

**Collaboration as the Politics of Affect:  
The client–consultant relationship  
as an embodied moral practice**

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## **Abstract**

Key words: Collaboration, consultant, power, affect, emotions, feelings, identity, ethics

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This thesis explores the ideology of collaboration from the context of the consultant–client relationship. The ideology is contrasted with the actual experience of collaboration in everyday organizational life, taking a micro-perspective on human interaction. The research question is to ask ourselves what we are doing when we say that we are collaborating with each other. The tendency to collaborate isn't restricted to the consultant–client relationship; it is expressed in many others, such as the relationship between government and citizen, employer and employee, and teacher and student. The thesis explores its self-evident nature and the reasons for framing relationships as collaborative ones.

Collaboration is embedded within a wider development of changing relationships within society that reflect the neoliberal principle of individual autonomy and freedom. Individuals, in the role of citizen, consumer, client or patient, are increasingly becoming responsible for their own lives and the choices they make, with institutions, professionals and managers taking on supportive, 'therapeutic' roles. Collaboration emphasizes the equality of the relationship, making it more cordial and intimate, hence masking the power relations that are an inherent part of the relationship and the transfer of responsibilities and risks towards less powerful groups.

Taking a micro-perspective on collaboration emphasizes people's daily interactions and focuses attention on what they are actually doing instead of theorizing about it. Applying the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) helped me to explore certain aspects of interaction such as power, resistance, politics, emotions, feelings and identity. Taking the perspective of a participant instead of an observer introduced my own actions, emotions and thinking into the narratives that I wrote and stimulated me to reflect upon my own experiences of relating within the events that I describe.

In this thesis, I argue that collaboration is an ethical and political practice that consists of a basic cooperative-antagonistic structure. The latter aspect contains experiences of conflict, dissent, struggle and strife that the ideologies of neoliberalism and collaboration obscure because they contradict ideological values of individual autonomy and freedom, equality and self-actualization. In contrast to those values, people's daily collaborations don't solely consist of cooperative experiences with peers and managers, but are also filled with struggle, resistance and strife. People reject these unwanted aspects because they generate uncomfortable feelings and emotions, such as anxiety, shame and anger, and threaten the sustenance of their preferred self-identities. I argue that if people accept and include the rejected aspects of collaboration, they gain a richer experience of it and allow themselves to learn by reflecting upon their own experiences.

I propose an interpretation of collaboration as an 'affective ethics' where people are aware of their mutual responsibilities and the outcomes of the collaboration. Acknowledgement of collaboration as a process of mutual affectation creates the opportunity to evaluate it by exploring people's 'lived embodied experience' (see also the Methodology section) and giving account of the commonalities as well as the differences and dissent that are part of the relationship. Integration of the dissenting elements isn't guaranteed, however, and reminds us of the pragmatic notion that collaboration as a moral practice emerges out of people's interactions and can't be prescribed or enforced.

When the consultant and client realize that their interactions make up the collaboration and the assignment, they can go beyond the self-evident notion that collaboration is a function of realizing purpose, thereby releasing the restrictive causality between the two. Becoming aware of the inherent asymmetry of the consultant-client relationship can stimulate the consultant to become more politically and ethically astute in order to create a relationship that acknowledges reciprocity and mutual dependence as inherent parts.

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# Introduction

## Research question

I have explored the phenomenon of collaboration in the consultant–client relationship in four projects over a period of three years. I did so in order to open up the apparently self-evident and habitual elements of the relationship and to understand what we’re doing when we say that we’re collaborating with each other. I have made the consultant–client relationship the focus of my investigation, because this relationship is central to my consulting work. The findings and reflections will resonate with many other situations, as the research reflects a wider social trend of labor relations that espouses harmonic, cooperative relationships.

What motivated me to start exploring the collaborative relationship was my experience of a discrepancy between its ideology and the actual experience of it in my consulting life. Over the years this discrepancy contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction, alienation and demotivation, which made me consider starting to explore it. This research provided me that opportunity by taking my own dissatisfaction and curiosity seriously. I believe that the ideology of collaboration has become a common practice for some reason, not only in organizations but also in wider society, for example in education and healthcare, and a major part of the way in which work is organized and governed. Becoming aware of its implications provides opportunities to better understand what people are doing when they are collaborating, likely reducing the gap between ideology and reality, and encouraging them to start to pay attention to their complicity in producing undesired consequences.

