Argument #1

The process of judgment, central to talent assessment and management, is not an analytical, linear communication between the assessor and the assessed but rather a relational and social process, which involves power relations and a dynamic of inclusion–exclusion

Talent management is traditionally considered an analytical exercise, in which managers and consultants use different tools to analyse the autonomous individual while maintaining objectivity and keeping any notion of relationship 'outside' the process of judgment so that they may arrive at the 'right' answer (Jackall, 2010; Vaiman et al, 2012). Through this, these managers and consultants expect to possess power and control over the flow of the process and its consequences. According to this view, judgment is performed at a separate time, while a feedback session serves only to deliver results. In the dominant discourse (e.g. Schein, 2010), this process of talent management and assessment is one of the processes that considered a 'helping intervention' in which the consultant coaches the manager to 'act out the solutions to a jointly defined problem' (Mowles, 2011, p. 47). Jointly defined by organisational managers, that is. Thus, researchers and consultants are becoming advisors on how organisations might better achieve their goals. In doing this, they serve the interests of those who relatively in a powerful position. In other words, as it is commonly defined

and perceived today, talent management is a practice that supports the interests of the management team.

Resting on three legs – the social process, power relations, and the inclusion–exclusion dynamic – my first argument changes the very essence of talent management as I see it now.

Judgment is a social process

Following Elias (2000), I now argue that individuals and their social context are inextricable, since they continuously co-create one another. That is, ‘only an awareness of the relative autonomy of the intertwining of individual plans and actions, of the way the individual is bound by his social life with others, permits a better understanding of the very fact of individuality itself’ (Elias, 2000, p. 543). The broader social background contributes to the meaning we assign to any local situation, and how we interpret it guides the way we handle any interactions involved in that situation (Elias, 2000; Mead, 1934). In the case of talent assessment, the local situations are interviews and meetings with referees who can shed light on assessed individuals. These are inseparable from the history and social background of the assessed individuals, which in turn are inseparable from any other individuals involved in that history or social background, and who are hence involved in the assessment process and are impacted by its broader implications.

Taking the complex responsive process perspective on the process of communication has enabled me to notice how the conversations that I hold in the process of talent assessment, in themselves, form a crucial stage in any attempt of mine to uncover what is going in the local situation. A conversation, noted Stacey (2012, p. 113), ‘is the social act of gestures evoking responses in which meaning emerge’. It thus follows that the feedback session is not a stand-alone event that is divorced from all preceding conversations or concludes them, but rather another conversation through which meaning is construed. I first encountered this idea in the feedback session that I described in Project 4 (pp. 103–107). By sharing my hesitation with the assessed manager, rather than telling him his scores on each competency, I allowed for a new conversation to flow, which, indeed, yielded new meaning as it shed light on the relationships that the assessed manager had with his team members on the one hand and his boss on the other. As our conversation proceeded, I realised that

truly I was involved in a continuous social process in which I could not isolate a 'clean' judgment of the assessed manager; rather, as we conversed, we were together creating the meaning based on a history of interactions and the social and political contexts, including the wider political situation (given that our home countries are in conflict) within which the assessment took place.

Narratives, habitus, and the historical context of relationships and related dynamics all serve as significant data in the process of judgment, where it is through experiencing that knowing emerges (Dewey, 1910). The notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), as mentioned earlier in the critical review of Project 2, signifies the basic assumptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours shared by a group or society that are embedded in us as second nature – a view already partly expressed by Dewey: 'Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home, and the home is part of our everyday experience' (1958, p. 104). This view changed the way I had always understood the process of judgment within the assessment process, where the goal was to achieve an objective assessment by gathering as much data as possible through which I could then analyse an individual's capabilities, skills and personality as the basis for attempting to predict their future potential.

[Judgment involves power relations](#)

Power is a fundamental concept in social science in the same sense that energy is fundamental to physics (Bertrand Russell, cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 88). Traditional notions of power in organisations are based on power as something that someone possesses because of their role or function – as critiqued by Stacey (2011) – whereby a higher position in the hierarchy confers more power and thus greater control. Authors of books such as *The Leadership Pipeline* (Charan et al, 2011; foreword, p. viii) advocate that the successful corporation should select, assess, develop, based on specific responsibilities and work values at each leadership level. As talent management consultants, we are typically paid to pass judgment and determine, based on defined competencies and values, whether individuals possess the skills (or have the potential to acquire these in the future) that would award them more power. In this view, 'we say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket' (Elias, 1970, p. 74). The alternative view I propose, based

on Elias, is that power 'is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships' (ibid, p. 74) and that therefore power is a process representing a fluctuating, fluid dynamic (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Since the possession of power is not a personal choice but rather a 'part of [the] string of relations in [the] society [in which we] live' (Elias, 1970), it reflects 'complex patterns of power relating'; moreover, it evolves with the formation of individual and collective identities (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 5). Thus, instead of wondering who holds the power, I now argue that it is more useful to reflect on how power is exercised within relationships.

While exploring the power relations between myself and my professional partner Prof. Davidson, as described in Project 3, I felt that the hierarchical perspective on power in organisations did not provide a satisfying explanation to the dynamic of our relationship over the years. The answers that I found in theories that explain power relations from the social and political angles, as presented by authors such as Steven Lukes and Hannah Arendt, offered a new perspective on understanding the way I am involved with him. Lukes (2005) described power as an ideological dimension, where the powerful can make the powerless behave in certain ways without coercion. He thus considered conflict prevention – through the creation of pervasive systems of ideology – to be the most effective use of power. Arendt (1958), influenced by political events and conscious of her Jewish identity, suggested that 'power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert'; in her view, power 'belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together' (Arendt, 1970, p. 44). Aligned with the spirit of the subsequent complex responsive process perspective, Arendt suggested that power relations exist only in the public sphere and that power was thus a potential rather than 'an unchangeable, measurable and reliable entity like force or strength' (Arendt, 1958, p. 200).

Power relations thus reflect interdependency: 'since I need others, I cannot do whatever I please, and since they need me, neither can they. We constrain each other at the same time as enabling each other and it is this paradoxical activity that constitutes power' (Stacey, 2012, p. 28). Undoubtedly, judgment taking place in the process of talent management emphasises these independencies, rendering the process itself a complex political game in which many participants are not active or even present and yet they are significantly influencing the local interaction. This

broader circle of interdependencies, like elastic bands (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Dalal, 1998), ties the different participants in the process so that they are changing and being changed throughout it. The consultant or manager leading a talent assessment process thus cannot control power relations.

In my experience, the exercise – or ‘game’ (Elias, 1970) – of assessing talent in the organisation has a domino effect, resulting from interdependencies among the results of the process – the impact of which is by no means limited to those assessed or deemed as talent, but affects other employees and managers too. Moreover, a ‘butterfly effect’ – whereby the ‘long-term trajectory of the system is highly sensitive to its starting point’ (Stacey, 2012, p. 46) – may carry the impact as it ripples into a widening circle of customers, stakeholders, or even other geographies. The incident described in Project 2 exemplifies this point, when my boss set out to sell the company that I was managing for her at the time. What I deemed as a political game directed specifically at me unfolded unexpectedly, and I could not have fathomed beforehand how many waves of ‘turn making’ and ‘turn taking’ (Stacey, 2003, p. 123) would be involved and what power differences would evolve through the event. Reflecting on Project 2, Elias’s words echo in my mind:

In so far as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force or by one need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, career, or simply for excitement. (Elias, 1970, p. 93)

For me, this has personal relevance: I notice in all four projects how the mutual need of the assessor and the assessed, for money and career, is driven by a desire to be appreciated and to have one’s value acknowledged by inclusion in a highly prestigious and coveted group. The link between the notion of belonging and that of power relations (Elias and Scotson, 1994), as reflected in processes of the inclusion–exclusion, is at the centre of the talent management practice and dynamic.

[The inclusion–exclusion dynamic that results from judgment](#)

Processes of inclusion and exclusion are not only the main consequence of the judgment that takes place in talent management; they are the very goal of the profession – deciding who goes to the top tier and who is left behind. In a ‘turn taking/turn making’ process, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion become ‘an

inevitable and irremovable property of human communicative interaction quite simply because when one person takes a turn, others are at that moment excluded from doing so' (Stacey, 2003, p. 123). This is, of course, not limited to talent management alone. In the narratives of Projects 2, 3, and 4, processes of mutual judgment took place that led to the simultaneous inclusion/exclusion of myself, as well as of other participants. The perpetual way we by which we 'are always acting to include and exclude others and experiencing ourselves as included and excluded' is among 'the most obvious way[s by which] we experience power relations at work' (Shaw, 2002, p. 74).

