



Human Relations
[0018-7267(200303)56:3]
Volume 56(3): 267–290: 031612
Copyright © 2003
The Tavistock Institute ®
SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA,
New Delhi
www.sagepublications.com

Consulting as a liminal space

Barbara Czarniawska and Carmelo Mazza

ABSTRACT

The growing literature on management consulting views consultants as allies of management, in temporary positions of power. This article attempts to complement this perspective by assuming a metaphor of consulting as a liminal space. Liminality is a condition where the usual practice and order are suspended and replaced by new rites and rituals. We build on the anthropological analyses of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to find theoretical support for the idea of liminality as applied to the consulting activity. This article is based on our experience as consultants and observers. It collects on-the-job reflections – ours and those of other consultants we have met. These participating observations support the suggestion that consulting can be represented as a liminal space for both consultants and their client organizations.

KEYWORDS

liminality ■ management consulting ■ organizational rites

I teach industrial economics and economics of competition at the Faculty of Economics. I know that you, too, come from an academic environment, so I hope you understand what I mean. I study mathematical models, use regression analysis and apply econometric models, but upon entering the ‘office of the client’ all I am interested in are organizational behaviors, and coordination and control systems. I call it schizophrenia; I know that this is a way of earning a living, but for how long can I go on like this?

(An interview)

The man who was interviewed sought in the metaphor of schizophrenia a way of making sense of his life situation. This metaphor emerged in the organizational discourse in the 1970s, at the time when uncertainty was the key villain in organization theory, to be exorcised with systems. The remaining 'dysfunctions' were interpreted in the vocabulary of individual psychological states. The romance of American psychology (Herman, 1995) was closely connected to the romance of American management (Shenhav, 2000).

Different times, different metaphors. The rapprochement between anthropology and management that took place in the 1980s opened a different repertoire of metaphors, whose merit is not only their freshness, so important in metaphorical discourse, but also their social character. They divert attention – and therefore blame – from the individual, but do not dump it on systems. They point at complex arrangements that people put in space only to forget them in time. These new metaphors depict organizational actors as surrounded by meanings that are taken for granted, routines that seem eternal, invisible infrastructures and rituals adorned with technical rationality.

One of the research topics that emerged as part of cultural studies, but also as a result of the growing salience of the phenomenon, was management consulting. It has arrived at an array of striking metaphors to depict what consultants do: they were seen as merchants of meanings (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990 a, b; Czarniawska-Joerges et al., 1990) impression managers (Clark, 1995) gurus (Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1995; Furusten, 1999; Clark & Fincham, 2002), story-tellers (Clark & Salaman, 1996) and even witch-doctors (Clark, 1996; Micklethwaite & Wooldridge, 1996). All these metaphors focused on the *role* of consultants, and this role as connected to power, thus contributing to a magnification – sometimes by divinization, sometimes by demonization – of management consultants.

This powerful picture has subsequently been completed by a vision of a more *symmetrical relationship* enacted in consulting. Consultants ought to be marginal, postulated Berthoin Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001), nonetheless assuming that a dominant role of the client is a defect that should be corrected by the consultant. Most researchers who espouse the ideal of a symmetrical relationship agree that '[t]he consultant has potentially the power to maintain the balance between himself [sic] and his client' (McGivern, 1983: 368; see also Fincham, 1999: 350 and Hislop, 2002: 668).

We wholeheartedly agree that a symmetrical and dynamic relationship is highly desirable. We are, however, less optimistic than our colleagues as to easy ways to achieve and maintain this symmetry. We are convinced by

Sturdy's (1997) thesis that managers are driven to use consultants by their 'executive anxieties'. If these are not promptly assuaged by the consultants, the most obvious result is the production of 'consultant anxiety'. This becomes a self-reinforcing process, a vicious circle.

As suggested in the quote at the outset, consulting can be a painful experience, where weaknesses rather than strengths are the salient aspects. By emphasizing these aspects, we turn upside down the view of consultants as rich and powerful actors juxtaposed to company decision makers. Answering Sturdy's plea for a more complex picture of consulting, we rely on anthropology rather than social psychology and opt for a metaphor that considers consulting a condition rather than a role or a relationship. The metaphor we wish to offer the frustrated consultant-cum-economist is that of liminality.

This is similar to the 'burden of otherness' ascribed to consultants by Kipping and Armbrüster (2002). Our approach differs from the one taken by those two authors in that it assumes an anthropological stance in both its method and its theory. Kipping and Armbrüster borrowed G.H. Mead's notion of the other as used in organization theory by John W. Meyer (1996), and used historical material only. We are, however, on the same track, pointing out that not all management consultants are gurus, and that many of them are often treated more like witches than like witch-doctors.

Our discussion is structured in five parts. In the first section, we introduce the concept of liminality; of long tradition in anthropology, it has only recently entered organization studies. In the second section, we describe consulting as a condition of liminality. Relying on interviews and participating observation, we apply the liminality metaphor to shed light on some typical dynamics of consulting. In the third section, we describe consultancy rites – the rites of passage organized by the consultants – pointing out that the condition of liminality applies to consultants and to employees in a consulted company, but not in the same sense. The fourth section is dedicated to a discussion of a 'liminal organization'. Finally, we discuss the possibility that liminality is becoming 'the modern condition'.

