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# Stakes and struggles in liminal spaces: construction practitioners interacting with management-consultants

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Although external consultant interventions are usual in construction organizations to mediate strategic change, micro-level analyses of these interactions remain scarce. We draw on rich data from a qualitative case study and focus on observations of a set of three management-consultant strategy workshop interventions, aka away-days, with top, middle and project managers, respectively, in a large construction company in Sweden. Our analysis uses the conceptual construct 'liminality' to frame the intervention practice and elements of Bourdieu's theory of practice to examine the unfolding of the interaction at the boundary interface. The consultants failed to achieve take-up of their novel ideas, and the workshops became sites of contention in which power struggles were played out between two very different fields of expertise. Using an integrated framework provides better understanding of power struggles at intra- and inter-organizational boundary interfaces.

*Keywords:* Boundary interfaces, construction, cultural misalliance, habitus, liminality, management-consultants, strategy away-days, symbolic capital.

## Introduction

The construction industry is a heterogeneous composition of a wide variety of professional fields dependent on the ability to negotiate boundary interfaces, both intra- and inter-organizationally (Dainty *et al.*, 2006; Fellows and Liu, 2012). In spite of a growing interest in cross-cultural interaction and negotiation (Hartenberger *et al.*, 2013; Hughes and Hughes, 2013) within the construction-management literature, including that with clients (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000; Kadefors, 2004), there is yet little research done on the interaction in alliances between management-consultants and construction practitioners.

We address this gap by providing empirical data at the micro-level of the unfolding of strategic away-days in a large Swedish construction company. These were designed and led by management-consultants and involved top, middle and project managers, respectively. Our focus here is to examine how individual and group beliefs, values and predispositions are mobilized and enacted, and how these influence the outcomes of the workshops. Thus, our paper is a response to recent

calls for more discursive and interpretative investigations at the individual level of project organizations (Brown and Phua, 2011; Phua, 2013), here concentrated on power struggles at cultural boundary interfaces. We argue that the complexities embedded in such cross-cultural, meaning-making processes warrant a multi-layered approach that links micro-level practices with macro-level structures. To do this, we use Bourdieu's practice framework as an analytical lens, focusing on the constructs of field, habitus and symbolic capital and on his game analogy.

In the following, we frame our study by providing a brief overview of relevant conceptual as well as empirical previous research concerning management consulting and strategic away-days. We then introduce Bourdieu's theory of practice exemplified through his game analogy and provide a brief summary of his renowned constructs of field, habitus and capital, which we use as explorative and analytical tools in our analysis of the data. We then situate the reader by providing the context of the study: research design and methodology. The case details are presented as settings for the ensuing encounters between practitioners and consultants. These are

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presented in a vignette composed of three acts, one for each workshop. Running commentary in the vignette is based on our field observations and serves as the setting for the dialogue. Finally, we discuss our analysis and the value of using a Boudieusian lens and the concept of liminality when studying boundary practices and interfaces.

## Theoretical framing and analytical lens

### Management consulting

Management-consultancy practices have been problematized using a variety of theoretical perspectives: role theory (Williams, 2001); agency theory (Fincham, 2003); social-network theory (Kitay and Wright, 2004); learning theory (Handley *et al.*, 2007) and social-systems theory (Mohe and Seidl, 2011, who also provide a brief overview and critique of these perspectives). Yet another perspective, which frames the analysis in this paper, draws on rites theory stemming from cultural anthropology and folklore. The focus here is the concept of *liminality* defined as the transition phase between an individual's separation from a social group and his/her re-incorporation into the group. Turner (1980) uses the concept to explain such rites of passage:

> Rites of passage, like social dramas, involve temporal processes and agonistic relations—novices or initiands are separated (sometimes real or symbolic force is used) from a previous social state or status, compelled to remain in seclusion during the liminal phase, submitted to ordeal by initiated seniors or elders, and reaggregated to quotidian society in symbolic ways … (Turner, 1980, p. 158)

Management scholars have used the concept of liminality to study management-consulting interventions with clients (Werr and Styhre, 2002; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Clegg *et al.*, 2004). They argue that these encounters take place in a liminal space, outside of the participants' habitual spaces, in which both consultants and clients may temporarily divest themselves of official rank and status in their respective organizational hierarchies. In this space, the organizational structures and routines no longer apply, which, as the argument goes, gives rise to uncertainty, but also generates creativity.