In talent management, interaction and conversation take place for the purpose of judgment, and through meaning emerge clarifying and construing power relations, which eventually lead to inclusion–exclusion dynamics. 'Both processes of mind and social processes are processes of communicative interacting and power relating between human bodies in which individual minds form and are formed by social relations at the same time' (Stacey, 2003, p. 16). It would thus be an illusion for us to think that, as consultants, we are working from the outside to assess the inside of the individual assessed manager (Stacey, 2003).

In our assessment and subsequent judgment for inclusion/exclusion, we are truly negotiating power – not only of the individuals involved in the process on behalf of the organisation, but also our own, as reflected in our membership of a 'talented' group. This has repeatedly emerged throughout Projects 1–4. 'Social identity theory has implications for both talent selectors (likely to represent dominant managerial groupings) and selectees ('the talented'), with whom the selectors are more likely to identify' (Sheehan and Anderson, 2015, p. 353). We, too, are thus subject to inclusion and exclusion. In this negotiation process we are learning to 'master the managerial code' that will lead to 'organisational survival and success' (Jackall, 2010, p. 41). In traditional talent management, being included in the 'key talent' group means joining a quasi-closed social group in which members share similar status, without formal leadership (Jackall, 2010).

The establishment of different membership categories helps to preserve power (Elias and Scotson, 1994). In practising talent management, organisations choose to give status symbols to the group of talents and differentially invest resources into

various groups. In doing so, they are sustaining power positions within the organisation. Some organisations do this visibly by assigning notable signs, while others preserve power differentials between classes of talent versus non-talent in unconscious, self-organising ways (Stacey, 2003). The process of talent judging thus creates powerful feelings of belonging that help to form collective and individual identities (Elias and Scotson, 1994); 'others' are being generalised in this process as members of the group assume the attitude of the social group to which they are related (Mead, 1934). Being part of the talent group goes together with external symbols like going through a unique programme, compensation programmes, and other relevant 'status symbols', recognised in the organisation. According to the complex responsive process school of thought, however, the notion of 'them' and 'us' is misleading, as both parties influence the outcome and are simultaneously co-created by it (Stacey, 2012).

Competition for membership in the talent group can be intensified by cult values (Mead, 1934), which means that employees individualise and idealise their collective cult, their exclusiveness as a select group is maintained by organisational leaders who present an idealised future for the organisation, free of any obstacles to its success (Stacey, 2012, p. 32). Management tools such as 'management by objectives' or its successor, 'management by values', which serve to determine inclusion in the talent group or and exclusion from it, feed the need of leaders to control movement towards an improved future (Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2012). This sense of control, however, is illusory: my research shows that even when objectives and values were clearly defined and best practices implemented, the assessment results and recommendations did not correlate with what later transpired. Robert Jackall, who belongs to the critical management tradition, reveals in his book *Moral Mazes* (2010) how corporate managers think the world works and how big organisations shape moral consciousness. Jackall relates to judgment process and argues that ultimately, advancement systems in organisations are based on informal opinions about others 'which are traded back and forth in meetings, private conferences, chance encounters, and so on' (2010, p. 26); this certainly echoes what I have experienced when involved in such organisational processes.

Much of the critique on talent management emphasises the dynamic of inclusion–exclusion – what Sheehan and Anderson refer to as the ‘shadow of talent management’ (2015, p. 350): inevitable bias. For Sheehan and Anderson (2015), ‘inclusiveness’ is defined as employees’ perceptions of belongingness and uniqueness within the work group, which, in the context of talent management, relates to perceptions of exclusion from the talent pool. By judging who to include in, or exclude from, the talent pool based on decision-makers’ predispositions, organisations fail to provide equal opportunity to all their employees, leading researchers to wonder whether talent management may hinder workplace diversity: ‘fighting the war for talent can readily create self-fulfilling prophecies that leave a large proportion of the workforce demotivated or ready to quit, and produce an arrogant attitude that makes it hard to learn or listen’ (Pfeffer, 2001, p. 258). One of the main risks of exclusion from talent programmes is hampering the employee–organisation relationship and the reactions from employees, who feel they should be included or fear what it might mean if they are not included (Swales and Blackburn, 2016, p. 115); that is, ‘all the employees are likely to experience the consequences of both in-group favouring (the ‘talented’) and out-group discrimination’, thereby negatively affecting employee motivation and commitment (Sheehan and Anderson, 2015, p. 353). Consequently, when conducting talent management processes within organisations, it is important to understand the risks, how people who fall outside the talent pools feel about their exclusion, and what kind of organisational support is required; as well as paying attention to the communication process and which messages are delivered (Swales and Blackburn, 2016, p. 126). Despite these reservations, the act of exclusion can also be positive, serving as a potential invitation to inclusion in a different group or organisational figuration.

Although I have reframed my understanding of talent management at large, I endorse Schein’s (1987) belief in the power of the consultant to help managers improve their organisations according to the client’s criteria for improvement. However, while I recognise that I am always caught up in the ‘game’, being more aware of the extent to which I am ‘constrained by the rules of that game’ (Mowles, 2011, p. 48) oddly enhances my sense of autonomy, in that I no longer feel I must steer towards anticipated results and stay outside the organisation’s political processes and

power relations (Mowles, 2009). Exploring the works of Elias (1970, 1994) and Flyvbjerg (2001) – who place power relations at the core of their analysis – helped to shape my current view of talent assessment as a social process involving a strong interplay of power relations. This is a significant shift from the starting point of my research, where I was merely trying to decipher my own personal need for belonging. Recognising the process as social leads to the next argument, which deals with my involvement in the process as a consultant – responding emotionally, and creating meaning related to my history, habitus, etc. – and what implications this has for practising talent management.

Argument #2

The assessor is not an objective observer, but a participant who is simultaneously both involved and detached; in the absence of objectivity (in the sense used by natural scientists), the assessor must rely on practical judgment

Traditionally, the assessment process – at the very core of talent management – is idealised as objective; we use ‘objective’ tools, and are meant to gather information and pass our judgment in an ‘objective’ manner. This may be partly driven by a sense that managers are involved emotionally and politically, and require an ‘objective’ external, professional assessment that they can use as part of their negotiation with employees and colleagues, as well as with their own managers; thus abrogating direct responsibility. Taking the social perspective in the process of judgment, as explained in the previous argument, significantly alters the way I understand my role and my involvement in this process of judgment. Here, I elaborate on the paradox of the assessor’s simultaneous involvement and detachment, acknowledging that my own involvement in relationships that emerge through the assessment process and ensuing emotions are always interwoven into the process of judgment, both shaping and being shaped by the interaction. Analysis of my projects led me to draw on Stacey’s notion of the consultant ‘as researcher that takes part in and has the intention to study human interaction as complex responsive processes of human relating’ (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 78).

‘Involvement’ refers to the inevitable emotion that arises while doing our task, interacting with others. ‘Detachment’ refers to more rational thinking as supposed by

the classical, positivist scientific method (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 9). They both exist at the same time, intertwined and independent.

Drawing on the perspective of pragmatism, I argue for a new perspective on objectivity and the practice of judgment within the world of talent management. Critiquing the traditional discourse that advocates objectivity in our profession, I consider Aristotle's notion of phronesis, or practical wisdom (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014) – what Dewey (1929) called 'practical judgment' – an important alternative to the systemic analytical tools that are traditionally relied upon. Unlike those, phronesis requires us to pay attention and respond in the moment:

Making phronetic judgments requires deliberative imagination: emotionally responsive attunement to the situation at hand; focusing on concrete particulars in a such a way as to see each one of them as a 'something' within a large whole: bringing forth past experience to the present context. (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014, p. 237)

Phronesis is important because 'it is that activity by which instrumental rationality is balanced by value-rationality' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 370). Practical judgment, says Dewey, is what enables us to gain 'the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise' (in Murphy, 1990, p. 63). It can be seen as acting upon the wisdom of experience: 'Theory is the cross-section of the given state of action in order to know the conduct that should be; practice is the realization of the idea thus gained: it is theory in action' (Dewey, 1891, p. 203).