Answering this question is highly relevant, as collaboration is becoming a ‘normalized’ practice within the wider development of changing relationships between employers and employees, citizens and government, and consultants and clients. The change entails significant shifts in responsibilities and uncertainties where the exercise of individual freedom and autonomy by consumers, clients and employees is forced upon them, without taking notice of the limitations of doing so and the negative consequences for these groups. The function that the ideology of collaboration fulfils in this wider development is the disguising of the inherent inequality of these relationships. The research explores this embeddedness as well as the collusion happening within collaboration, illuminating people’s complicity in sustaining the inequalities experienced.



## **Occupational context**

I have been working in the consulting business for more than thirty years and have seen the consultant–client relationship change in what I believe to be a significant way. When I started at Ernst & Whinney in the mid-1980s, the consultant was seen as an expert, bringing in specific expertise that the client didn't have. (S)he acted authoritatively, rational and with a professional distance. Most organizations didn't have the knowledge that the consulting business provided, because its employees weren't as well, or were differently, educated as most consultants were. Nowadays, many client organizations have excellent consulting knowledge and a variety of expertise themselves (Sturdy et al., 2015); what they now ask for is facilitation in processes of development, change and implementation instead of solely providing expert knowledge. As a consequence, many consultants have become 'helping hands' (Schein, 1998) for their clients and partner with them instead of remaining distant. In general, the relationship has become more cordial, equal and intimate (Ekman, 2013).

Consultants have become collaborators with their client organizations, joining them for a while and adding value, and then leaving and moving on to the next client. Although this collaborative relationship seems self-evident, in reality this isn't always the case. I recall assignments in my projects in which I participated where the relationship didn't work out, despite my, or the client's, collaborative intentions. These experiences made me become curious towards the concept of collaboration that from business literature seemed clear and straightforward. Its main feature is that cooperation prevails, and dissent and conflict are minimized, and if conflict happens the consultant possesses the skills to handle it well (Block, 2001; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011; Bushe and Marshak, 2015). I noticed that, in contradiction to this ideology, conflict, dissent and tension often prevailed in my relationships with clients that couldn't be contained by either side. Even positive change projects designed by means of applying positive approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) weren't immune from these non-collaborative aspects and it was these particular experiences that became the starting point for my research.

## **Conducting research**

I have conducted four pieces of research over a period of two-and-a-half years, in which I explored episodes of my consulting life. Taking my own experience seriously was the method

that I used, writing autoethnographic narratives about events that bothered and puzzled me. In using the term experience, I mean ‘lived experience’ as my pre-reflective, immediate way of dealing with the world as a subjective embodied experience (van Manen, 2001: 35-37). These pieces of work resulted in four papers that are part of this thesis which I will present in consecutive chapters. In the first project I wrote a professional biography about my consulting career, reflecting upon meaningful moments and looking for themes and patterns that emerged from it. The second, third and fourth project were explorations of meetings with clients, and in particular collaborative moments in which things happened that I couldn’t comprehend at the time and that I became curious about. In project two, I explore two meetings that were part of a large-scale change intervention that I facilitated. This happened at a Dutch mental health organization, called Health Inq., that intended to improve its rate of addiction recovery by putting the addictive client in the lead with regard to his/her recovery process.

In the projects three and four, I explored experiences with a Dutch government executive organization responsible for the provision of licenses, surveillance and maintenance with regard to environmental issues, called Environment Protect. Recently, I had developed a new governance policy for them and, following on from that, they had asked me to facilitate its implementation. In my narratives, taking place over the period of one-and-a-half years, I write in these projects about meetings and conferences that I experienced as difficult and sometimes disconcerting. The reason for selecting these events was that they comprised conflict and dissent, in which we nevertheless collaborated with each other, and it was interesting for me to find out what we had been doing.

I used the method of narrative inquiry for doing research, which consisted of writing out my experiences of events and systematically reflecting on them. This process is social, interpretive and creative (Cunliffe et al., 2004) and studies the way we put our interpretation of reality into a story by looking at it critically from different perspectives, being open to the interpretations of others (ibid) and becoming self-critical of one’s own taken-for-granted realities (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). My participation in the DMan program was valuable for me: it consisted of a group of fellow researchers (between sixteen and twenty students plus supervisors) subdivided into small learning sets of a maximum of four students and one supervisor. Every six weeks we produced work that was read by everyone from the learning set and commented upon. It broadened the scope of everybody’s research, because

the students were coming from all over the world, bringing in different backgrounds and being in different stages of their research. This enhanced the quality of my work significantly and helped me to develop alternative, and different, perspectives on the situations I explored that provided me the opportunity to change my relationship with them, hence altering my ways of thinking.