Creativity and change may be achieved through an alignment of consultants and clients (Werr and Styhre, 2002; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) or through confrontation of differences (Clegg *et al.*, 2004). Sturdy *et al.* (2006) in their study of consultant

and client business dinners questioned the notions of liminal spaces as being transitional or uncertain, arguing that these spaces embed their own rituals and activities, which transcend the transitional. For example, the liminal spaces of business dinners embed layers of structures, norms and activities from various social spheres, e.g. work and private spheres, playing out in the predetermined rituals of sharing meals.

### Strategic away-days as liminal spaces

Another area where the concept of liminality has proved to be analytically useful is in the strategy-as-practice literature. In their study of strategic workshops, also called away-days, Hendry and Seidl (2003) framed these types of interventions as off-site 'strategic episodes' consisting of three phases: initiation, conduct and termination. Bucher and Ruegg-Sturm (2008) elaborated on this framework, depicting strategic episodes as 'protected interruptions' from the day-to-day processes and practices of organizing.

Johnson *et al.* (2010) drew on Turner's rites theory (1982) to frame their study of behavioural dynamics in strategic workshops. They compare these workshops to rituals, where *change of location* in combination with a planned *liturgy* creates a transitory state of *liminality*. Here, time, space, institutional norms and routines as well as organizational hierarchies are seemingly temporarily suspended, giving rise to an *anti-structure*. The affective states of liminality and anti-structure in turn are supposed to create *communitas*, i.e. communal commitment, which, if strong enough, may carry the strategic insights from the transitory workshop into the daily practices of the organization. However, Johnson *et al.* (2010, p. 1612) argue that translation from workshop outcomes to realized outcomes is problematic since ritualization and liturgy may generate questioning of the status quo; however, such questioning and possible creative new ideas seem to remain encapsulated in the context of the liminal space and the ritual.

One limitation of previous studies of management-consultant interventions and strategy workshops is that they have tended to focus on the role of the liturgy specialists, e.g. those that plan and run the interventions: external consultants in the former and internal top-management in the latter; few studies have examined the unfolding of strategy workshop interventions with middle or project managers.

Chia and Rasche (2010, p. 35) recently critiqued the privileging of high-level managers for reflecting a 'means-ends logic', where action is viewed deterministically as the results of the intentions of individual actors. Instead, they advocate a 'dwelling worldview' that takes account of the tacit dimensions of a collective situated

knowledge consisting of *phronetic* or practical knowledge and *mëtic* or know–how experience acquired in the day-to-day practices of working together over time. Accounting for the tacit is methodologically challenging since researchers need to be sensible to immanent, shifting and transient episodes, which, although ephemeral, remain as unconscious impressions wielding influence on ongoing practices and individual identity formation.

Within such episodic instances 'dialectical dancing partners' deploy significant cultural performances:

> […] of the perennial social drama to which they give meaning appropriate to the specificities of time, place and culture. However they have their own autonomy and momentum … (Turner, 1980, p. 159)

To capture the dynamics of this dialectical dance, we draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice and game analogy. Taking our point of departure in a case study of a strategy-change project run by external management-consultants in a large Swedish contractor, we examine a set of interventions at three managerial levels. As mentioned earlier, we use a Bourdieusian lens to analyse and describe how two very different cultures negotiate meaning and vie for symbolic power by evoking different forms of capital pertaining to their cultural field. As the reader will see later on, the dialectic dances enacted in these workshops will influence not only the outcome of the individual workshops, but also their uptake in the organization. The unit of analysis here is the interaction at the individual level, and for this analysis we have chosen to privilege the perspective of the construction practitioners.

### Analytical lens: habitus, field and symbolic capital

Bourdieu's theories are currently undergoing a renaissance in the management and organization-studies literatures, although Hurtado (2010) has recently critiqued their use in strategy-as-practice research as being somewhat superficial. In the construction-management literature, we only found fleeting mentions of Bourdieu, mainly tied to his construct of social capital. The only empirical articles found that have used a Bourdieusian framework are by Styhre (2008, 2011), who examined the interactions between individual site-managers' dispositions and the institutional structures of the organization and the industry.