[The objectivity and detachment of talent management assessors](#)

Talent management practitioners and researchers stress the importance of providing 'objective assessment to the people who occupy key positions and use [it] to help them to become more effective or to enable others who are more capable to step in and take on key responsibilities across the business' (Smilansky, 2006, p. 67). To achieve objectivity, assessors are also meant to be detached. Our key measures are self-reported questionnaires in which assessed individuals describe achievements, capabilities, strengths and weakness. These questionnaires were developed based on diverse psychological theories, such as the Jungian I-Speak® questionnaire¹³ or the

¹³ See <http://www.peopleworksinc.com/resources/assessments-profiles/i-speak-questionnaire/>. Accessed 3 June 2017.

Career Anchors tool developed by Edgar Schein.¹⁴ Providing assessors and consultants with scales for interpretation, these tools aim to equip us with one objective answer, one unassailable truth, with which we may predict future events and steer the organisation to its path of success.

An 'objective' alternative to current assessment practices is analytics, which bases decisions on a broad range of data gathered and classified by a software application (Schweyer, 2004). Because the analytics approach is anchored in the analysis of data that are generally considered objective, it cannot be used in the assessment of performance aspects that are not easily translated into quantitative measures. Its main advantage, according to its proponents, is that it minimises the human factor and potential bias in assessment. Google's analytics-based in-house Project Oxygen, for example, identified eight behaviours that characterised good managers and five behaviours that all managers should avoid (Davenport et al, 2010). In the authors' view, this result exemplified the superiority of the analytics method for attaining maximum objectivity and identifying absolute results. However, limitations of this method have also been acknowledged: the LAMP (Logic, Analytics, Measures, and Process) framework developed by Boudreau and Ramstad (2004) is just one example outlining the conditions under which analytics-based methods can yield valid organisational conclusions (with the limitation that disproportionate attention given to any of its four elements might lead to results that fail to address the needs of talent decision-makers). I cannot fully agree with recent writers' assertion that the analytic method is the only approach used in the process of judgment as currently practised, since (as explored in Project 4) we include face-to-face interviews; and although we relate to components like values, motivation and culture fit, we still convince our clients that we do so in an objective, detached way.

And yet, aiming for increased objectivity has not rendered talent managers any more successful in accurately predicting future organisational results. When talent management is conducted internally within an organisation, objectivity is not always a primary concern. Performance appraisals, upon which in-house talent management is based, are often considered in joint calibration meetings held to define ratings by which key players could then be ranked. However, these meetings are frequently

¹⁴ See <https://www.careeranchorsonline.com/SCA/about.do?open=prod>. Accessed 3 June 2017.

characterised by fear, lack of transparency, and lack of candour: members are afraid they could be 'passed the trash', and attempt to protect perceived human capital assets (Kesler, 2002, p. 6). Furthermore, executives tend to believe that personnel selection is intuitive (rating their own intuition very highly), not recognising assessment as a skill that should be developed (ibid). Based primarily on (and thus limited by) decision-makers' historical experience and conditioned by their existing paradigms, intuitive appraisal is, of course, anything but objective, as appraisal is limited to the worldviews and perspectives of these assessors.

Criticism concerning the reliability of talent management predictions, described in detail in Projects 3 and 4, combined with the criticism that no assessor can be truly objective – whether executives, members of management partaking in calibration meetings, HR personnel, or external talent management experts – have led researchers to call for more validated analytical tools. This critique reflects the same thoughts that provoked my initial feelings of discomfort with my profession and which ultimately led me to the current research. While I endorse Sheehan and Anderson's (2015) warning of bias as the 'shadow of talent management', and the reasons analysed by recent authors, I find the proposed solutions inadequate, preferring my own interpretation of talent management as inspired by pragmatism. I believe that the inflexibility of talent management derives from the process of assessment itself and its (lack of) discourse with the various stakeholders (actors) involved. True flexibility demands an ability to observe the situation, reflect upon it, and acknowledge one's influence in co-creating the situation while also being created by the interaction as it unfolds. This was nicely expressed by Stacey, although he did not write about talent management specifically: his notion of flexibility manifests in the spontaneous and improvised behaviours of interacting actors, acknowledging that this freedom of expression is where novelty often emerges (Stacey, 2012).

[Recognising the power of subjective involvement in the assessment process](#)

With the reduction of behaviours and traits to simple scores, voices began to emerge in favour of the 'human factor' in talent assessment. Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001), for example, cautioned against over-reliance on computerised data, as it removes assessors from 'what is ultimately our greatest strategic differentiator: the talent inherent in each person, one individual at a time' (p. 18) – a statement that I

find somewhat problematic, since talent (like power, as previously argued), is not an inherent personal quality, but constantly co-created and changing in an ongoing social and political process. From a different angle, Lewis and Heckman (2006) stressed the importance of a conceptual model to guide which 'questions should be researched, which data should be linked, [and provide] decision-makers [with] context for interpreting the results' (p. 148). In other words, how the assessment is approached and how the final results are interpreted are matters left in the hands of individual human decision-makers.

In the process of judgment required in the practice of talent management, although we, assessors, do follow methodologies, it is clear that our main expertise lies in the meaning we infer through our participation in the process. In order to infer meaning, then, we must be involved in the process. 'To know something, is to do something' (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 28). Indeed, 'nothing ... could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. To be certain, one had to make sure; and in order to know, one had to do' (Arendt, 1958, p. 290). Knowledge, then, is a practical activity, not a passive perspective (Dewey, 1910).

Involvement implies mutual emotions, interests, prejudices, and so on that rise in the interaction and influence it; they can be unpredictable, or shift spontaneously (Burkitt, 2014). Organisations are not impersonal, and as humans we cannot deny potentially disruptive feelings and emotions such as shame or anger (Marshal and Simpson, 2010; Mead, 1934). In the process of judgment at large, but especially so when identifying organisational talent, two main emotions accompany the progression of the process: fear and anger. Burkitt (2014) attributes this to the fact that both emotions are linked to the dynamic of power relations: 'anger results from a loss of status; fear from the loss of power relative to the others; sadness from a loss of status; ... joy from a gain in status' (2014, pp. 156–157). I can personally attest, as described in Project 4, to the intensity of anger and fear, sadness and guilt, that engulfed me as processes of judgment were unfolding.

If talent assessment is a relational process, as argued above, then so too are the dynamics of experience, emotion, and knowledge-gaining; they are hence as applicable to inquirers as they are to participants being inquired – to judges, as well as to those

being judged. It is thus impossible, argues Dewey, to separate the researcher from the object of research: 'the subjective and the objective are paradoxically intertwined' (1958, p. 7).

Similarly, 'spectator' models of knowledge are rejected emphatically by the pragmatist school of thought in favour of a more engaged perspective that acknowledges the social dynamics of knowledge construction (Marshall and Simpson, 2010).

It may not be possible to isolate the assessor from the assessed, but perhaps the acts of reflection and reflexivity can help attenuate their intertwined effect. As explained above, reflection is the ability to detach ourselves from our involvement, while reflexivity is an ability to consider what we think and feel about how we are engaged. Reflexivity calls into question how we know what we know, and how we have come to know it (Mowles, 2015, p. 60). The act of thinking about one's involvement in any interaction leads to some degree of detachment, resulting in what Elias (1987) called the paradox of involvement-detachment. Applying this idea to organisational life, Mowles (2015) suggested this as a helpful strategy for managers by which to handle complexity and uncertainty.

Since the way we assign meaning is tightly linked to how we have been socialised (Dewey, 1910), the assessor's own biography, experiences, beliefs, and prejudices must all be considered when interpreting and ascribing meaning. This is achieved reflexively by paying attention to the intersection between the social and the personal contexts, or the 'intersection of biography and history within society' (Watson, 2010, p. 918). Following the pragmatist viewpoint, human experience is determined not just by what we contribute to the interaction but also by what we are taking from it. In the case of talent assessment, it may be helpful, as Mowles (2015) suggests, for assessors to reflect on how they have grown accustomed to understanding things in certain ways, and to question whether these habits are relevant or important.

Through this research endeavour, I was able to reflect and be reflexive on my own experiences as a talent management consultant. I came to recognise that the way I am involved in relationships impacts how I understand those relationships and respond to different interactions within them. Mowles (2015) proposes that managers

and consultants must be invested in the game in order to play it, yet at the same time notice how they are being caught up in the game, whether consciously or unconsciously. With the process of reflection, we may be able to detach ourselves and take a 'higher' perspective, looking at long-term trends.