The program takes a complexity perspective on organizational life that considers people's daily interactions primary, out of which patterns and themes emerge that make up organization (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). It contrasts the macro-perspective of seeing organizations as systems made up of entities such as people, departments, strategies, plans and resources as an underlying reality of organizational life. Communicative interactions further interactions and nothing more (ibid). This perspective, called the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, helped me to start focusing on what people are actually doing when they are collaborating, instead of focusing on what they should be doing or how they are talking about it. Taking this relational view, I started paying attention to processes of joint meaning making, people's embodied participations in meetings and conversations, unconscious processes, the occurrence of power and politics, and the expression of feelings and emotions, not as an observer, but as an active participant while taking my own experience seriously. This helped me to expand my view on collaboration, including my role in constituting it, by starting to notice aspects of human interaction that from, a functional point of view, I would have considered unhelpful or unwanted.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating derives its main features from complexity science, process sociology and pragmatic philosophy (Mowles, 2015). They are processes of the ways in which humans relate that consist of interactive communication, power relating and evaluative choices that are ideology-based out of which personal and social identity, the inclusion and exclusion of people, and narrative themes and meaning emerge (Stacey, 2012). These outcomes form people's interactions at the same time as they are formed by them, creating the paradoxical situation of stable instability and predictable unpredictability, hence the possibility of novelty and change (ibid). These interactions take place in the living present as embodied acts of interpreting situations and events that create a circular relationship between the past, present and future. Interpretations made in the present may continue, or may alter perceptions of the past that simultaneously continue or alter future

perspectives. This concept of living present (Stacey, 2012: 27–28) rejects a linear time function and makes it dynamic and iterative.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating invites researchers to inquire into ambiguous situations, and explore paradox, because they can generate valuable insights into organizational life from an uncommon perspective. People experience paradox when they are able to hold two contradictory thoughts that exclude, but simultaneously define and negate each other (Mowles, 2015: 13). Human processes of relating are filled with paradox that reveal the inherent uncertainty of our common interactions. As uncertainty and ambiguity are avoided or rejected by many managers, paradox is often not talked about, let alone be studied in organizations.

After having finished the projects, I wrote my synopsis which was more than a summary and a conclusion. It was a critical appraisal of the work that I had done so far, reflecting on the major themes that emerged and assessing the scientific relevance of my work. The synopsis contains a critical reflection on the four projects, the elaboration of my key arguments and a summary of my main contributions to knowledge and practice.

## **Outcomes of the research**

I criticize the performativity of the ideology of collaboration, emphasizing harmonious relationships, attaining shared objectives and mutual enhancement of people's unique qualities as unproblematic. This performativity serves the managerialist discourse by implying a causal relationship between cooperating employees, their engagement and work satisfaction, and organizational objectives and performance. It conceals people's contradictory experiences with collaboration, making it difficult to talk about, let alone explore, them in order to understand what is actually happening within people's interactions. I argue that this happens for a reason.

The changing labor relationship between employer and employee emphasizes a fundamental principle of neoliberalism, that of individual responsibility, freedom and autonomy. Employees nowadays are supposed to govern their own work and careers, and are becoming 'entrepreneurial subjects' (Catlaw and Marshall, 2018: 1). Moulding employees into these

self-actualizing and entrepreneurial subjectivities contradicts the propagated values of freedom and autonomy, and those of collaborative ideology, revealing the disciplining that is going on which contributes to conflictual relationships instead of harmonious ones. It reveals a managerialist agenda underlying this development, producing subjectivities that enhance organizational productivity and efficiency; this is what is masked by the ideology of collaboration. Instead of contributing to change and novelty, collaborative practice normalizes, stabilizes and regulates the behavior of employees. Foregrounding independent and autonomous employees and supportive managers rejects the mutual responsibility both have for the relationship, hence disallowing the experience of mutual dependence and reciprocity within it. I argue that the consequences of the changing principal–agent relationship (Anderson, 2009) spills over into the consultant–client relationship.