The concept of liminality

The word liminal, derived from limen – the Latin word for threshold – was first used by the French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his work *Les rites de passage*.¹ The word denoted rituals of transition – of passage between one social status and another. Liminality was, in its original sense, a term denoting a time and a space.

As Victor Turner (1966, 1982) points out, van Gennep intended using the term 'rites of passage' to denote both rituals accompanying an individual's (or a group's) change in social status, and those associated with such things as seasonal changes for an entire society. As he elaborated only the first use, the term acquired a narrower meaning in the anthropological tradition (van Gennep, 1909/1960; Turner, 1982). Turner attempted to extend it, and so did later anthropologists.

In his original use, van Gennep distinguished three phases of a rite of passage: separation (divestiture), transition (liminality) and incorporation (investiture). During the separation phase, the person or persons who are to be subjected to the passage become separated from their previous social environment and their previous way of life. During the transition phase, the person or persons separated from their previous environment experience the liminal condition. During the incorporation phase they enter a new group and a new life.

The concept of rites of passage has been evoked in the organizational context by Harrison M. Trice and Janice M. Beyer (1993) and, most recently, by Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002). In this last study, the three phases were found to be a good description of the developments during a trainee program in a transnational company. The young trainees were first separated from either their student life (if they had been recruited directly from school) or else from their working life and colleagues (if they were already working). The period of training was the liminal phase, while the phase of investiture – becoming managers, which was the aim of the training – ran somewhat parallel with the liminal phase. Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002) concluded, in accord with Trice and Beyer, that the third phase is the least developed in modern corporations (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

This conclusion may be somewhat premature. Van Gennep himself pointed out that specific stages could be more significant in different kinds of passages: according to him, the separation phase was most prominent in funerals, while the incorporation phase played a central role in marriages. The transition phase can be very short (for an example on the army's two steps forward as the initiation of a conscript, see Turner, 1982) or it can be prolonged in time and marked by travel to distant places. The transition phase may end with travel itself (for example, on promotion in US corporations, which almost inevitably requires transfer to other cities, see Turner, 1982), or travel may be only the means of entering the liminal space.

Victor Turner pointed out that the phase of transition is situated in sacred time and space, as opposed to the profane times and places of the first and third phases:

the ritual subjects pass through a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few . . . of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.

(Turner, 1982: 24)

There are certain aspects described by van Gennep and Turner that are of more relevance in the present context than others. For example, Turner insisted that the concept of liminality must not be applied to modern societies (1982). He suggested a new term, 'liminoid' – meaning 'not quite liminal' (1982: 32). We do not make use of this new concept for two reasons. First, it is highly laudatory as it describes creative communities and, although the consultants might certainly be conceived as a creative community, we would like to abstain from delivering such judgments. Second, since Turner wrote these words, anthropology and the rest of the social sciences have agreed that there is no 'great divide' between so-called premodern and modern societies (Sahlins, 1994, 2000). We shall therefore continue to use the old concept of liminality.

There is an important insight in Turner's treatment of the concept that we wish to preserve, however. He pointed out that while separation may be characterized by a sharp symbolic inversion of social attributes, liminality is characterized by the blurring and merging of distinctions. Persons who find themselves in a liminal phase are 'temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others. But it also liberates them from structural obligations' (Turner, 1982: 27). The phase is characteristically accompanied by ritual symbols that are either of effacement or of ambiguity and paradox (Turner, 1982).

A German ethnologist, Richard Rottenburg (2000) has made use of this observation and, as a consequence, extended the notion of the liminal state in a fascinating way. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he took a position at Viadrina University, situated in Frankfurt an der Oder, on the border between Poland and Germany. Since 1991, German and Polish citizens have been allowed to cross the border without a visa and, as a result, Rottenburg, like many of his colleagues, spent much of his time in a bar called Lubusz in the small Polish town of Slubice. Sitting in a bar leads easily to participant observations, and after some time Rottenburg formed a theory, according to which the landlord of the bar was an entrepreneur who was 'doing business in an auspicious liminal space' (2000: 91).

The main corroboration for this thesis was the fact that established categories did not work in Lubusz. Not only did Rottenburg and his colleagues have problems deciding who the people staying in Lubusz were, but the place itself changed its character through the day and into the night.

From a café in the morning, it transformed itself into a bar and a restaurant in the afternoon and early evening, to end up as a discotheque, and its patrons changed accordingly, although sometimes they were the same persons (or at least the same bodies).

The interpretations differed with the interpreters:

Some . . . (mostly academics from Berlin) made sense of this experience by classifying it as a process of fluidisation of classification systems. They assumed this fluidisation to be part of a huge transformation of Middle-Eastern European societies. Others (mostly academics from Poland) made sense of the very same experience by classifying it as an experience of alterity.

(2000: 97)

The point Rottenburg was making is also helpful in interpreting the frustration of the consultant quoted at the beginning of the article. Rottenburg refers to 'the aporia given by the contradiction between the impossibility of true classifications and the unavoidability of classifying' (2000: 98). Aporia may therefore be a proper, less harsh and self-accusing, notion by means of which to express this kind of frustration. Schizophrenia is an illness, or at least is classified so in our societies, and not easily curable, whereas an aporia is a state – perhaps not pleasant but definitely temporary.