Exploring the two paradoxes of subjectivity/objectivity and involvement/detachment, as I dug deeper into the philosophy of pragmatism, allowed me to consider an alternative interpretation of objectivity that appears to be absent from the literature in my field.

Doubt and practical judgment

Reflexivity and reflection legitimise these two important aspects of behaviours and interpretations, which are not traditionally acknowledged by the talent management community – indeed, even contradict the basic assumption that we, the consultants, the judges, are objective observers. The habitual thinking of all participants in the talent assessment process about management, and about the meaning of a good or successful leader, is drawn from wider cultural aspects. These fragments of information and experience converge to delineate a whole picture and assign meaning to it. Taking Dewey's (1910) perspective, we judge and assess jointly, in an overall context. The amount of information amassed by the assessor does not necessarily correlate with the quality of judgment, as 'to be a good judge is to have a sense of the relative indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation' (p. 104). It is the assessor's expertise, then, that will determine the quality of the assessment process.

This 'practical judgment', based on the assessor's expertise, reminds me how we thought about training development in the Israeli army, as mentioned in Project 1 (pp. 19–21). In order to train for the most complex and unexpected situations, we defined an expert as the one with 'buckets of experience' who could improvise rather than follow flowcharts of processes. Therefore, we used to simulate complex situations and conduct more and more on-the-job training.

The assessor's expertise is required from the very beginning of the process. The assessment interviews are the arena where most of the assessment knowledge emerges. Thus, conducting an interview – or any thought or inquiry, *per* Dewey – can be considered a form of art (Murphy, 1990, p. 65). The way Dewey discusses

conversation as a form of inquiry is equivalent to the process of assessment, the climax of which is the act of judgment.

Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* – or practical judgment, which gives us the capacity to determine how to act in specific situations – is about value judgment, not 'producing things' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 58). The emphasis is on the role of emotions – the moral qualities of agency, perception, which is the context and the way in which each meaning of each part depends on its relationship to other parts; and 'hermeneutical processes' – the ability to grasp and appraise the situation, and the use of language (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014, p. 230–232). Bourdieu links the idea of *phronesis* to the concept of *habitus*, saying that practical knowledge is founded on one's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990). I value this idea, which also relates to the paradox of involvement/detachment and is relevant to the process of judgment in talent management processes, where an inevitable consequence is that some gain while others lose. Practical judgment is based on experience: in each new situation, patterns can be recognised from previous situations – and those patterns are the themes emerging in the conversation. Practical judgment is based on the assessor's expertise in recognising the themes that emerge in the interaction during the assessment process: 'the major "technique" of practical judgment in organisations is that of inquiring into what is going on and what part one is playing in this. The technique is that of inquiring into why all are doing what they are doing together' (Stacey, 2012, p. 110). Stacey emphasises practical judgment as a 'technique' of spontaneity and improvisation, where novelty can emerge. Thus, where I once considered judgment based on my own subjective interpretation as unprofessional, I now perceive it to be a crucial factor in my assessment at any organisational level.

Following Dewey (1910), who did not write specifically about organisations, I would encourage assessors to be willing to leave room for doubt and avoid the traps of dogmatism, rigidity, prejudice, caprice, passion and flippancy, as well as being stuck in routine and habitual modes of understanding based on evolved meanings derived from past experiences. This is particularly important given that talent assessment always takes place in a situational context and involves substantial risk, since assessors, based on their assessment skills, guide subsequent organisational decision-making.

There is an ethical caveat to this point of view. Clients pay talent management consultants to produce what they perceive as objective results, often expressed as a numerical score; and the price of error is very high, both to individuals and to the organisation in general. Yet, it would be misguided of us to assume that ‘we could ever be objective about social processes which have formed us’ (Mowles, 2015, p. 59). Instead, I would advocate the pragmatist approach, which endorses ‘the strategic usage of doubt in a way that serves the inquiry in reaching satisfactory warranted assertions to the problematic situation in question’ (Martela, 2015, p. 557). Probably the greatest shift in my professional thinking, drawing also on critical management literature (Thomas, 2010; Watson, 2010; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016) is allowing room for doubt, no longer seeking the ‘right’ answers or aiming for objectivity in the process of judgment or decisions concerning inclusion–exclusion. I now regard subjectivity as an integral part of the assessment process, a necessary component in uncovering a holistic picture that reflects the multifaceted truths involved. In fact, I wonder why, when developing individuals in organisations – especially members of high potential groups, as I do in my practice – we keep feeding them with flow charts, models and a single interpretation of success rather than allowing them to exercise their own practical judgment, legitimising their doubts and questions, and encouraging them to explore alternatives.

Shattering the idea of a single, objective truth to which talent assessors must strive is further supported by Dewey’s ideas on ethical behaviour. Dewey cautioned against ethical behaviour that strives to adhere to a single creed or set of rules that purports to cover all eventualities; instead, he regarded ethical theories as tools that can aid deliberation. He thus encouraged individuals to respond to eventualities through interactions and their relational context (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 58). Similarly, following my research I conclude that the tools traditionally used in talent management (as described on pp. 108–110), offer only a loose guideline: they may be supported by reflection and reflexivity and enriched by data pertaining to the changing external environment as well as the history, relationships, emotions, experience, and context within which the assessment process takes place. Appreciating this complexity, rather than insisting on traditional frameworks, allows for a more nuanced dialogue that reduces potentially negative consequences for those who might be excluded, as

well as minimising risk for the organisation. I thus encourage assessors to accept flexibility, doubt and the notion of multiple perspectives as the premises for a discussion of alternative interpretations in the search for whatever approach is most helpful in addressing the specific problem as it is understood by all stakeholders (Martela, 2015).

Faced with the ethical implications of 'phronetic' judgment, there is the danger of falling into the trap of what Dewey (1938, p. 106) calls the 'mania of doubting'; I will elaborate and deal with this in the section on Ethics (p. 174).

Argument #3

Talent management's traditional promise of future-oriented focus and reliable predictions is illusory, given that all participants are continuously merging their ongoing experiences to spontaneously co-create the future in unpredictable ways. Traditionally, talent management aims to fulfil the rather optimistic expectation, shared by client and consultant alike, that managers and talent management experts can control and predict the future, delivering results that will steer the organisation on a certain path to success. Every single aspect of talent management is directed at predicting future potential, including services such as succession planning, due diligence of talent in mergers and acquisitions, and career planning. In my own practice, I have always justified the use of external professional consultants by saying that success in current performance does not predict future success, whereas the tools and experience of talent management experts can do just that.

As noted throughout this work, the practice of talent management centres on competency-based performance measurement. Yet, the business environment is changing even as we are assessing competencies. In other words, we are working to develop a strategy that will no longer be relevant when the future arrives. This critique is well known in the arena of talent management, echoed in orthodox literature on organisations under the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) paradigm. Peter Hawkins summarised it best: 'too much talent development is just the fastest escalator up yesterday's mountain' – that is, 'by the time an organization has defined what it means by talent, developed the inevitable competency frameworks to box people into this definition and begun to shift the focus on career moves accordingly,

the world has moved on and it [has] all [become] obsolete' (quoted by Clutterbuck, 2012, p. 8).

Some researchers attribute the shortcomings of talent management to an inadequate definition of talent. Cheese (2008) posited that talent should be tied to the 'skills and capabilities organizations need to succeed' (p. 6), and specifically those skills that are required for executing the business strategy. In this context, the term 'competencies' is often defined as 'a set of measurable, performance-related characteristics that are critical to driving the organization's strategy goals' (Reis, 2015, p. 5). The question arises whether competencies can indeed predict suitability and success in specific roles. Critics of competencies frameworks include Bolden and Gosling (2006) and Gravells and Wallace (2011), who stressed that a focus on competencies overlooks the varying behaviours leaders need to exhibit in different situations. Additionally, they argued, competencies do not explain the success in the same role of different individuals with disparate sets of competencies. Finally, competency frameworks are associated with qualities that have been proven to be successful in the past and are therefore past-oriented, whereas talent management should be forward-facing (Kesler, 2002).