In contrast to the desired harmonious relationships, people’s daily collaborations with others are also filled with struggle and resistance, as my narratives in the projects three and four show. It reveals the basic cooperative-antagonistic structure of collaboration that is of a paradoxical nature. People cooperate and compete with others for recognition, inclusion, rewards and getting ideas and actions legitimized. This is a constant process of mutual positioning of bodies that affect each other in physical and psychosocial ways, what I call a ‘politics of affect’, that lead to temporary positions of superiority and inferiority. The outcomes reveal that people are emotionally invested in the collaboration when attempting to sustain their options and identities into the future with feelings and emotions reflecting their successes and failures. I argue that the cooperative aspects of collaboration have to be complemented with the antagonistic and competitive ones, hence leading to a fuller experience of it. It makes collaboration an ethical, political and aesthetic practice that people must reflect upon in order to find out what they are doing when collaborating with others.

The ideology of collaboration conceals these unpleasant realities of collaborating in which people meet resistance from others when trying to realize their intentions. This will likely contribute to uncomfortable feelings and emotions, such as anxiety or shame, and it is these that people are trying to avoid. It makes them realize that not everything is possible, that they are dependent upon others in their strivings, that what they do changes them in sometimes unpleasant ways, and that their actions come with consequences for themselves and others. It is where people’s realities contradict their ideas, intentions and convictions that emotions and feelings are generated. They reveal people’s entanglements with the world and the resistance

they experience when their sustenance of habit and identity is interrupted. The research emphasizes the importance of making a shift towards a participative perspective and becoming reflexive as a condition for learning to cope with these daily realities in more appropriate ways and becoming responsible for one's contributions to them.

People's understanding of collaboration can be enhanced when they accept that struggle, antagonism and conflict are an inherent part of it. No longer neglecting or avoiding these experiences, people can start to reflect upon their experiences of collaboration and create a much richer context than from its restricted ideological counterpart. An 'affective ethics' of collaboration puts people's 'lived embodied experience' (see also the Methodology section) in the center, acknowledging difference and dissent as inherent aspects of collaboration, hence stimulating people to take the perspectives of others into account, while also making their own account more explicit. Without this mutual recognition genuine collaboration isn't possible and turns it into another kind of relationship, mostly a collusive one.

When consultants and clients realize that their habitual choices affect the quality of the relationship and the collaborative process, an opportunity is created for making an alternative choice. Collaboration is then no longer seen as a functional condition, but as mutually constituting the assignment. By reflecting upon the process of collaboration, its cooperative-antagonistic nature and unconscious aspects, reciprocity and mutual dependence are enacted within the consultant's and client's interactions. When the consultant becomes political and ethically astute, and is apt to negotiate these qualities, (s)he is in a position to counterbalance the power differential within the relationship, hence his/her tendency to unreflectively follow the managerialist discourse.

### **Continuing the conversation**

In my research, I started a conversation about collaboration with myself and others that was already taking place in other places, instigated from different experiences and perspectives. My research adds something to that discussion, and I hope it will resonate with the reader of this thesis, inviting him/her to start reflecting upon his/her own collaborative experiences and to continue this discussion in their local practices. This reflects the idea that meaning-making happens 'in between' and is a collaborative and ongoing process.

Also, I want to stimulate the reader to go beyond his or her habitual assumptions about collaboration and become conscious of what (s)he is actually doing when collaborating with other people. Noticing how one is participating in a collaboration is a prerequisite for becoming aware of one's co-responsibility in the way the relationship is constituted, hence its outcomes. Taking personal experience of the relationship seriously then creates an opportunity for altering it, although this is not guaranteed.

The research is relevant for the community of consultants and managers, professionals who collaborate with colleagues or third parties, and HRM-consultants and managers who are responsible for the development of collaboration within their organizations.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Following this introduction, I will present my four research projects, which describe my narratives of disturbing moments and events from my consulting practice that stimulated me to start exploring them, to reflect upon them in order to understand my habitual ways of sense making, and to find alternative explanations and understandings for what happened.

Next, in the first part of the synopsis, I summarize these projects and critically reflect upon them from the point at which I arrived after finishing them and starting to write my synopsis. I return to my research question in order to develop the key arguments that emerge out of my research.

In the second part, I introduce my four key arguments and elaborate on each of them. I describe how I have arrived at these arguments and what they mean or how I interpret them.

In the third part, I elaborate on Methodology, explaining autoethnography, reflexive inquiry and the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. Also, I reflect on the research ethics of this study.