Bourdieu's theory of practice (1990; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) offers a conceptual framework for studying social interaction, transcending the traditional ontological dichotomy of objectivism versus subjectivism. The former concept sees social interaction as already constituted realities that can be objectively recorded and structurally analysed. From this perspective, a break with the experiential is presupposed, and attempts are made to explain the structures and principles of the observed. The latter is the one Bourdieu criticizes for being subjectively phenomenological and interpretative, i.e. only taking account of the experiential and explaining the world solely as experiences by the individuals situated in it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For Bourdieu, practice is a dynamic interplay between past and present, individual and collective, and between contexts of culture and contexts of situation. The objective and the subjective are fluid, continuously interacting and relational. One of his key concepts to explain this dynamic is *habitus*, which he defines as:

> [S]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations […]. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53)

These sets of dispositions incline individuals and collectives to behave in certain ways, generating meanings that are not always consciously coordinated or rule governed by the situation and activities at hand. These dispositions are acquired through socialization into various and different social contexts over a longer time. They are durable in that they become embodied among groups of people conditioned by similar socialization processes. They are structured in that they reflect the social structures and practices within which they were acquired, but they simultaneously reproduce the structures. They are transposable in that they travel across social contexts, and since habitus embodies layers of dispositions acquired through socialization into several fields from early childhood onward, it may generate multiple possibilities of both predictable and unpredictable perceptions and expressions (Bourdieu, 1990).

Bourdieu's term for social context is *field*, which he describes as:

> [A] network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions […] objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their […] agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation […] in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific

profits that are at stake in the field. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 96)

Field denotes a structured space with its own inherent rules and forces, the structure of which is determined by the dynamic interrelations of the positions of the individuals and groups that occupy it. A field is a site of contention, in which individuals or groups have interests and stakes, and in which they compete to control or alter the distribution of resources or capital pertaining to it. Bourdieu explains his understanding of field by using the analogy of a *game* where 'players agree, by mere fact of playing, and not of a "contract," that the game is worth playing […] and this *collusion* is the very basis of their competition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). He further explains:

> We can picture each player as having […] a pile of tokens of different colors, each color corresponding to a given species of capital she holds, so that *her relative force in the game*, her *position* in the space of play, and also her *strategic orientation toward the game* […], the moves she makes, more or less risky or cautious, subversive or conservative, depend both on the total number of tokens and on the composition of the piles of tokens she retains, that is, on the volume and structure of her capital. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 99)

In this game, or field, players can conform to the tacit rules to reproduce constancy and avoid crises. Thus, they play to reinforce and strengthen their prevalent different types of capital. However, they can also choose to change the rules of the game by trying to change the value of their tokens and the exchange rate between the types of capital by using strategies that discredit their competitors' form of capital, thus enhancing their own. It should be noted that Bourdieu's view of capital and profit is that these are not solely monetary and material, but may also have social and symbolic value, e.g. cultural, social or linguistic capital.

Bourdieu's theory of practice emphasizes the importance of the socio-historical conditions within which an object of analysis is produced, constructed and received. It is this game analogy that we will use to analyse the relative forces in the play, the occupied positions and the strategic orientation towards the game of two competing groups of players socialized in different fields.

## Methodology

Our data are drawn from a longitudinal case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) of strategy work in a large Swedish construction company, ConstCo, spanning over several years, 2007–2014. A longitudinal case study was chosen since the aim was to gain knowledge of how socio-historical and cultural contingencies influenced change and strategic practices at different levels of the organization (Löwstedt *et al.*, 2011; Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012). During this time, we have carried out a number of focused sub-studies using multiple methods: in-depth life-story interviews, field studies and document analysis. These enabled triangulation of the data and shed light on organizational members' processes of interaction, their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and the socio-material and symbolic resources they availed themselves of to position themselves and the structures within which they moved.

The sub-case study in focus here was a strategic development project run by management-consultants in the form of a series of away-days interventions at all managerial levels. The data consist of field observations of three runs of the management-consultants' away-days intervention. The occasions were selected to represent a varied sample, and thus ranged from the very first run with top-managers, one with middle managers and one with project managers. The participants of each group came from geographically dispersed units. The interventions lasted three full days and were located in an idyllic lake town in the middle of Sweden.

We sat in as observers during the three full away-days. During the interventions, we focused on practices, activities and behaviours, including socio-material features, such as room design, technical and semiotic tools, body posture and facial expressions. We sat on the periphery of the action and did not participate in any of the activities and discussions in the 'classroom'. When there were break-out activities in smaller groups, we observed one group each, and to a limited extent participated in the conversations when questions were addressed to us.

We felt that the participants and the consultants forgot our presence in the room although some of the managers wondered at the amount of writing we were doing. Rather than use a tape recorder or video camera, which could have been disruptive, we took continuous field notes during the three interventions, over 200 A5 pages in all. These field notes were then compared and synthesized, read and re-read.