The practice of talent management is closely related to organisational strategy. As consultants, we are required to learn the strategy envisioned by the organisation for its success, and through this define what type of talent is required and assess where current risks lie; having assessed current employees, we recommend an action plan that is intended to minimise the gaps between the talent required and the talent currently available within the organisation. Reflecting on all four projects of my thesis and my early roots in the profession, developing a training programme as part of my army service to prepare 18-year-old soldiers to handle war scenarios, I am alarmed by my belief that I could do it successfully. Not only could I not imagine the genuine meaning of facing such situations; today, I believe that no one can truly be trained and prepared for assignments that raise extreme emotions under life-threatening circumstances.

While my work in organisations is not so radical, the risks and volatility of the environment in which I operate are high, and the principle of development is similar: I develop and train employees to handle the future challenges of a future optimal

strategy, facilitating 'strategy and vision' off site. It is 'a process of correcting employees' efforts toward the ideal deterministic path that has already been rationally chosen' (Mowles, 2011, p. 217). Through my research, I have come to believe that the noticeable gap between talent management assessment and its actual contribution to organisational success is not because of misguided assessments but simply results from a failure to recognise complexity in organisations. Systemic thinking, which underlies talent management reasoning, and the systemic linear (causal) understanding of the relationships between past, present, and future lead to the misguided assumption that learning from the past and analysing the present is enough for predicting the future.

The complex responsive process way of thinking shatters the illusion of predictability, by taking a different view of time in organisational processes and the ability of managers or consultants to control future predictions. 'If management is a kind of practical and political action, a practice, then time is rendered more complex than the if-then causality espoused by a more realist approach to management, where we are often impelled relentlessly and sequentially toward an idealised future' (Mowles, 2011, p. 25). Moreover, the complex responsive process perspective pays close attention to the present moment, considering historical context while attempting to construct an unknown future, paradoxically rendering us devoid of adequate tools with which to perform the task (Griffin, 2002). Dewey (1925) described the idea of continuity as criteria for experience; 'each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future' (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 2). These and similar arguments of the complex responsive process school of thought have altered my entire concept of *time* as a significant parameter in the practice of talent management – one that is also manifested in the social aspects of talent management assessment, where assessment results are co-created by all the participants, employing their shared history (past) and context (present) to think about the future. In such discussions, the importance of practical judgment is paramount, as it enables participants to respond in the local interaction of the assessment, collectively generating ideas for the future.

Complex responsive process theory emphasises the importance of uncertainty and inherent ambiguities in social interactions and the spontaneity of impressions in

the social interaction – that is, the co-creation of meaning (Bourdieu, 1990; Stacey, 2012). This has shifted my understanding of assessment, retention and selection processes away from being absolute processes where consequences may be controlled to being an ongoing process in which time is not independent of action and interactions occur between interdependent individuals (Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2012). My biggest ‘take-home message’ here is that any notion of future projections must be construed by harnessing shared history and context in a collaborative effort. Translated to organisational talent management practices, this would mean jointly reflecting on interactions that emerge in interviews while being aware of the present context and past history, as far back as it may go, in order to uncover what may be important in reframing expectations of the future.

The unpredictability of the interaction is where meaning is created and new ideas or directions can emerge (Stacey, 2011). I have experienced this time and again. I can easily recall (and partly narrate, in my projects) situations where I had to set aside my assessment results in order to respond to a political context, reinterpret the past, or improvise based on an interaction that had emerged during the assessment process. These deviations have contributed to my growing frustration with my practice, as I found myself continually reshaping the future rather than confidently planning a process that will lead to a defined future (Mowles, 2011). For talent management consultants, the complex responsive process approach offers an empowering strategy: rather than habitually following rigid schemes, consultants and managers are encouraged to let go of preconceived ideas and allow ourselves to be flexible, improvise, participate in the political game, and draw upon our experiences to inform our unique practical judgment (or ‘practical knowledge’ [Bourdieu, 1990, p. 102]), which can only be gained through action and interaction.

This argument and its implications for our understanding of process have wide repercussions for talent management, where achieving predetermined objectives has traditionally been the accepted goal. The paradoxes of “predictable unpredictability’ or ‘stable instability’ of social life (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Elias, 2000) offer an alternative, in which accountability plays a significant role as ‘employees give an account of what they have done and why, rather than describing in a more limited way whether they have hit a particular target’ (Mowles, 2011, p. 218). This is far removed

from the traditional discourse, where the assessor, having collected the data, sits alone to analyse it and produce allegedly prophetic recommendations regarding the future, where past and present are considered linear and are relevant only as lessons learned that reflect only the viewpoint and experience of the assessed individual.

The method and the three arguments of research, raise ethical questions that are linked to the practice of talent management and the process of judgment of inclusion and exclusion. In the next section I will describe each of the main ethical implications – of the practice of talent management, method, and drawing on pragmatism

Ethics

As my research progressed, so my anxiety grew regarding the ethical implications of my work in talent management. My concerns can be classified into two main categories. The first relates to the very essence of talent management, the values and ideology upon which it is based; the second relates to the mode of inquiry typically applied in traditional practice. These concerns crystallised as my familiarity grew with the DMan method of inquiry, which I found directly relevant to the core element of judgment within talent assessment processes.

Researching real-life contexts raises ethical dilemmas that are conspicuous in settings of qualitative research. In everyday qualitative inquiry, 'it is impossible to separate completely the values and the facts, the ethical issues and scientific issues' (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 51). Given the DMan research methodology, where we cannot always predict the path that our research and description of our experiences will follow, we must always be mindful of potential ethical issues. While grappling with the different dilemmas that emerged for me before and during this research, doubting my own role as consultant, and contemplating different solutions, the question of how to reconcile the ethical implications of my arguments remains to some extent unresolved.

Ethical implications of method of inquiry

Ethicality and confidentiality are crucial to my practice and to the issue explored in my thesis concerning the judgment process in talent management and the potential wider implications of my recommendations. Before the DMan, I liked to consider myself an objective observer; I revered the notion that a single truth could be established

through my assessment and that my recommendations were bound to lead to the desired organisational result. While I was free from deliberating the ethical implications of my practice, an element of risk was entailed, as Dewey (1891) pointed out, in my attempt to behave ethically according to a single theory or set of rules that I thought would cover all eventualities. My recent understanding that there is no single, objective truth that talent assessors can provide resonates with Dewey's regard of ethical theories as 'tools to think with' rather than obeying certain rules. Dewey encouraged humans always to 'respond to the nature of the actual demands which [a person] finds made upon [them] – demands which do not proceed from abstract rules, nor from ideals, however awe-inspiring and exalted, but from the concrete relations to men and things in which [the person] finds [themselves]' (cited by Brinkmann, 2012, p. 58).

One of the main tenets of the paradigm shift I experienced with relation to my practice is allowing room for doubt – relinquishing the ambition to locate 'right' answers or achieve objectivity in the processes of judgment, inclusion, and exclusion. Ethical questions regarding research into real-life experience are powerfully relevant when practising talent management. Through 'participative self-organisation', the complex responsive process way of thinking, drawing on pragmatism, has immediate implications for ethical consequences: rather than ethical conduct being something that is somehow fixed or predetermined in advance of, and outside, action, our intentions (ethics) can only be expressed spontaneously through our actions, which take place as we simultaneously observe and participate in our ongoing interactions.

Phronesis, in the assessment process, is a driving force in one's understanding of ethical behaviour and its framework (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and thus plays a role in establishing ethical meaning, which is continually negotiated within interactions: 'ethical meaning does not reside in external universals to be applied to interaction but, rather, ethical meaning continually emerges in the interaction itself. Ethics are being negotiated in the interaction' (Griffin, 2002, p. 20).

Project 4 is a good example of how, in the interaction itself, through my improvisation and responses to what emerged from the conversation with Tavi, we were both negotiating ethical meaning that could not exist as external to the local situation – our meeting and the context in which it took place.

Researching real-life contexts raises ethical dilemmas that are conspicuous in settings of qualitative research. In everyday qualitative inquiry, 'it is impossible to separate completely the values and the facts, the ethical issues and scientific issues' (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 51). Given the DMan research methodology, where we cannot always predict the path that our research and description of our experiences will follow, we must always be mindful of potential ethical issues. While grappling with the different dilemmas that emerged for me before and during this research, doubting my own role as consultant, and contemplating different solutions, the question of how to reconcile the ethical implications of my arguments remains to some extent unresolved.