All that is said about liminality and about aporia suggests a temporary state that may be painful (viz. Purgatory, a state of limbo for Catholics) or even enjoyable (more about that later), but of limited duration. Here, however, Rottenburg's study offers another set of surprises. To begin with, certain customers of Lubusz (perhaps even Rottenburg himself?) seemed to enjoy their prolonged visits there just because it was a limbo. Having separated themselves from whatever was behind and before, they were in no hurry to be incorporated into something new. Perhaps there was nothing new to be incorporated into; one had to stay in limbo until the new heaven was constructed.

Can limbo thus be conceived as a new, postmodern heaven, where everybody lingers to watch their own and others' identities (and alterities) dissolve and crystallize again in a stroboscopic light? Rottenburg argues that classifications do actually work: so liminality can be conceived as a space that makes itself permanent – more like Purgatory than a ritual space created occasionally – but also that, unlike Purgatory, has a distinct attraction, at least for some time.

Along this line of reasoning, liminality can offer, as van Gennep and Turner had already noticed, a sense of freedom, a possibility of creation, a

special sense of community with the others in the limbo that has little to do with identity – rather a shared sense of alterity, as it were. When aporia prevails, the exits are open and so, peculiarly for our time and place, also the entrances. One can leave for good – but also come back. Let us see whether such a notion of liminality fits the situation as described by consultants themselves.

The consultant condition

In the rites of passage described by van Gennep or Turner, liminality is much more than a personal state; to use a traditional vocabulary, it is an objective condition, a working arrangement, which we shall call a *consultant condition*. In order to put consulting in the liminality context, we will describe consultancy events and action in terms of *consultancy rites*.

The liminal space in which consultancy rites take place is that of a *liminal organization*, as perceived by the consultants. We emphasize this relativity of definition in order to point out that the actual place occupied by the liminal organization is the same as that which for many other people is a non-liminal place, a place of stable identities and everyday work. A liminal organization shares its legal boundaries and physical environment with a proper work organization, but it forms a virtual space, experienced differently by consultants than by the regular employees. While other organizational rites of passage, like the managerial training described by Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002), might take place in a different locality or at least at a different time from the regular organizing, consulting happens at the same time and place but in a different space. In what follows, we shall illustrate the three concepts – consultant condition, consultancy rites and liminal organization – taking examples from the practice of consulting.

A brief explanation of our own status is due: while one of us is living the liminal existence of an academic-cum-consultant and has been doing it for quite some time, the other has made several studies of consulting. The material used is fieldnotes and interviews collected in the period between September 1999 and March 2002 in Italian organizations.

The external locus of time control

Most of the consultants belong to some non-liminal world: usually a university or a consulting company, somebody else's or their own. Unlike participants in rites of passage, however, they do not leave it once to re-enter it later after a completed transition. They travel back and forth, in and out

of the liminal space. While within this space, they abdicate control over their time.

We consultants work on demand. In a sense, we are all call-girls. Or, if you do not like the metaphor, we are like children: when mummy calls, we go and do as told.

(An interview)

Do you want to know about my working day? Yesterday I was at the client's office till 20:00. Then she invited me to dinner, so I kept consulting (to a certain extent) till midnight. At 1:30 I got a short message at my mobile reminding me of a meeting to be held the morning after. At 7:15, she called me to tell me that the meeting was postponed but a new one had to be prepared. This is not extraordinary: I spent three months like this! This is what they think they pay for.

(An interview)

To a certain extent, we consultants are what we charge our clients. Our chargeability is the measure of our performance.

(An interview)

A consultant's time is an item in the client's budget and is managed like all other items in that budget. Consultants are controlled through measurement of their workdays, and their output is calculated in person-per-day units. The time of a given consultant is then checked according to the number of persons-per-day allocated to a given project. Significantly, the controlling discourse focuses to a great extent on time management:

Going to lunch, already? Are we now paying you also for meal times?

(Fieldnotes)

A meeting you say? So that we do all the talking while you bring in ten people to get a whole day signed down without any need to work! I know what you are after: let's speak in order not to do anything!

(Fieldnotes)

I have seen your most recent publication in the [scientific journal]. Congratulations! I am sure you worked day and night to get it. I hope, however, that when I saw you here every afternoon at the computer you were working for our project, right?

(Fieldnotes)

While the form of the comments is undoubtedly locally tinged, the content is certainly recognizable by consultants all over the world.

Naturally, consultants attempt to carve niches of their own time, but it is most likely that all the novices subjected to rites of passage also do so. In all such situations, however, autonomous time management is not legitimate; nor is the choice of action left to the consultants' will.

The external locus of action control

The external locus of action control is even more obvious than time control. The consultants must not have their own objectives: their role consists of internalizing those of the client. They are supposed to perceive the world, interpret it and act on it so as to best serve their clients' interests.

I feel like a truly global consultant. Last night I had dinner with the client, today I will help her solve personal problems, tomorrow I will give her advice on how to furnish the flat or which book to read over the weekend.

(An interview)

There is of course a possibility that the clients do not perceive their interests correctly, at least according to the consultant, but even correcting misperceptions is a part of acting in clients' interests. A consultant cannot decide that, for the good of humanity, the client had better perish, and although the temptation may exist, such an alternative means taking leave from the consultant condition, perhaps permanently. A consultant has no right to her or his own will that is divergent from that of the client:

Sometimes we feel like creatures with the words 'Hello!' or 'Can I help you?' written on our faces to further display our availability for supporting any client's activity. Is it peculiar to pursue such an alignment to the client's goal? I do not think so.