We mingled with the participants and consultants during coffee breaks, lunches, dinners and after-work activities, here too as observers, but without notebooks. An observer may notice phenomena and behaviours that have become objectified and embedded in the organization's structures and routines, and therefore remain invisible to the participants themselves; they are blind spots. An important part of participant

observations is therefore to search for patterns (Angrosino, 2007). As stated by Czarniawska-Joerges (2007, p. 21): 'An observer can never know better than an actor; a stranger cannot say more about any culture than a native, but observers and strangers can see different things than actors and natives can'. It is the confrontation with 'differences' that triggers awareness and learning.

We analysed the data through a constructivist lens, viewing organizational life as socially constructed, where associated 'realties' are alterable constructs over time and in different spaces, their form and content based on the involved individuals ongoing meaning-making (Cicmil and Gaggioti, 2014), including our own. Within the situated context of an organization, members discursively create and co-construct the realities they inhabit; they embody and enact them as well as base their predictions on them (Isabella, 1990; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). However, this (co)constructed situated reality is also conditioned by past social structures and practices into which the members have been socialized, and which are then reproduced in later co-constructions (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991). We attempt to understand how these underlying, deeply ingrained dispositions shape the discourse and interaction as well as the unfolding practice. In the following section, we contextualize the case, describe the set-up of the away-days as well as our involvement as researchers.

## The interventions: context, design and unfolding of the 'game'

ConstCo is one of Sweden's largest and oldest contractors. Over the last 25 years it has undergone a transformation from being a group of largely independent, opportunistic and competing entrepreneurial units to being a standardized, specialized and centrally governed organization. To consolidate this new order, corporate strategies were formulated to coordinate and make use of all the existing knowledge within the company, and to capitalize on their extensive experience of managing projects. The vision of the new organization was to become a 'model for Swedish construction'.

This strategic direction has underpinned a number of more or less dramatic organizational changes from 1990 to date: a new in-house tool to measure performance in the numerous, geographically spread units was developed and implemented; a common code of conduct was formulated; and a central purchasing organization was created; and HR, financial and organizational support functions were moved from the units to sort under one centralized executive unit. Most of these changes were achieved internally. In 2010, ConstCo formulated a new strategic direction for 2012–2015, in which 'increased business volume' was added to the prevalent foci of 'increased efficiency and profitability'.

To communicate the new strategic direction in the organization, the decision was made to implement a development project. External management-consultants from an academic institution were commissioned to design and run a series of mandatory intervention workshops at all managerial levels, in all about 30 workshops were planned.

Each workshop would include 20–30 managers, who would be sorted by organizational levels and units (e.g. construction, infrastructure, residential development). The purpose of the intervention was to introduce two management models: the 'Importance-Performance matrix' (Slack and Lewis, 2002, p. 179) and the 'Operations-Strategy matrix' (Slack and Lewis, 2002, p. 283). The objective was to foster a common view and method for strategy management. The models were viewed by the consultants as being generic and well known, but were unfamiliar to the construction practitioners. The workshop design was to introduce the models to the construction managers and then facilitate their use in the organization. The models were described as 'powerful tools' that would enable the workshop participants to realize the new strategic direction formulated for 2012–2015 and to adapt them to the situations of their units.

The first workshop was planned as a trial-run for the top-management level and took place in-house. Of the approximately 30 top-managers invited, only eight attended. The rest of the workshops were designed as away-days, i.e. 'protected interruptions' from everyday tasks and responsibilities (Bucher and Ruegg-Sturm, 2008). All the workshops followed the same process and included the same activities.

The off-site venue chosen was a rather exclusive conference hotel located in a small, picturesque and historical town by a large lake. All the participants stayed there for the duration of the intervention, thus spending three days in each other's constant company: from 08.30am to about 10.00pm during the first two days, and on the third day until 3.00pm.

The conference room had a traditional U-shape design of tables and chairs. The consultants, usually two, occupied traditional instructors' spaces at the head of the room. The principle mediating tools were MS PowerPoint and hand-outs. Notebooks bearing the management-consultants company logo were distributed. Over the three days, there were numerous break-out exercises that took place in adjoining rooms. In the liminal space constituted by the away-days, the consultants availed themselves of a repertoire of set activities: several presentations in lecture form, e.g. presentation of the two models; a role-play to demonstrate the planning imperative and the risks of the lack thereof; individual and group

exercises directed towards learning-by-doing. The third and last afternoon was devoted to group presentations of suggested action points to improve the company's growth and productivity, which was to be attended by one of the top-managers.