I feel further burdened by implications that arise from my national settings and working in a small country where 'everyone knows everyone' – especially within my limited local professional community. This context intensifies the meaning and implications of the act of judgment. While the research method required me to write my projects based on my experience, I debated with myself about how open I can or should be. Could my research expose people with whom I interact? Could publishing it harm anyone? Could my work entail any risk to my professional community? Would it put my belonging to this community at risk? I have carefully anonymised persons and entities mentioned in the narratives to protect their confidentiality, and perhaps also my own interests. Being well known in my small professional community will force me to face colleagues who may dislike or disagree with my conclusions. Yet at the same time, perhaps I might be able to influence other members of this community to consider a new perspective on our work as talent management consultants, involved in these highly sensitive, political, and risky organisational processes.

Ethical implications of practice

The element of judgment in the talent assessment process involves deciding whether individuals should be included in the highly coveted group identified as talent. Such inclusion identifies these individuals as having a greater value to the organisation than others who are excluded. This binary division has led scholars to debate the degree of organisational justice and the ethical implications of talent management.

Sheehan and Anderson (2015) argued that the relatively new practice of talent management 'goes further than the HRM [human resource management] discourse of

the late 20th century and early 21st century in its conceptual polarization between the “haves” and the “have nots” (p. 352). They refer to previous research suggesting that ‘organizational leaders and line managers with the power to identify talent are likely to represent the characteristics of dominant groups in their societal context’ (p. 351), which may result in reinforcing biased management and leadership with respect to characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, and religion. Such an outcome, besides being unethical and perhaps illegal, may potentially hinder diversity in the workplace. Therefore, they propose that ‘the effect of talent management on equality and diversity in organizations of all types, sizes, and sectors requires attention’ (p. 352).

The extent to which my own values and ideology concerning organisations are aligned with being an expert in this field is beyond the scope of this research. I nevertheless cannot ignore the link between my overall ambivalence about what the judging element of talent management is believed to represent, and the ways it is driven by politics and power relations. I agree with the critique that points at the social implications of these processes. Unfortunately, in 25 years of practice in my country, I have never seen an executive from an ethnic minority appointed to the talent group. Thus, through the talent management process, *de facto*, organisations perpetuate inequality of opportunity. Furthermore, to improve competitiveness and support future success, organisations often invest in the development of high-performers as a way of preparing them for future pivotal roles that are expected to favourably impact the organisation’s performance; this also serves as a means to retain those employees by enhancing their sense of organisational commitment. Organisations with constrained resources are forced to offer these development programmes to a limited number of participants, exacerbating inequalities among their members. This strengthens what I am saying in Argument #1 – that the judgment process manifests dynamic power relations, rather than being a professional analytic process.

While engaging with the idea of talent assessment as a social process, it is important not to overlook the personal implications for individuals involved: the judgment that I pass while assessing organisational talent can have harsh consequences for someone’s career. Thus, there is a high risk of excluding employees

who had no opportunity to be considered as talent, or including someone simply as a consequence of power dynamics.

My own conflict is directly related to the notion of inclusion and consequential exclusion. During Project 1, I noticed that my own desire to belong to exclusive groups had been a key factor in building who I am today. Yet I now have reservations about my participation in a process in which I must judge others' right to belong. In the past, participating unconsciously in this social process of judgment, I was co-creating the organisational reality without seeing that I had no control over what followed. Given that I was taking a perfectly conventional approach, I now feel conflicted with respect to the ethical implications of what talent management stands for. Reflecting back on Project 3, I wonder yet again why I lingered in my collaboration with a fellow consultant who has no such hesitation about making bold predictive assertions. I felt relief at being able to voice my own doubts, as described in Project 4, and to share my assessment results with the assessed manager without disguising my uncertainty.

My research raises another ethical issue related to the wider impact on my professional community. Critiquing my practice could directly harm my business, raising questions about the validity of the work I am doing; it might also affect colleagues who also sell this service. Even further, executives who went through our assessments could question the validity of their reports, and even decisions resulting from our intervention. I feel that ethically, the potential contribution to practice justifies the risks I am taking: 'In qualitative inquiry, we have the chance of writing about our moral ambivalences, of turning them into research texts that are honest and display our doubts and vulnerabilities, and this, I believe, is often a sign of ethical responsibility in itself' (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 61).

Contribution to knowledge

My thesis and its main arguments challenges key assumptions in the field of management pertaining to traditional theories on organisations and leadership that also underpin the practice of talent management, as this involves the processes of judgment, inclusion and exclusion. The professional community of which I am part bases its practice on the premises of organisational behaviour or organisational psychology that are currently taught in most business schools worldwide. Based on

rationality, the dominant theories in these fields are tethered to an understanding of the organisation as a system, with its associated strategic considerations, ROI (return on investment), and organisational culture; members of this community therefore focus on planning and prediction tools (such as flowcharts), as well as linear processes such as change management or leadership development, as means for control.

First and foremost, my research brings new knowledge to my field by drawing on different disciplines – mainly sociology, social psychology, and philosophy. This offers a new, broader context in which to interpret the practice, its meaning, its impact, and the concrete results and recommendations from the process of judgment. The complex responsive school of thought, which has so strongly influenced my own perspective, draws heavily on the theories of Elias and Mead and insights from the complexity sciences. It allows for an understanding of the organisation through the main social processes that take place within it, allowing for simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity (Mowles, 2015). Engaging with sociological theories on organisations – by taking account of social processes and the dynamics of interactions such as power relations, values, communication and identity – radically changes our understanding of talent management. Far from seeing it as an analytic, objective exercise that can be relied on to provide a single ‘right answer’, and in which the only full participant is the assessed executive, we can now recognise it as a social, dynamic process involving a high level of emotional engagement – a process driven by political issues and conflicts, and reflecting different ideologies.

I turn the emphasis in talent management to the notion of *process*, a dynamic interaction of power relations that cannot ‘possess’ the ability to predict talent success. The view I offer challenges the current configuration of power relations in the practice of talent management. For example, throughout my years of practice, roles and responsibilities are very clear (or at least perceived as such), so that it is apparently obvious who has the power to judge and make decisions; who is the assessor and who the assessed; and how managers control the select group of individuals known as ‘talent’, as well as those excluded from this group. This perception is directly related to a hierarchical understanding of organisations where specific parties hold power permanently.

According to the alternative view that I propose, actors involved in talent management should pay attention to ongoing fluctuations in power relations while acknowledging that we are assessing and being assessed at the same time, and that the trait of 'talent' is not bestowed upon one individual by another but rather emerges through a dynamic intra-organisational social process. Focusing on judgment within the relationship, my research sheds new light and meaning on the concept of objectivity for talent assessors: I suggest that talent management professionals regard objectivity and subjectivity not as opposites, but rather as complementary concepts in which subjectivity is a necessary aspect of the search for objectivity (Dewey, 1910). This understanding shatters the myth that as consultants, we are objective participants in the process of judgment. Instead of talking about objectivity, Elias (1987), and later Mowles (2015), talk about the paradox of the researcher (or the assessor, in my practice) as being both involved and detached at the same time, using reflection and reflexivity in the local interaction. This way of thinking supports 'practical judgment' and acknowledges the crucial validity of doubt in the process of judgment.

The misleading notion of predictability that is associated with talent management has been well documented in traditional literature, yet the gap between our predictions and reality is often all too apparent. Assuming the perspective of pragmatism and complex responsive processes, I propose a new understanding of 'predictability' and 'time' in talent management practice. Traditionally, talent management concerns the employee's potential to successfully fulfil a future role based on assessment of their current (or past) performance as measured against certain definitions of standards/competencies. My research subverts the validity of such an evaluation using one set of definitions or values, since the meaning and interpretation of those standards are revealed only while the action is taking place. The concept of experience also redefines the concept of time, since it involves 'interaction between people in the movement of the living present, in which they create the future on the basis of the past' (Griffin, 2002, p. 15). This, too, emphasises that the future cannot be predicted.

Contribution to practice

There is a tendency to idealise the profession of talent management because it generates considerable attention and political tension. As it defines the most powerful and well-rewarded hierarchy of the organisation, there is a lot at stake and we are under pressure to know the 'right answers'. A key contribution to practice deriving from my arguments is the legitimacy of not having such answers prepared in advance, but encouraging my colleagues to understand the challenge and create answers together with other participants in the local situation, not always knowing what to say.

The short narrative below illustrates how I experienced myself not only doing things differently, but actually talking this through with other participants in the situation.