(An interview)

I know many consultants who make their living out of a consulting relation with a single client. This means that you link your income to your ability to grasp and align with that client's interest. As strange as it could be, this is the way many colleagues work every single day.

(An interview)

Action control sometimes means that consultants have to replace their

clients' staff. In such a situation, the hierarchical power over collaborators and the bargaining power over consultants may collide. Whichever way, it makes the liminality of the consultant's position even deeper:

I received an order to send a letter to the Minister. This means that I've got to do what the Head of Division should do. So I am replacing him in one of his main tasks, without even being a member of the organization. Is this wise from a professional viewpoint? And is this wise from the client's viewpoint? However, this is only a small part of the whole story. In order to be sure that the letter has been sent, I will also have to replace the secretary who makes the needed copies, the people who prepare the envelopes, and even the courier that delivers the letter. What does it have to do with being a consultant?

(An interview)

The sense of frustration is obvious in this passage. A further complication consists in the fact that the client is seldom a homogeneous unit, so to speak, and thus even a consultant cannot be of one piece:

Listen, now you have to write two reports for our two clients. The somewhat peculiar thing about it is that those two reports will be used in the next meeting between them. Both of them asked us to prepare proposals for the meeting. Well, if the proposals are the same, they will probably think that it is unfair to have the same consultants and we will lose both projects. We need them to eventually agree, but we have to make them discuss different alternatives, so they do not notice the similarities. We have to write in some wrong ideas to make them feel they went a long way to agree.

(Fieldnotes)

I have seen Giovanni [a fictitious name of a consultant] speak one way when he represents the Personnel Director, and in another, practically opposite, when he was doing a job for the Company's Vice. At one meeting he had to represent both of them in budget negotiations, you should see him quarrelling furiously with himself.

(An interview)

Although not all consultants are as flexible as Giovanni, most would probably recognize this necessity of changing voice depending on who they are meeting on the client's side. The point we are making here is that there is a difference between acting on feedback – a normal expectation in human

relations – and a continuous demand for adaptation. It seems that consultants must be more than flexible – they need to be pliable. The external locus of control is a central facet of liminality, both in anthropological studies and in the practice of consulting.

It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that liminality is a condition imposed on consultants from outside. As the clients have to be enticed to offer more consulting projects, consultants do their best to reproduce the condition of liminality, proposing still new interventions.

Senior consultant: We should propose a standard format to collect data on the budgeting process. An Excel file would be enough.

Partner: That's fine, but we could convince our client to adopt a web technology and an integrated database to store data. I agree with you that it might be redundant, but we could end up with a very big project this way.

(Fieldnotes)

Now I explain to you what our strategy is. We need to find a problem the client has not detected. Then we ask for a few days to work on it. Once this is accepted, we present the problem as very serious, convincing the client that it requires more working days to be solved. Ideally, the problem should be presented as something that could be only faced but never solved. Of course, the problem must be so serious that it could put at stake the client's success and performance.

(An interview)

How does it feel to be a consultant?

One of the possible consequences of the consultant condition is a fragility of self-esteem, which makes consultants look for possible sources of pride and self-assertion. Sometimes this can be accomplished by making derogative comparisons with people who do not experience the frustrations related to living in a liminal state:

Consultants are *la crème de la crème* of management science. We consultants are able to turn ideas and time into money as companies turn products and services into money. Academics are only able to talk; we do the real stuff! That's what we are paid for.

(An interview)

The contrast between the consultants and the researchers is a staple diet of professional reflection both in academia and in consulting. Who is doing 'the real stuff'? In the present context, however, the contrast that is of interest to us is that between the consultants and the employees of the client's organization. This contrast comes in relief when consultancy rites are in focus.

Consultancy rites

Rituals in contemporary organizations

Edmund Leach (1968) defined ritual as stereotyped behavior that is potent in terms of communicating information about a culture's most cherished values, though not potent in a rational-technical sense (Leach, 1968; Turner, 1982).

Having stated that different anthropologists at different times defined rituals in different ways, Leach proceeds to explain his way of understanding the term, where great emphasis is placed on the perspective view of rationality, the view for which Leach is famous:

Human actions can serve to do things, that is, alter the physical state of the world (as in lighting the bonfire), or they can serve to say things. . . . The actions that say things . . . are not as a rule intrinsically different from those that do things. . . . Almost every human action that takes place in culturally defined surroundings is divisible in this way; it has a technical aspect which does something and an aesthetic, communicative aspect which says something. In those types of behavior that are labeled ritual by any of the definitions so far discussed, the aesthetic, communicative aspect is particularly prominent, but a technical aspect is never entirely absent.

(Leach, 1968: 523)

Leach, unlike many of today's anti-functionalist organization theorists, underscores the sheer instrumentality of a ritual: 'From the viewpoint of the actor, rites can alter the state of the world because they invoke power' (1968: 524). This formulation resembles Austin's speech act theory: human utterances can serve to say things, and they can serve to do things (Austin, 1962; Silverman & Torode, 1980; Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988).