In the following, we have aggregated our findings in a vignette divided into three acts, one for each managerial level. Each act conflates similar episodes from the three workshops observed. Using Bourdieu's game analogy to depict the workshop practice, each act illustrates the relative 'forces and positions deployed in the space of play', as well as the players' attempts to strategically 'orient themselves towards the game' to respond to the dynamic contingencies created (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). In between the dialogue, we provide contextual details from our field notes.

### Vignette: stakes and struggles for legitimacy

### Act I: The trial in-house workshop intervention: top-managers (TM) and consultants (C)

(NOTE: We have considered the participants as belonging to a collective rather than distinguish them as individual speakers, except for one speaker who took on the self-appointed role of spokesperson for the whole group, denoted as TMS. Underscoring represents speaker emphasis and (…) represents overlapping speech. There were alternatively one or two consultants present.)

No sooner do the consultants begin their introductions to the workshop than they are interrupted by one of the top-managers. He seems to have appointed himself as the group leader, or spokesperson, which is tacitly accepted. As a consequence, it is he whose voice is mostly heard:

TMS:   What do you mean by "resources"?
C:     It could for example be material, competence, technology and so forth (…
TMS:   …) ok, so what it all boils down to then is nothing other than money and people.

A few minutes later:

TM:    What does "adjustment" mean?
C:     It means a form of prioritizing (…
TM:    …) ok, well in this case we say "order priority" (…
TMS:   …) Don't use the word adjustment because then they [middle and project managers] will presume they can circumvent the rules!

The resistance of the TM group grows increasingly disruptive as the day progresses; the consultants grow increasingly frustrated.

C:     I think it would be good if you didn't focus so much on specific words. Could you wait with your comments and let us explain?

The use of English in all the slides becomes a topic of contention.

TMS:   Is this going to be in English in the other workshops as well?
C:     Yes!
TM:    Well you have to change that! Translate it into Swedish!
C: But, we have been doing this [strategy workshops] in so many different companies, and we have never before been asked to translate into Swedish.

TMS:   I think all this is far too academic!
C: This model is easy to use (…

TM:    …) excuse me! did you say easy to use, in that case you are really making me worried (…
TMS:   …) I'm not quite sure what we need this model for. We need something more concrete!
TM:    Can't you provide them [middle and project managers] with three concrete action points that they can take home and work with instead?

The consultants again explain that the model is just such a tool to develop strategic action points at the operative level.

TMS:   This model is difficult, and if we don't understand it, they [middle and project managers] certainly won't either. I mean, why can't we use the Star Model? That model they already know, and it does the exact same thing!

Here the consultant challenges the TMS to describe the Star Model, but neither the TMS nor the other TMs take-up the challenge. This prompts the consultant to remark rather sarcastically:

C: If your goal is to become the leading construction company in Sweden, then you may have to learn to work with two different models.

No progress is made beyond (re)presentations of the 'new' model. The top-managers keep iterating that the consultants need to clarify their intentions with the model. Then:

C:     I see, so [mumbling audibly] we have to repeat ourselves over and over again.

At the end of the TM workshop, after some discussions, the top-managers agree, reluctantly, to promote the

strategy workshops to their respective subordinate managerial levels by e-mail. The TMS voices his reluctance emphatically:

> TMS: If we do [promote the workshops] then don't you forget to mention that it is you who are the experts here so we know why we should listen to you!

A decision is also made that one TM should attend the last day of each ensuing workshop to listen to the participants presentations of perceived strategic and operative challenges and action points.

## Act II: Away-days intervention: middle-management level (MM)

(NOTE: In the MM group, a spokesperson for the group was also rapidly and tacitly identified, here denoted as MMS. There were alternatively one or two consultants present.)

Right at the beginning of the MM workshop, as people are still settling in, the participants are informed that no one from top-management has volunteered to attend the last day's presentation activity despite previous agreement. The consultants find out that no one in the MM group has received any preparatory or promotion information about the workshop from their managers.

> MM: By the way, why is no one from top-management here today?
>
> MMS: I guess they don't think it's so important.

During the day's coffee and lunch breaks, a group of participants take it upon themselves to persuade or maybe even coerce a top-manager to attend the presentations planned for the third day. Much collective effort goes into this unanticipated task, which takes attention away from the planned workshop activities. In contrast to the TM workshop, there is a lot of joking and laughter among MM participants throughout the three away-days. As the top-managers before them, the MMs also question the model and are critical of the use of English terminology.