I was invited to give a lecture to group of people responsible for training development in non-profit organisations, in my country. As the date approached, I found myself not preparing anything for the lecture – something that is very unlike me. Even as I drove to the venue, I still had no idea what I would say.

When I entered the room, they asked if I had a presentation; I said I didn't. Instead, we all sat in a circle, and I started by asking everyone to describe the main challenge/concern they faced in their job.

Most participants talked about the gap between what they plan and what they could finally achieve; some expressed their frustrations with the gap between planning and execution. As I listened, I wondered how to respond; then I found myself explaining that I hadn't prepared a presentation because I had realised, when planning ahead, that I no longer believe in the profession of training development – that is, in developing training systems to deal with an unknown future.

When they asked me for a take-home message, I said: 'Maybe you're disappointed that I didn't come and give you a recipe for how to develop training programmes; but what I want to invite you to do is to understand training as a process of interaction – to recognise that the most important aspect is what takes place in the interaction, the conversation around what is going on in the local situation, and what we can learn from it; and then

working out how we can generalise from that to whatever we are doing in our job.'

We analysed some examples together, and I finished the session with a strong sense of achievement. I felt that I had made a significant contribution to how people in my professional field perceive and think about their job. It was a contribution that was demonstrated at a key stage of talent management (the development phase), and illustrates how the complex responsive way of thinking leads to a new understanding of what training development in organisations means.

Traditionally, talent assessment begins with the individual, and is often considered a confidential process. We assessors administer a set of tools, such as the individual in-depth interview or a self-reported questionnaire, collecting information on personality, working style, motivation, and competencies of each assessed individual. Sometimes, assessment is applied to an entire working unit (such as top management). The tasks and outputs are predefined, typically leading to the diagnosis of gaps between expected behaviours/competencies and the current observation/judgment, yielding a list of recommendations for further development of the assessed individuals and estimation of the time it will take.

The most profound change to result from my research, regarding my view of the practice of talent management, is my new understanding of its processes of judgment, exclusion and inclusion as a dynamic social process. The direct implication for practice is that I no longer see talent assessment as a linear process based on scores and standards. I recognise, too, that there are more actors involved than just the assessed personnel; the assessor is by no means an external observer. This conclusion challenges traditional views of systemic power figuration. Through this new understanding, even if the same tools (like self-report questionnaires) are used, their application and the meaning we derive from them is altered.

The key contribution I offer to my practice is the understanding that talent management, and especially talent assessment, is a social process, rather than an individualistic, private process. The immediate implication is that we professionals should consider how we might 'socialise' the assessment process and turn the judgment element of it into a social activity that allows its political nature to be more

transparent. I encourage my colleagues to consider the social aspects of the interaction between assessor and assessed, as well as among other organisational members (and assessors) who participate in the assessment process (or the 'game' [Elias and Scotson, 1994]). For example, it may be important to consider the history of political relationships between the two countries that the assessor and the assessed executives come from; or to recognise that the previous boss of the assessed executive is a significant participant in the process of understanding the whole picture. In Project 4, I came to understand that in assessing the general manager of the subsidiary, I could not help being influenced by guilt about recent major hostility between our countries; I realised that I was trying to compensate for what my country did, and afraid that a negative assessment could be perceived as biased because of this conflict. Being aware of this, and of the boss's possible expectations, as potentially relevant factors in my observations made it possible for me to set them aside as influences on my final assessment.

This leads to my second recommendation for professionals in the field of talent management: that we should consider not only the data collected by our traditional tools – competency scores, self-reported questionnaires, in-depth interviews – as input, but also the very process of data collection itself. If we – assessors and assessed alike – are influencing the process while simultaneously being influenced by it (Stacey, 2012), then reflexivity and context are crucial elements for understanding the power relations involved in both the assessment process and the organisational process that prompted the need for the assessment. The interaction between the judge and the judged, as it takes place, is thus important data upon which to reflect. Specifically, assessors' reflexivity regarding their judgment in the process will produce significant data, which in turn can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their interactions with organisational members and whether it is possible to generalise from the local situation to other interactions and relationships within the organisation. Should it be deemed that generalisation is inadequate, the assessors would then have to carefully isolate that which is relevant to their judgment from that which is not.

I am not suggesting that we remove from the discussion the results of self-reported questionnaires; validated tools are useful in benchmarking, enabling valuable comparisons between assessed managers in different organisational units – an

important advantage given that such tools are used worldwide across cultures, languages, and industries. Yet, it is important to remember that they can only capture a fraction of the bigger picture. Instead of relying on these helpful instruments, we should use them differently – reflecting on their underlying assumptions, in an attempt to reach a common understanding. For me, this new behaviour began in Turkey (see Project 4), when I accepted a new interpretation of the data, which led to changing the report.

This approach leads to a new kind of discourse: what Stacey (2012) has called a ‘complex conversation’. No longer am I a one-sided judge, presenting the results of an analysis made from ‘outside’ the organisational context. Instead, in my judgment, I leave the conversation open (but also know when to close it), so that the client and I – all of us actors in this ‘game’ – are co-constructing meaning, understanding together why we are where we are, while also considering the contextual history. This, of course, requires talent management professionals to let go of the alluring fantasy of control and predictability. In practice, what it means is that the two main conversations – the initial interview with the assessed executive, and the feedback sessions with the client – are part of an ever-changing cycle.

Having adopted the approach I advocate here, I now also challenge my own conduct – a practice I think all talent management professionals would benefit from in their work. I am developing a more acute awareness of how I choose to pay attention to the events around me, and how I interpret them. I suggest we remain fully conscious of the habitus – defined by Bourdieu as most of the day-to-day activities that we do without thinking, which represent the output of patterns embedded in us during the socialising process (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) – and reflect on our prejudices, some of which were passed down to us by our respective cultures and societies. In my case, I am increasingly mindful of the ramifications of my cultural heritage and context. I am not a blank canvas, but enter any judgment process influenced by my own personal history and identity, which in turn are shaped by our social and professional communities. Being more acutely aware of the prejudices we inevitably carry can help to minimise their impact on our eventual judgment, so that our aspirations to respect equal opportunity are not unconsciously compromised.

To best serve our clients, we must be aware of our habitual ways of thinking, we should be reflective, and we should acknowledge and experience the differences between our individual selves and other participants in the process. This is the only way to make these processes social. If we do so, our judgment and how we pass judgment might change (Mowles, 2015). This new conduct is not limited to myself; I also apply it in my company. When I collaborate with other consultants on large projects, I now conduct calibration discussions with all assessors, who have each assessed different individuals; I invite them to reflect together and be reflexive regarding the differences (and similarities) between us, and their significance.

For many years I have used what I believed were impartial methodologies, tools, and flowcharts to reflect and serve the strategic processes of the organisation. I never considered that it might be legitimate to pay attention to personal factors such as my own history, emotions and dynamic relationships, rather than making every effort to set these aside. Understanding talent management as a relational process, and the judgment within it as an interactive social process, allows me to incorporate these elements of myself as integral to the methodology rather than dismissing them as irrelevant distractions. In a way, they have even become crucial to the judgment process. Furthermore, once these elements gain legitimacy in the practice of talent management, they infer legitimacy for the use of practical judgment and common sense in the process, as well. This is a big step for a field that is founded on formulas and equations.

In leading an assessment process, the use of practical judgment naturally encourages me to invite group members or individual interviewees to join me in a reflexive inquiry: an open discussion, with no preconceived agenda, in which central themes are bound to emerge. Despite my fear of ambiguity and lack of control in this scenario (especially a group assessment, where relationships, emotions, and power relations are complicated further by the number of participants), I have witnessed how reflexive inquiry combined with my improvisation brings about an authentic, candid discussion on what is going on, which in turn increases the probability of change.

My experience with writing narratives and reflection on themes that are important, as reflected in this work, has brought a new tool to my practice that I believe can benefit the wider talent management community. The first notable change

is that narratives, unlike self-questionnaire tools, are not intended to be judgmental: there are no good/bad results or high/low scores. Instead, a narrative becomes the basis of conversation, which itself becomes the most important data for judgment. The second development is that for assessment purposes, I always used to ask interviewees to describe a success story, an achievement for each core competency discussed in the interview. This is a very structured way of focusing on what I want to hear or expect to hear, while at the same time communicating the core competencies each assessed employee must demonstrate. The alternative I now offer is to use narratives that highlight difficulties, things that need clarification, and elicit a discussion on why the interviewee acted the way they did, rather than simply expressing retrospective satisfaction with what they did. Success stories I once used to assess individuals concerned the extent to which they had followed the rules and idealised models; whereas today, I believe we should probe more deeply into issues of power configuration and interactions. This is what taking the experience seriously really means (Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2012).