The last part of this thesis, and the synopsis, explains the contribution of this study to the practice and theory of collaboration and consulting.

# **Project 1 – A consultant’s journey**

## **Introduction**

This paper is the first of four projects in which my professional practice will be the subject of research. Project 1 is an autobiographical reflexive narrative about the ways of thinking that exemplifies my ways of working and the developments of these thinking habits over time. As I go through my career and describe particular experiences that have shaped me into the person and professional that I am now, the themes and questions that emerge as a result of my reflections will give direction to the next phase of my research.

I will start with the beginning of my professional life, how I became engaged in the consulting business, and then consider significant events or periods that have influenced the development of my career. I will finish my chronological description with where I am now as a professional consultant, facilitator and trainer. In the last part of the paper I will reflect on central themes in my professional life that have emerged from my narratives and that may be the topic for my next project.

I will share specific past experiences that have formed me as a professional consultant and informed the way I currently think. I have chosen certain events over others and make choices about what seem to me perhaps important moments in both my personal and professional lives. I will reflect on these events, consider the reasons for choosing them and reflect on the thought style(s) that I exhibited during these experiences. I will look back at these narratives from my current experience and reflect on what I think was really going on at the time. Together, these experiences express a kind of continuity of who I am, or of who I consider myself to be, into the past as well as into the future (Dewey in McDermott, 1981).

Writing this reflexive narrative is part of the DMan program that I joined in October 2015. My main motivation for participating is to reflect on my professional career as an external consultant in order to find personally meaningful ways to contribute to the quality of organizational life in the coming years.



## **Starting my professional career**

### **Graduating and starting my first job**

I graduated in Business Engineering in 1984 in the subject of industrial innovation. Together with a couple of other students, I was selected to participate in a government program aimed at stimulating innovation in small- and medium-sized production companies. We executed field research under the supervision of a consulting company, which is how I was introduced to the consulting business. Right after graduating, I started studying Business Economics in Rotterdam, but quit after two years. I disliked the courses on bookkeeping and finance, and I wasn't really motivated to continue studying, having already been doing so for six years. My father suggested that I go and talk to the Ministry of Defence, where he worked at that time. After a couple of introductory meetings, I was offered a job as an organizational consultant at the head office in The Hague. The manager I started to work for was the youngest director within the Ministry, and he had great plans for his department. The Ministry had just started experimenting with a new matrix structure; at the same time, the first round of privatizations was on the horizon. It was a very complex and hierarchical organization in which the civilian personnel were secondary to the military personnel. Besides the staff departments, the Ministry consisted of four military divisions that, together, made up the matrix organization: the navy, the air force, the army and the military police. When I started, I was unaware of the complexity of this hierarchy, power and politics, but I soon discovered it.

For my first assignment, I accompanied a senior colleague to the head of Legal Affairs. He had a personnel problem and wanted us to solve it. I noticed that my colleague was cautious during the conversation, so after a while I stepped in and started to talk about what we could do for him. While I was talking, my colleague kicked my shins under the table in order to silence me. I was surprised and stopped talking. Afterwards, he told me to not do that again, without giving an explanation. I was puzzled. Much later I realized that my candidness in speaking, without taking status and position differences into consideration and in a rather didactical tone, was not appropriate behavior in the given situation. I came to another conclusion; my colleague was of an Indonesian background. Right after World War II the Dutch government faced another war, this time in Indonesia, one of their colonies. The Indonesian soldiers who had fought in the Dutch army were regarded as traitors by their own people and had to flee their country when the Dutch government commanded its army to

retreat. Many of these former KNIL soldiers stayed in the Dutch army and found jobs there. I sensed, or perhaps projected, an attitude of obedience in my colleague towards the head of Legal Affairs, an attitude that I resisted.

Another assignment was a personnel assessment at a military home for wounded soldiers. I met with the director, a general, and he explained his question to me. During the day, I interviewed several people. When I finished, I told the general that I would fulfil his wish for extra personnel. He then smiled at me and said that the extra personnel he needed had already arrived. I was only there to take care of the administrative regulations and write my report. The matter had already been solved when I started my research earlier that day. To me it seemed very inefficient for the organization, and unfair towards me for wasting my time. The fact that this was not discussed with me made me feel excluded from a process of which I was already a part without knowing it.