> MM: Why do you keep using a bunch of English words all the time?

When the consultants elicit comments, questions or a discussion, the MMs address each other rather than the consultants. Fragments of previous conversations are often resumed, rather than attending to the issue at hand. This interrupts the rhythm and pace that the consultants desired. As a consequence, they have difficulties maintaining a coherent thread through their repertoire. The liminal space of the away-days is thus invaded by particular situated day-to-day operational concerns and problems, which the consultants are unable to share. The middle managers become increasingly aware of the consultants' complete lack of knowledge of the construction industry.

> MMs: Yea, those reminders [to use the standards] we keep on getting every year are a pain! [laughter]
>
> MMS: Yes, [ConstCo] lacks a unified system for problem solving, if something does function it's because one person takes care of it. There is no control, it's up to individuals ( …
>
> C: … ) but don't you use your stardardised processes?
>
> MM: We are so production focused; we seldom stop to reflect; we are doers [English word].
>
> MMS: Top management demands that we accelerate and brake at the same time!
>
> MM: We talk about building in a certain [standardized] way, but we don't evaluate the gains. We are not evaluated on performance, only on profit; the result has to be that we find our own ways.
>
> MM: We are special, you know!

The word 'special' meaning 'different' crops up on several occasions in the construction practitioners' exchanges with the consultants in justification for deviating from the workshop curriculum. The consultants are unable to mobilize arguments against this claim.

By the second day, the consultants start successively to lose control of the workshop, and the purpose of the intervention is relegated to the background. The MMs focus all their attention and energy on preparing for the last day's presentations for the top-manager. They see this as an opportunity to get their voices heard and realize that they need to plan persuasive arguments. One MM makes this blatantly clear to the consultant:

> MM: We have chosen to disregard your tools and will now work with the models we are familiar with.

The middle manager who took on the role as the group's spokesperson (MMS) now gets impatient with the slow, and at this stage, the unstructured progress of the workshop. Suddenly, he moves to the front of the room and invades the consultant's space thus divesting the latter of his function. The consultant is left with no choice but to move aside. The MMS announces that the group will now use post-it notes instead of the model, and they will start by brainstorming collectively. He argues that the top-manager will not want to listen to long outlays, and 'will anyway not answer more than 10% of our questions'. The MMs get to work while the consultant tries to restore order by admonishing

them to follow the set instructions. The MMs ignore them; they are too busy following their own course of action. The consultant gives up and walks out of the room. He does not rejoin the group until a few hours later for dinner.

During the third day, the consultants maintain a low profile. The players of the game are now the MMs and the top-manager who has joined the workshop. The consults remain peripheral for the remainder of the workshop.

## Act III: Workshop at project manager level (PM)

[NOTE: In this group, we did not discern any one member taking on a spokesperson role. Here too there were alternatively one or two consultants present.]

This workshop starts with the consultants reflecting out loud on the previous participants' evaluations of the intervention so far: 'too much theory'; 'too little theory'; 'too much group work'; 'too little group work'. They point out that the most important purpose of the workshop is: ' … probably that you get time to network and socialise'. The consultants then ask the PMs to first formulate and then discuss what they see as their largest problems/challenges right now. The PMs take on this task with alacrity and enumerate a range of problems, all of which stem from a lack of unified processes and models, lack of unified governance and unrealistic demands.

| | |
|---|---|
| PM: | … )yeah and then we also have our economic system [LAUGHTER] … I think it is odd that we don't have one integrated system, instead we are expected to solve problem as they arise ( … |
| C: | … ) could we call this "reactive capabilities" [the term has just been defined] |
| PM: | [in unison] YES! |
| PM: | I think we are generally fixated on the solution. We <u>fix</u>, that's what we do, and it is in these temporary fixings that the shit hits the fan. |

The consultants pre-empt objections to their model and its level of detail and abstraction by first exemplifying and justifying the details. The PMs then start working with the model. The atmosphere is positive. However, the PMs soon abandon the model and digress to practical, local and site-specific problems of their daily work, seeking feedback from each other. Discussions concerning corporate visions, growth, profitability and enhanced effectivity—the rationale for the workshops —were highlighted through their impossibility of achievement. The focus turned to the negative implications of top-management's tough demands and the

mismatches of these with the PMs' lived realities. Similar to the MMs, this workshop becomes a space for voicing frustration and dissatisfaction.