A question to ask is, whose world is supposed to change – the consultant's or the client's employees? One could claim that this question reveals the highly metaphorical character of the rites of passage label – disclosing the

wrong side of the metaphor, as it were. Surely the function of traditional rites of passage is to change the novices and keep the community as it was; while the function of consulting is to change the community while leaving the consultants as they were? None of this is certain, however. As Turner (1982) pointed out, liminality fosters deviation and creativity, and a new generation of novices may be the one that will organize a mutiny or at least will renew the community. Moreover, it must be made clear that the clients never or rarely think about changing themselves. As many studies of change have shown, the expression 'we have to change' really means 'they have to change', where 'they' are usually subordinates and sometimes other departments. Consultants are summoned when a group of practitioners are judged to be deviating from their proper route or, as Brunsson and Olsen (1993) succinctly put it, the purpose of reform is to avoid change.

But it is correct that the consultants are not expected to change. Consultants are not summoned to organizations to undergo the rites of passage, but to organize them. Their task is to temporarily turn a regular organization into a liminal one.

We have therefore observed two parallel and causally connected rites of passage: those for consultants and those for employees. The temporal organization of the two is inverted. The start-up meeting is an investiture for consultants and a divestiture for the employees. The presentation of the report is an investiture for the employees and the divestiture of the consultants. In the phase of transition, the status of both is fluid, and can change dramatically with circumstances. The main difference between the condition of the consultants and that of the employees is that it is the consultants who organize rituals for the employees, whereas the consultants collaborate with the clients in staging their own rituals.

Incorporation/separation: the start-up meeting

While the novices in a traditional rite of passage must become familiar with the spirits or demons who will supervise their stay in limbo, the employees of an organization that is going to turn liminal similarly become familiar with the consultants who will supervise their excursion into liminality. In both cases, there is a richness of symbolic and narrative resources invested in the presentation, aiming at the strongest effect. Here is how novice consultants are presented:

Another member of our team is the consultant X, our expert in international issues connected to the creation of fiscal agencies. We suggest that you all try to make a good use of his knowledge of foreign

developments in order to apply it where it is relevant for our common action.

(Fieldnotes)

So, you have met our consultant Y. You see how he works, he is our genius. I keep him by my side at all meetings, as he knows how to deal with everything!

(Fieldnotes)

Here is Z. He is our genius. He is able to contribute to a solution of any problem. However, be careful; he is an academic so he could study your behavior and then make a book out of his reflections. So, your bad attitudes could be known through international books!

(Fieldnotes)

Similarly, when one of the authors was forced to act as a consultant in a public utility, she was presented to the group of managers, to her dismay, as 'the professor who came here to tell us how we should reorganize our utility'. Observe that in both cases the foreignness of the expertise is an important part of that expertise; the special powers, in van Gennep's terms, have to do with experiences in distant places (other worlds).

While consultants are invested with special powers, the employees are invested with a special status: that of learners, or reformees – those who are to change and who are expected to contribute actively to that change.

I invite you all [the client organization's employees] to take a maximal advantage of the presence of our consultants. They are not supposed to stay here forever, so you should learn what they do pretty soon. I am sure you will be able to replace them at the end. In the meantime, try to benefit from the methods and techniques they use.

(Fieldnotes)

We all have to learn how to follow the normative procedures. What I ask you [the consulting team] is to support me in this new task. I cannot rely on the employees. They are not ready to frame the change now, so they have to follow in your steps. I have already talked with my managers to explain this. I do not expect much resistance, but if it happens, ignore it and report directly to me.

(Fieldnotes)

The status differences between these two groups become sharp and clear, as the simultaneous investiture and divestiture widen the gap. This status

difference is also reproduced through symbols like clothing, accessories and body language.

Take a look at X; you could bet he is a consultant even if you saw him for the first time. It is the color of his suit, right shade of gray, it's the sun-glasses, it's the pen he uses. You cannot be mistaken: he is a real consultant!

(An interview)

This is the situation in the initial phase, which serves to incorporate consultants (into the client's company) and to separate the employees (from those who are not the target of consultancy). In this case, 'separation' is doubly fitting because the groups become separated not only from their original communities, but also from one another. As the consultancy proceeds, the separation line becomes increasingly blurred.

Transition

Sharing of documents, a ritual typical of the transition phase, is a good example of the intertwining of symbolic and instrumental aspects of each and every action. After all, sharing of documents is a perfectly rational, technical, instrumental action. In order to be of use, consultants must learn about the client's situation. This same action is, however, imbued with symbolic transitions and transfers of meaning. Clearly the owners of documents hope that the consultants, given access to the documents, will gain not only the information but also the right interpretation, as it were. After all, facts speak for themselves, don't they?

So, this is the situation, and if I managed to explain it even to consultants, then the situation is clear enough, isn't it!

Well, I am only your consultant Dr Client. I adjust to your indications and even if I do not understand the indications I adjust anyway.

And you are right on both accounts, Consultant. You should think like I do for two reasons: because I am paying your consulting hours and therefore I take away your right to think independently, and because I am always right.