### **Reflections on these experiences**

Why did I choose these stories to begin with? They mark my entrance as a newcomer into the world of organizations (Fineman and Gabriel, 1996). Not yet influenced by the habits, rules and norms of the organization, I experienced the discrepancy between those of the organization and of myself, which came in the guise of feelings of shame and anger. As Sandelands and Boudens (2000) explain, feelings are not solely individual experiences; they are identified with the place and activities of an individual in a group. Individual feelings are inherently social and tied to the connections we have with others. I found out that I could not act on my own account; I had to take the actions and preferences of the people I worked with into consideration. This was new for me, not in a sense of having to collaborate with others, but to take into account factors such as seniority, personal agendas and politics that I had not had to consider previously. In a way, these experiences disturbed me and altered the images I held of work, organizations and myself. The notion of experience here is interesting when compared to that of holding certain expectations of reality. John Dewey says the following about experience:

Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo, the consequences of its own actions... Experience, in other words, is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings... Nothing can eliminate all risk, all adventure; the one thing doomed to failure is to try to keep even

with the whole environment at once—that is to say, to maintain the happy moment when all things go our way. (Dewey in McDermott, 1981: 63)

I had not expected my working life to be one of suffering, to be affected by others or to run into my own feelings and emotions, or those of others; my technical study had not prepared me for that. Seeing myself as an emotional being participating in a world with other emotional beings was something that I considered as belonging to the private space of family and friends, not to the public space of work. But it did.

My thinking style at that time assumed that people shared the same goals and oriented themselves towards the same results. Developing a clear strategy and creating an excellent performance are examples of such shared ambitions. I saw organizations as goal-seeking entities resembling a cybernetic-systems view of organizations (Stacey, 2011). Desired outputs can be accomplished by means of meticulous design of structures and processes, by educating people and giving them the right tools, and by thorough control. My thinking style also represented one that was universalist and realist, as I regarded organizations as being determined by universalist laws resembling a reality that was there and that could be discovered. A book that reflected this thought style well at that time was *In Search of Excellence* written by Peters and Waterman (1984). The central idea of the book is that one can attain excellence by means of intelligent design, which fitted well with the idea of an organization as a cybernetic system.

The consequence of this thinking style was that I separated myself from the organization that I was a part of, so that I could act upon it in order to make it more effective and efficient. Unconsciously, I had made the organization into an instrument, including myself and the other people within it, that functions in a single, optimal way by making use of models and methods, by means of rational decision making and by acting in a consistent manner upon these choices so that desired results could be accomplished. This is a cognitivist psychology that simplifies reality by making mental models of it (Stacey, 2011). In contrast to humanistic psychology, there is no place for emotions or personal values and beliefs in these models. It is not that they are not considered important, but they have been made subservient to the organization's goals. This cognitivist view contrasted with the experiences I described earlier, in which my feelings and emotions became foreground and resulted in these sometimes confusing experiences.

## **Continuing my consultant's journey**

### **Changing jobs**

After one-and-a-half years, the manager I worked for became ill. He was replaced by an old-fashioned type of manager who focused more on stability than change, and so I decided to find another job. I became a consultant in Operational Management at Ernst & Whinney (E&W), by that time one of the eight biggest accountancy companies in the world. We were a small consultancy team of fourteen consultants operating within an internationally oriented tax and accountancy company. I remember that period as exciting, with long hours, doing lots of projects and getting well paid. But I also felt for the first time compromised more than once. On one project, my manager told me I had to change elements of my advice, which did not feel right to me. I changed it a bit but not entirely as he had wanted it. When I was working at the client's office, an international pharmaceutical company, the CFO asked me in. He said he had read my report and asked me what I really thought. I remember I blushed and then I told him what I thought he should do, which was different than what I had written in the report. He thanked me when I left his office. At another project, I was hired by the managing partner from the accountancy department to work for a financial investment bank. I had to develop an algorithm to transfer money to a tax haven that could not be traced by the Dutch Tax Authorities. Although what we did was legal, it did not feel right for me either. A couple of months later, the same managing partner from the accountancy department moved to Coopers & Lybrand, together with a new client that Ernst & Whinney had lost on the same bid. It was a big client that I had recruited. I had considered him to be trustworthy, honest and sympathetic.