| | |
|---|---|
| PM: | We can't wait around to see what management <u>might</u> come up with; <u>we have to act</u>! |
| PM: | We have to be able to plan and get <u>resources, time</u>, if we are to grow. |
| PM: | Problems arise when people keep on parking their bikes close to our construction sites. |
| PM: | Wells are also a problem, aren't they? |

The presentations during day three emphasize the PMs strong concerns with solving day-to-day crises in the projects and evidence a lack of engagement in strategic issues. Allusion to the model is minimal. Towards the end of the workshop a consultant asks:

| | |
|---|---|
| C: | What have you learnt from the model? |
| PM: | Oh! well, oh yes, for example that green building may not be very important today, but may become important in the future. I would <u>never</u> have been able to determine this without the model! |

There is no mistaking the irony in this statement.

## Discussion

Most of the research on interventions in organizations privileges the consultants and/or high-level managers (Werr and Styhre, 2002; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy *et al.*, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2010). There is to date scant attention paid to consultant interventions or their effects at middle- or lower managerial levels where strategic innovations are operationalized. Moreover, none of the research on consultant interventions examines the practice in the construction field. We have attempted to bridge both these gaps by examining the micro-level enactment of external management-consultancy interventions at three managerial levels in a large construction company. Using Bourdieu's game analogy described earlier, we discuss the forces at play in the competitors' struggles to win tokens and strengthen the value of their various forms of capital, each party vying for power over the other.

Extant management-consulting theorizing tends to present a somewhat idealized view of consultants as boundary brokers whose role it is to transform organizational practices (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Clegg *et al*, 2004; see also Sturdy *et al.*, 2004). By interacting with organizational members in sanctioned liminal spaces, 'normal' everyday processes and practices may be interrupted, questioned and, in the best of worlds, transformed 'in a magical way, without revealing the details of the process itself' (Czarniawska and Mazza,

2003, p. 284). Clegg *et al.* (2004) conceptualize consultants as 'parasites' whose job it is to create 'noise' by 'disrupting' the existing order and enabling the creation of a new order. Sturdy *et al.* (2004) critiqued these contributions for 'celebrating consultancy as a privileged arena' thus reinforcing already existing power relations and the discourse of managerialism. They point out that management consulting has been more about the 'silencing' of groups than about 'noise and plurivocality' (ibid., p. 338). Whether 'silencers' or 'boundary brokers', consultants from this perspective play the role of 'discourse technologists', introducing a new managerial-imposed discourse on organizational members (Räisänen and Linde, 2004). These aforementioned perspectives take for granted the assumption that the consultants possess the domain knowledge and expertise required, and thus possess social and pedagogical-authority capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, they assume that the consultants have already won *the game* before they carry out the interventions.

However, based on our findings, we contend that in taking for granted that all the relevant tokens in the *field* of the intervention are stacked on their side, as the consultants in our empirical examples seem to do, they neglect to form a contract with the workshop participants. By omitting to create (common) rules for the game, they failed to achieve collusion and silence plurivocality and thus exposed themselves to attack. This failure seriously eroded the value of their social and pedagogical-authority tokens, which they then failed to strengthen or exchange for more viable tokens relevant to the game that unfolded. We interpret this failure as mainly due to their total lack of situated knowledge pertaining to the field of the practitioners.

Consequently, the practitioners could use strategies to discredit the consultants' form of capital and enhance their own, e.g. by attacking the consultants' use of English, their managerial jargon and their theoretical model; by making face-threatening comments about their lack of knowledge of construction; and in various ways taking over their pedagogical authority by literally moving into the consultants' symbolic space. The consultants thus lose the legitimacy of their tokens and fail to mobilize new ones. The practitioners on the other hand, succeed in both using their own tokens and appropriating those of the consultants: their professions of being 'special' are a case in point.

It is interesting to note that the consultants have to repeat the process, and failure, several times before they 'learn' that their tokens and capital do not have the taken-for-granted values ascribed to them in their own field of play. Their beliefs in their own social and pedagogical-authority capital render them blind and deaf to the strong admonitions from top-managers, for example, to change their intervention repertoire and routines.

The strong individual and group identification with a construction–practitioner *habitus* renders the practitioners of this case study formidable opponents. In the same way as the consultants, the practitioners take for granted the superior value and uniqueness of their tokens and their social, cultural as well as economic capital in the game at hand. This is reinforced by several factors. First, the practitioners own the game; the organization has commissioned and thus paid the consultants to do a job, which strengthens their economic capital. They can therefore question and undermine the pedagogical-authority capital of the consultants, which they explicitly do through face-threatening criticism, and implicitly through omitting to promote the interventions to their subordinate managers.