(Fieldnotes)

The sarcasm and the aggressiveness of these remarks may be exceptional, but they illuminate a process that always takes place. As the consultants become

familiar with documents, they form their own opinions, not always shared by the locals. Disappointment, corrections and recriminations follow, and the special powers of the consultant seem to be diminishing. The employees, on the other hand, including the clients, feel the anxiety of a disclosure – hence the resulting defensiveness and even aggression. One could, in fact, speak of the supporting *spoliation* rite: the clients reveal the secrets contained in their documents, the consultants reveal (and accept) their liminal condition, temporarily refusing allegiances to the external world: having therefore reached a similar status resulting from the shared condition of liminality, they can then work together.

It is important to share information with consultants. Only if we work with the same information, can we develop a real cooperation. I am not like those who hide documents from consultants; but the consultants have to employ their own interpretative skills. If I have to explain to them the inner meanings, which value would they add to my office?

(An interview)

Let's read together this letter. What do we think? We should define together the way to reply. I want all the consultants here! They must help us to defend our office. They must know the whole story behind it. And, naturally, they will be forbidden to disclose anything. Otherwise we will immediately fire them.

(Fieldnotes)

During the transition rites, the relationships between the consultants and the employees resemble those of communicating with spirits: although consultants' and employees' bodies have the same physical status, their social position and their roles are not the same. The souls communicate in passing, as their transition goes in opposite directions.

Separation/incorporation: presentation of the report

Client: This report represents a fundamental contribution towards the complete reform of our organization. We shall be well ahead of all other units in this process, partly because we have capable consultants to work for us. And we have to admit that in the process the consultants learned to understand us better and better.

(Fieldnotes)

Consultant: We give total support to our Client. We work, we study, and we try to make him understand how things stand, and to protect him from making grave mistakes. He knows it alright, although he will never say it openly. But this is well understood: the merits belong to the organization; we are responsible for the errors.

(An interview)

The presentation of the final report is always an important ceremony. It is a moment of ultimate pride (or ultimate humiliation, as in the case described by Czarniawska, 2001). It reminds one of military parades on the national day: it is a ritual reconfirming capacity and competence. As in a military parade, though, the tribute is to the leaders, although the crowd may be applauding the soldiers. The rite is modernized: in ancient Rome, the leader would have headed the parade; the tribute was to him. In contemporary societies, the leaders stand on a podium, and the soldiers parade. In this case, both consultants and employees play the part of the soldiers: one group marches out, the other marches in.

As consultants, we are not always invited to the final presentation of the project reports, once they have been amended and accepted by the client. The client prefers at that stage to be fully in charge of the output. The client's team is the main character in the parade. Of course, we are often mentioned, but as marginal helpers; merits are on them.

(An interview)

Please, stay close to me [the client] during the presentation, since you prepared it. But remember that you [the consultants] are not allowed to speak. We have to predict everything in advance so that I will be able to face any troubles. You must remain invisible, I will be the only one who knows who you are. But I could ask you for advice at any moment in time, so be ready!

(Fieldnotes)

If not always the actual end of the liminality in organizations, the report is a marker of the beginning of the end. The consultants will leave the organization, and their product will be put to work. The organization will, at least temporarily, liquidate its liminal space; it will, again, become a working organization.

The liminal organization

In the liminal space, the (usually distinct) borders between the sacred and the profane are blurred. In organizational vocabulary, one could say that the borders between theory and practice are opened.

What does it mean when an organization creates a liminal space? One way of describing it is as a theater of images – activated during the time of consultancy. The employees present their work organization to consultants: although sometimes consultants replace the staff through a formal assignment, this is an unusual step, and it may end in an unusual way – with a consultant accepting a permanent position. The consultants' expected contribution is a new repertoire of representation(s). This new repertoire might be used as a blueprint for forming a new or different work organization, but will most certainly be used directly in an unchanged form: as a collection of images to be presented to the spectators outside.

The difficulties of being a constructionist consultant, hinted at by Czarniawska (2001), can in this light be explained as being caused by the constructionist consultant's insistence on revealing the props. It is as if those who organized the rite of passage made explicit all the tricks of the trade to the novices and yet expected them to believe in the extraordinary character of the event. A successful consultant helps to replace one type of representation with another in a magical way, without revealing the details of the process itself (hence the researchers' metaphor of witch-doctors; Clark, 1996; Micklethwaite & Wooldridge, 1996). A liminal space is one that is being created when the switch is to take place: the organization veils itself, and then shows its new face already in place. Although all the participants are aware of what has happened in the meantime, it is almost a matter of delicacy not to discuss it in detail. This aggravates the feeling of liminality for the consultants, who are allowed to reflect on their condition only in anonymous interviews, if at all.

We [consultants] should be focusing on work, not discussing about other things. We spend too much time in reflexive reasoning. We should think of deliverables and timing instead. Let's keep our psychological arguments out of the client's office, if not out of our minds.

(Fieldnotes)

This double status of an organization that at the same time contains a working and a liminal space would be of no surprise to van Gennep, could he contemplate abandoning the idea that there is a sharp divide between modern and primitive societies. He mentions the fact that rites of passage are

often combined with some other rites: of protection, of divination, and so on.

All these rites, which have specific effective aims, occur in juxtaposition and combination with a rite of passage – and are sometimes so intimately intertwined with them that it is impossible to distinguish whether a particular ritual is, for example, one of protection or of separation.

(1909/1960: 12)

In other words, under the pretext of rites of passage, the community performs its everyday business.