I worked three years at Ernst & Whinney, and during that time the company merged twice, first with a Dutch accountancy firm on a national scale, and then with Arthur Young on a global scale. The consultancy department grew from 14 to 250 consultants, and soon after the second merger, I was made a senior consultant in Strategy and Marketing. I then decided I wanted to leave and move to a smaller office. Three years before, I had chosen to join a small consultancy team where everybody knew each other, but now it felt as if I had become a number within a large consultancy company with a stifling culture. For example, the rumour went around that if you, as a consultant, were not an accountant, you could not have a career within Ernst & Young, which was the new name after the merger. Right after the merger

many young people changed jobs. One of the partners that I worked for had moved to a small consultancy firm in Utrecht and he asked me to join him. And so I became a consultant at MIM in 1990.

This consulting firm, with its expertise in information management, was run by three managing partners, all former senior ICT managers. The other employees consisted of senior consultants and three secretaries. I arrived, together with another young consultant (we were called 'the boys') and were the first expansion since the company had started five years previously. Although the atmosphere was informal and the communication lines short, the three managing partners held tight control over the performance and direction of the company. They often argued with the senior consultants, some of them very experienced managers themselves, mostly about the future direction of the company, ownership and the preferred business strategy. In a short period of time quite a few people entered and left the organization. I remember this went mostly over my head, because these skirmishes were dealt with in bilateral or private conversations. I regarded them as personal differences of opinion that people had to sort out amongst themselves, as I did whenever necessary. The idea that these differences resembled patterns of the relationships that were characteristic of the ways we handled our affairs, and so could be discussed collectively, did not occur for me at the time.

Six years after joining the company the managing partner asked me to become a member of the partner team, which had expanded to five partners. I accepted his offer. By taking that decision, and without me knowing or realizing it, I had created a conflict with a senior consultant who felt he had been passed by. Suddenly I found myself in an awkward situation, because the CEO had promised him a position in the partners team as well, and he saw that position blocked by my nomination. I knew about his appointment with the CEO, because he had told me so, and knew that his nomination was important for him. But I did not consider myself to be an obstacle for his promotion, as the number of partners in the partner team was not restricted to six and could be expanded as long as candidates were successful in their jobs. His experience of my promotion was entirely different and he blamed me for what had happened. I noticed this as, from that time on, we were no longer on speaking terms. More than ten years later, even after he had retired, he was still angry with me. One day he phoned me to make an appointment about something that turned out to be an excuse. When we were seated and had exchanged formalities, he suddenly started talking about the incident that had

taken place so many years ago. I remember I listened to his story, kept quiet, did not defend myself and told him that I felt sorry for him. But I felt completely taken by surprise and had never realized, or noticed, the impact that the event had had on him.

### **Reflections on power and conflict**

Power comes with the job and is connected to the function somebody fulfils in an organization, or so I thought. Attributing power to functions and roles in this way is an example of general systems theory, in which roles and responsibilities are attributed to certain people in order to manage the goals, strategies and values of the organization (Stacey, 2011). I didn't realize at the time that this thinking style restricted my actions in response to the situations that I described above. I found it difficult to openly challenge my superior's request to alter my advice, because I feared he could coerce me to do so. With his request, he asked me to be loyal to the organization instead of the client. This was the essence of me feeling compromised and the fact that this decision was not openly discussed but remained implicit. I felt it as a threat that caused feelings of anxiety and also of shame, because it generated a sense of incompetence or inability in me to handle the situation effectively. According to Chris Argyris, these feelings are covered up and the fact that they are covered up gets covered up too, in order to save face and to be regarded by others as competent. It is what he calls the process of 'skilled incompetence' (Argyris, 1990: 106).

I didn't consider at the time the possibility that other people could compromise me in my work. I was naïve and thought that most people were as sincere, honest and straightforward in their communications with others as I was. These values were my point of reference for judging the conduct of other people. The possibility that they could have opposite values than mine didn't occur to me. Dewey considers values as 'compelling motivations to act towards the good' (Dewey in Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 394). So, what motivates people is different for everybody, according to what they consider 'good', and conflict is the inevitable consequence of this collision of values. We're always negotiating our values against each other in particular situations, even when we share the same values, such as sincerity and honesty. They represent differences amongst people that have to be negotiated and so bring conflict to the fore.

On a cognitive level, I can accept the inevitability of conflict, but to deal with conflict on an emotional level is another thing. It generates anxiety and other emotions and causes

uncertainty about the outcomes of the conflict: whether or not the dispute will be solved and the relationship will sustain. It generates feelings in me of no longer being in control or of not knowing what to do in the situation at hand. The existence of conflict as an inevitable fact of organizational life doesn't fit the expectation I have of people collaborating in a harmonious way with each other. Most of the time I consider conflicts as dysfunctional and damaging to relationships and outcomes of collaborations.