Second, the top-management team members were not involved in the decisions and planning of the development project leading to the interventions; this was delegated to the executive manager of the organization's competence-development support-unit. The top-managers therefore had minimal stakes in the success of the interventions, which was also demonstrated by their very poor attendance and lack of involvement, other than to be critical. The third factor was that the interventions were compulsory for all middle and project managers, but neither purpose nor incentives were clearly formulated. This lack of clarity compounded by the consultants' failure to establish common rules for the game, enabled the practitioners to frame their own purpose and rules, which, due to their number and strong common habitus, overrode those of the consultants.

The discussion so far raises the question of the nature of the liminal spaces of management consulting. Are they, as Clegg *et al.* (2004) and Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) suggest, emancipatory spaces where creativity may burgeon, or are they, as Sturdy *et al.* (2004, 2006) argue, spaces that have their own embedded rituals and activities constituted through several layers of colonization? The protected status of the space, its temporal and spatial removal from the day-to-day rituals of the work place are more likely, as Johnson *et al.* (2010) claim, to result in difficulties of transfer and translation of innovative ideas created in liminality into the various (and often varied) local contexts of the actors.

In our view, the success of the liminal space in generating communitas and transferability of new ideas depends on the creators' and inhabitants' abilities to mobilize the affordances and minimize the constraints offered by the space. The consultants need to be aware that the space, as Sturdy *et al.* (2006) have pointed out, embeds its own layers of rituals and activities, which elicit behaviours enacted in other practices. In the present case, the away-day format entailed sharing meals and 'free' time, which reinforced the professional camaraderie of the participants, enabling them

to network. Even though networking was one of the purposes of the liminality, i.e. an affordance, it was also a constraint in that it widened the social distance and the difference between consultants and practitioners. Rather than use meals and breaks to erase status differences and create an anti-structure, the participants were at liberty to deal with operational problems in their units 'back home'. There was thus a lot of time spent on cell phones with their subordinates and consulting with each other. These issues then impinged on the workshop activities, which caused much of the disruption shown in the data section.

## Concluding remarks

As Styhre (2011) has noted, for construction workers know–how and expertise are valued tokens of social capital and demonstrated through performing 'good work'. What is considered 'good work' has been locally established in the organization at the individual level and over time has become embedded in local norms. This is shown in many of the statement in the data by middle and project managers and also explains the top-managers' convictions that the consultants discourse and level of abstraction will not work with their subordinate managers. The managers have either contributed to embedding norms and routines or have been socialized into them, which explains why, even though they are not all acquainted with each other, the practitioners almost immediately form an in-group, among which we heard a variety of national dialects and slang, lots of internal jokes and laughter. These elements and the continuous stream of shoptalk among the practitioners constituted a palpable and impregnable boundary between the two cultural fields. These behaviours, as Bourdieu (1990, 1991) argues, have been historically constructed and institutionalized over time, inculcated into the participants, who have embodied a construction habitus through socialization.

Representation of the construction industry as 'special', 'unique' or 'distinctive' is a common iteration, and critique, in much of the extant construction literature, and is often seen as an obstacle for innovation and cross-boundary learning (Hillebrandt and Cannon, 1989; Groak, 1994, 2001; Hillebrandt *et al.*, 1995; Green *et al*, 2008: Styhre, 2011, to name only a few). The attribute of being 'special' was oft repeated by the construction managers in the encounter with the management-consultants, but here with undertones of pride. It could easily be argued, however, that the claim of being 'special' could be attributed to both the construction managers and the consultants: the challenge is whether to use 'uniqueness' as an obstacle to change or as an invitation.

To conclude, by viewing the interventions from an integrated perspective that includes socio-cultural and historical factors, we have shown how the fields, the individual and group dispositions (habitus), and different kinds of capital are mobilized to gain power over the practice and 'adversary' at hand. Further and deeper analysis of internal and external consultancy interventions using this integrated framework, and combining it with the concept of liminality, is warranted, and hopefully our contribution will trigger an impetus for further studies in this vein. This combination could also be fruitful to gain better understanding of blind spots that hinder communication and knowledge sharing at the interfaces of cultural boundaries, both inter- and intra-organizationally as well as at project boundaries.

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