This is a situation well known in contemporary organizations where rites of passage are used so intensively for many other symbolic purposes that bystanders sometimes wonder whether the performers remember what the occasion was. Newcomers are welcome, or graduates receive farewell wishes, but sinners are also exposed, scapegoats offered, and pecking orders re-established.

This confusion of spaces led van Gennep to an observation that the sacred pivots, or revolves:

... the magic circles pivot, shifting as a person moves from one place in society to another. The categories and concepts which embody them operate in such a way that whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa. Such changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of the society and the individual, and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects.

(1909/1960: 13)

Here we come to the crux of the matter: while the rites of passage are meant to reduce the harmful effects of liminality on the employees, they leave unprotected those who conduct the rites. The liminality of the consultants goes unaided.

A house on quicksand: is the consultant's condition unavoidable?

Assuming that consultants are indeed summoned in order to create a liminal space in work organizations, is it necessary or inevitable that they submit

themselves to a liminal condition? After all, a limbo for some may be a stable and regular place for others. Charon² is but a boatman, no matter where his passengers are directed, and probably belongs to the boatpersons' union.

Van Gennep did not pay much attention to the condition of those who organized the rites of passage. Most likely, they safely belonged to the sacred domain, or routinely pivoted, like the members of secret societies (where belongingness to another sphere is hidden and therefore not a problem).

It seems, however, that recently there are a growing number of professionals who accept liminality as an ever present condition and thereby end it: they decide to move into bar Lubusz, metaphorically speaking. They do not move between proper organizations (university, consulting company) and those in a temporary state of liminality: they move in and out and consider it a stable state. As Ulrike Schultze and Richard J. Boland (1997) put it,

Place, in the age of postmodernity, does not exhibit the simple bound-
edness, immediacy and intimacy associated with pre-modern notions
of place. Instead, post-modern place is dialectically shaped through a
dynamic interweaving of space and time, and of absence and presence.
(1997: 541)

In other words, the consultant condition may be the consultant's place in the postmodern dromocentric world. Schultze and Boland (1997) studied contract workers engaged in computer system administration, and described their condition in terms that we find similar to those characterizing the work of consultants. In a similar vein, Christina Garsten (1999) studied the liminal condition of temporary workers and the episodic community of workers it is creating.

These studies found the liminal condition both exhilarating and frustrating, as workers were torn between the promise of freedom given by a (liminal) space, and the promise of stability given by a place. Their solution was a trailer; a mobile office. While the trailer is a specific technological solution tailored to the needs of computer consultants, heavily dependent on actual artifacts, the non-technological consultants feel a similar need for the comfort of a place of their own.

Moving between university and managerial practice might prove very trying, as the opening quote suggested. Consulting companies are more like a place that can maintain the consulting condition while softening its adverse consequences. Another solution is a connection to various types of manpower organizations, where the telephone exchange is the place of belongingness. After all, the activity of turning organizations into liminal spaces becomes a routine.

What consequences might all these developments have for working organizations? While the hope is that of Turner – that all organizations will become liminoid and therefore creative – the unintended consequence might be the minimization of novelty. As liminality becomes routinized, marginal innovations may be happening all the time, but rarely inventions or breakthroughs. The organizers of the rites of passage return to their community and their daily duties as do the novices; the contemporary organizers are constantly busy and have to make a place of their own.

Less optimistic is the reaction of Richard Sennett (1998) who argues that the steadily increasing insecurity experienced by workers is making it impossible for them to achieve a moral identity. It may well be, points out Zygmunt Bauman (2002), but both the New York baker befriended by Sennett and Sennett himself forged their ‘characters’ in the harsh conditions of their youth, hoping fervently that their children would be able to avoid ‘the orderly, steady, “learnable” corridors of laboratory mazes’ (Bauman, 2002: 8). So perhaps one has to agree with Gabriel that ‘as we move from modernity into the great unknown that lies ahead, old prisons and old chimeras are losing their grip’ (2002: 19), but the new ones are emerging. The research, therefore, needs to become as flexible as the workplaces it studies, trying to grasp the emergence of such new cages. The liminality metaphor, pointing to the neglected side of management consulting, is such an attempt.

Notes

- 1 Published in English as *The rites of passage* in 1960. Charles Arnold Kurr van Gennep was born in Würtemberg and had a Dutch father, but spent most of his life in France, his mother’s home country.
- 2 We refer to Charon, in Greek mythology the boatman who takes the dead souls across the river Lethos (hence the tradition of putting coins on the eyelids of the deceased, enabling them to pay for their passage).

References

- Austin, J. *How to do things with words*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Bauman, Z. Education’s challenges in the liquid modern era. Manuscript, 2002.
- Berthoin Antal, A. & Krebsbach-Gnath, C. Consultants as agents of organizational learning: The importance of marginality. In M. Dierkes, A. Berthoin Antal, J. Child & I. Nonaka (Eds), *Handbook of organizational learning and knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 462–83.
- Brunsson, N. & Olsen, J.P. *The reforming organization*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Clark, T. *Managing consultants: Consultancy as the management of impressions*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995.