Using narratives in the assessment means we give life to the interaction as together we explore the history of the situation and how it was created. This sits well with my new understanding that our practice would benefit from allowing for the possibility of doubt in judgment – moving away from expectations of ‘objective certainty’ in favour of practical judgment, and towards a subtle appreciation of how complexity, ambiguity, and paradox co-exist in organisational life. This more nuanced awareness, when combined with experiential common sense, offers a new technique to contend with what the management literature has come to recognise as ‘VUCA’ (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity)¹⁵ – instead of the usual recommendations on how HR/talent managers must change their leadership development approach to foster leadership vision, understanding, clarity, and agility (Lawrence, 2013; Horney et al, 2010). From my own practice, I can attest to the value of acknowledging organisational paradoxes – in particular seeing conflict as having the power to both facilitate and constrain processes, and thus offering the potential for novelty and change (as described in Project 3). Another paradox that has enriched my

¹⁵ See for example <https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you>. Accessed 3 June 2017.

work is my understanding of myself as an assessor who is always simultaneously detached and involved in every process of assessment.

The process of assessment and judgment of talent in organisations can determine the fate of very senior and experienced individuals. Allowing room for error, as Martela (2015) has discussed, when the price could be so high, raises an ethical issue. To some extent, the method of inquiry that I now advocate offers some resolution to this question, since responsibility for assessment results is shared by all participants and the final judgment leaves some room for doubt. At the same time, however, we are cautioned by Mowles not to 'over promise the benefits of being reflective and reflexivity, to present reflexivity as another tool for managers to get on top of and control situations, or to assume that reflexivity is an unalloyed good' (2015, p. 59). This may be a fine line that can be too easily crossed. Talent management professionals should guard against inadvertently doing so by continually directing reflexivity at their own conduct, choices, and behaviours.

I would also advocate increasing the number of assessors to more than merely a single assessor, so as to enable multiple observations and interpretations. This lesson I draw from my experience in the DMan community meetings, which were invaluable in enabling us to reflect together and seek a shared understanding of what else was going on, what emerged in the group, and what was important. In some cases, we had to repeat the process several times before finding, as a group, a new direction and a new way of thinking, which eventually drove us to change. Applying this insight to my work, I now recognise that individuals are really assessed for their part in the group.

Addressing my critique of my own work, I would like to end by outlining the questions that remain open in my mind. In most of our projects, we are not only assessing but also expected to rate the assessed employees or managers on one global scale. Given the main ideas described in my research, which emphasise the locality and specificity of any given situation, I have so far been unable to find a way to generalise comparisons of assessed personnel. Similarly, it is difficult to ensure that any variance in the personality, histories, and experiences of multiple assessors is fully accounted for – a crucial problem, given our impact on the personal and professional futures of the individuals we assess.

Having begun the research already with some ambivalence about talent management, somewhere at the halfway point I lost faith in the practice and considered myself no longer part of the professional community. Finally, I am concluding this research with the understanding that I can continue using the same professional tools, and drawing upon my years of experience, without throwing them away – by adapting the way I use them, thinking carefully about our practice, being aware of different data that emerge from history, habitus, prejudice, relationships; and of course by sharing all these new insights with my employees, clients, and colleagues. Though some questions require further investigation, I have much greater confidence in the value of what I am doing and the potential wider impact of the changes I have experienced. I am therefore planning to publish my findings in professional journals – such as the *Harvard Business Review*, *Diversity Journal* (<http://www.diversityjournal.com/>), *Human Relations* and *Human Resource Management* – as well as encouraging business schools in my country to offer a course on ‘critical thinking on talent management’.

Recognising the risks and ethical implications for my professional community, and for the wider community of consultants and managers who participate daily in processes of judgment, including and excluding employees in organisations, I believe this research can help to map the way forward by offering an alternative way of thinking about these processes, as fundamentally dynamic and social – an insight that can enable us to participate in them with authenticity and integrity.

Final thoughts

I am the owner and CEO of a leading company that specialises in large-scale talent management projects, conducted in relatively large global companies based in my home county. When I started this research, my marketing materials boasted slogans created under the assumptions that the relationship between ‘talent’ and organisational success is linear, controllable, and predictable (such as: ‘Talent, a source of success, a resource to manage’ or ‘Manage organisational talent so that the talented will manage the organisation’).

This research, however, led me to understand my practice as a social process that takes place in a broad historical context, involving dynamic relationships and power relations. I learned to accept that we cannot predict or control the personnel we assess, as they ‘do not fit schemes and grids’ (Mowles, 2011, p. 19). Rather, ‘the interweaving of intentions, hopes, aspirations and behaviour of people who are both inside and outside organisations, who behave both rationally and irrationally, will bring about outcomes which no one has predicted and which no one has planned’ (ibid, p. 9). This includes my own role as the consultant who carries out what are considered best practices in talent assessment exercises.

Through my research investigation, I gradually developed a new understanding of my participation in the process of talent assessment, and specifically in the process of judging who is included in – and excluded from – the group of talent. I started my research with the theme of belonging, and moved to an understanding of it as the dynamics of power relations in their broader socio-political context. This has become the key, as I currently see it, to understanding the alternative perspectives of talent management processes and explaining the observable gap between talent management predictions (when professionals operate ‘by the book’) and what eventually transpires.

The unique experience and research process of the DMan programme has made a significant impact on my way of thinking, stretching far beyond my professional realm. I now participate in the world in a different way and apply the critical thinking I have learned through this research – such as awareness, reflection, and reflexivity – to all my communications, including with my family and friends. I now view conflict – including the political conflict that characterises my country – in a new

light, as an opportunity, and am better able to consider a broader context in which players and stakeholders operate.

The DMan faculty members and the community of researchers, all of us originating in different countries, cultures, and professions, have affected me profoundly. Challenged by their comments and perspectives, in a language that is secondary for me, and through the ongoing discipline of writing, I am forever grateful for ways in which the programme has transformed me, both as a human being and as a talent management expert. The DMan and its participants raised questions as well as opportunities for my future professional development and ability to assess and seize new opportunities.

To my professional community, I urge flexibility and open-mindedness regarding the way we perceive and practice this delicate and important organisational process of change. I hope that this work can inspire and contribute towards a more inclusive view of talent management as a process that is co-created by all who are involved in it (both actively and passively) and which carries high-risk implications for its key players, we consultants included.

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Appendix: Names used in the narratives

All names of people and organisations have been anonymised throughout this thesis.

The list below provides an explanation of the fictional names used.

Alai	High-profile Turkish company, acquired by MedSci at the time that TLT were assessing Tavi
Dan	Manager of RJH, who resigned on my first day as CEO and was replaced by Nancy Bowman
DefenseTech	Defence systems company; my first job (as an external consultant) after discharge from the army
Emily	Co-researcher with long experience of the DMan programme
Hepburn Associates ...	Global business consulting firm, specialising in executive placement
HR-Tech	IT company, specialising in HR functions, that bought up RJH
Jane	MedSci's marketing and sales manager at the parent company, considered as a replacement for Tavi as general manager of the Turkish subsidiary
Jonathan Linklater	Co-founder of HR-Tech
Keith Eastwood	Co-founder of HR-Tech
MedSci	A large biopharmaceutical company, parent company of the Turkish subsidiary where I assessed Tavi
Nancy Bowman	Powerful businesswoman, owner and CEO of Hepburn Associates
PPW	Global accounting firm that sought TLT's collaboration in submitting a tender to manage the national bank's three-year talent management project
Gary Davidson	A leading authority on talent management with whom I have a long history of business collaborations
Ray	Divisional manager of MedSci
RJH	National affiliation (~20 consultants) of Hepburn Associates, specialising in dismissal processes; I was CEO until it was sold
Simon Green	Third partner (existing RJH client) recruited by Jonathan Linklater and Keith Eastwood when acquiring RJH
Susan	Partner in PPW
Tavi	General manager of MedSci's subsidiary company in Turkey
TLT	My own independent talent management company, established in 2008 following the sale of RJH