- Clark, T. The management guru as organizational witchdoctor. *Organization*, 1996, 3, 85–107.
- Clark, T. & Fincham, R. (Eds) *Critical consulting: New perspectives on the management advice industry*. London: Blackwell, 2002.
- Clark, T. & Salaman, G. Telling tales: Management consultancy as the art of story telling. In D. Grant & C. Osrick (Eds), *Metaphor and organizations*. London: Sage, 1996, pp. 167–84.
- Czarniawska, B. Is it possible to be a constructionist consultant? *Management Learning*, 2001, 32, 253–72.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. Merchants of meaning: Management consulting in the Swedish public sector. In B.A. Turner (Ed.), *Organizational symbolism*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990a, pp. 139–50.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. Linguistic artifacts at service of organizational control. In P. Gagliardi (Ed.), *Symbols and artifacts: Views of the corporate landscape*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990b, pp. 339–64.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B., Gustafsson, C. & Björkegren, D. Purists vs. pragmatists: On Protagoras, economists and management consultants. *Consultation*, 1990, 9(3), 241–56.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Joerges, B. How to control things with words: Organizational talk and control. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 1988, 2(2), 170–93.
- Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. Gender construction in corporations. In B. Czarniawska & H. Höpfl (Eds), *Casting the other. Production and maintenance of inequality in organizations*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 89–103.
- Fincham, R. The consultant–client relationship: Critical perspectives on the management of organizational change. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1999, 36(3), 335–51.
- Furusten, S. *Popular management books – how they are made and what they mean for organisations*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Gabriel, Y. Glass palaces and glass cages. Organizations in times of flexible work, fragmented consumption and fragile selves. Inaugural lecture, Imperial College, School of Management, 12 March 2002.
- Garsten, C. Betwixt and between: Temporary employees as liminal subjects in flexible organizations. *Organization Studies*, 1999, 20, 601–17.
- Herman, E. *The romance of American psychology: Political culture in the age of experts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Hislop, D. The client role in consultancy relations during the appropriation of technical innovations. *Research Policy*, 2002, 31, 657–71.
- Huczynski, A. *Management gurus: What makes them and how to become one*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Jackson, B. Re-engineering the sense of self: The manager and the management guru. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1995, 33, 571–90.
- Kipping, M. & Armbrüster, T. The burden of otherness: Limits of consultancy interventions in historical case studies. In M. Kipping & L. Engwall (Eds), *Management consulting: Emergence and dynamics of a knowledge industry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 203–21.
- Leach, E. Ritual. In the *International encyclopaedia of the social sciences*. New York: Free Press, 1968, pp. 520–26.
- McGivern, C. Some facets of the relationship between consultants and clients in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1983, 20(3), 367–86.
- Meyer, J.W. Otherhood: The promulgation and transmission of ideas in the modern organizational environment. In B. Czarniawska & G. Sevón (Eds), *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996, pp. 241–52.
- Micklethwaite, J. & Wooldridge, A. *The 'Witch Doctors': What the management gurus are saying, why it matters and how to make sense of it*. London: Heinemann, 1996.

- Rottenburg, R. Sitting in a bar. *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies*, 2000, 6, 87–100.
- Sahlins, M. Goodbye to 'Tristes Tropes': Ethnography in the context of modern world history. In R. Borofsky (Ed.), *Assessing cultural anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994, pp. 377–94.
- Sahlins, M. Ethnographic experience and sentimental pessimism: Why culture is not a disappearing object. In L. Daston (Ed.), *Biographies of scientific objects*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 158–293.
- Schultze, U. & Boland, R.J. Constructing high tech space: Mind, body and place in knowledge work. In H.K. Rasmussen (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Accounting, Organizations and Society conference on accounting, time & space*, vol. 2. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1997, pp. 539–58.
- Sennett, R. *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Shenhav, Y. *Manufacturing rationality: The engineering foundations of the managerial revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Silverman, D. & Torode, B. *The material word*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Sturdy, A. The consultancy process – an insecure business? *Journal of Management Studies*, 1997, 34(3), 389–413.
- Trice, H.M. & Beyer, J.M. *The cultures of work organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.
- Turner, V. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.
- Turner, V. *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness at play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982.
- Van Gennep, A. *Rites of passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1909/1960.

Barbara Czarniawska holds a Skandia Chair in Management Studies at Gothenburg Research Institute, School of Economics and Commercial Law, Göteborg University, Sweden. Her research focuses on control processes in complex organizations, most recently in the field of big city management. In terms of methodological approach, she combines institutional theory with the narrative approach. She has published in the area of business and public administration in Polish, her native language, as well as in Swedish, Italian and English, the most recent publications being *Narrating the organization: Dramas of institutional identity* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), *A narrative approach to organization studies* (Sage, 1998), *Writing management* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and *A city reframed: Managing Warsaw in the 1990s* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000). She has been a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences since 2000, and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences since 2001.

Carmelo Mazza is visiting professor at Copenhagen Business School, Industrial Sociology and Organization Department and Senior Research Associate at IESE Business School (Barcelona, Spain). His research focuses on processes of institutional change and diffusion of managerial knowledge, applying from the perspective of institutional theory. He has recently published in Italian a study of the changes in the management of the city of Rome. Currently, he holds a teaching contract at the University of Rome La Sapienza, Faculty of Sociology, and works as a management consultant.

[E-mail: cm.ioa@cbs.dk]