Conflicts arouse feelings and emotions in me, which express themselves in physical reactions such as blushing or becoming confused or reactive in my behavior. They are an expression of something that is taking place inside of me, invisible for others, which arouse more feelings, like a chain reaction, for feeling incapable of handling the situation well. At the time, I didn't consider the thought that this process could be something other than the expression of an inner and private process. Burkitt, on the contrary, claims that feelings and emotions are patterns of relationship and inherently social:

... If emotions are expressive of anything, it is of the relations and interdependencies that they are an integral part of, and in this sense emotions are essentially communicative: they are expressions occurring between people and registered on the body, rather than expressions of something contained inside a single person. (Burkitt, 1999: 113)

Not recognizing my bodily reactions as expressions of the communications that were taking place I didn't ask questions about what was going on, nor did I explore the situations I found myself in with the people involved. I don't know why they avoided talking about the situation and wondered if they were aware of the ethical considerations of their requests or if they cared about what I was thinking. Oscar David, a Dutch researcher and writer on power and integrity, says that most of the time people don't talk about power, because:

People with more power can lose a part of their power by making it discussable. For the less powerful people it is often risky or dangerous to confront the more powerful people with the ways in which they handle it or their position. (David, 2014: 27)

David holds that people possess power as an individual asset or as a character trait that they apply to others, that it implies a risk for people to talk about it openly and that power can be felt or experienced by the ones who are on the receiving end. By using this kind of language, he obscures power as something that is palpable for people but also something to be avoided

to talk about. Robert Marshak does something similar when he speaks about covert processes, those hidden and unconscious dynamics that are at play during interactions between people but which they do not talk about (Marshak, 2006). According to Griffin (2002), they idealize power and turn it into a cult value, as something that is real, conflict-free and helps to diminish anxiety. But this idealization also creates problems, because it turns attention away from what is actually taking place and constrains possibilities for exploration of what is actually happening. When I attributed power to the managers, and to their functions, I didn't consider the possibility that I could influence the situation and move it into the direction that I preferred. I didn't realize at the time that together we constituted the power relationship we found ourselves in, and that I was a part of it. Norbert Elias defines power not as a possession of certain people but as a structural characteristic of human relationships that reflect the fact that we are interdependent on each other. He sees power as an ongoing activity of enabling and constraining each other at the same time, which is an expression of our mutual dependence on each other (Stacey, 2011). I could have objected to my manager's request or asked for an explanation of the managing partner's behavior, but I did not. It felt like a scary and risky thing to do, and as a result I silenced myself and did not listen to my own feelings and thoughts.

At the time, I generally denied the existence of conflicts and avoided conflict situations that I didn't feel capable of dealing with effectively. I would distance myself from them, analyzing and trying to understand them, instead of participating in them and taking responsibility for the situations that emerged. By doing this I avoided the messiness of situations in which I felt less effective and secure, and so denied what actually took place by idealizing the models and theories that I used (Shaw, 2002). This made it difficult for me to learn from these situations, to see what was really happening and to develop my skills in how to act in these kinds of situations. The advantage was that I kept my identity as an effective consultant intact, and by doing this I fooled myself into thinking that my way of handling the situation was effective and commensurate to what was really taking place in the living present (Griffin, 2002) (See my description of this concept on page 10–11). But it was not and by distancing myself from these threatening situations I was not able to see the unconscious contributions that I had made to the emergence or sustaining of these conflicts.



## **Searching for a new perspective on consulting**

### **Being educated in group and organizational development**

My first occupational years in the consulting business made me realize that much more was going on than just doing research, solving problems and implementing solutions, and I wanted to find out what that was. So, in 1994, I joined the post-Masters program 'Consultancy in Groups and Organizations' (Cigo) at the Universities of Leuven and Diepenbeek in Belgium. For two years I became a member of a learning group that consisted of fourteen people. The program became pivotal in my development as a consultant as I learned about myself in group life, and about individual and group behavior. For the first time, I had the opportunity to reflect on my thinking and doing as a management consultant. Becoming reflective was an important skill, because, as René Bouwen and Felix Corthouts, the two founders of the program and facilitators of the group, used to say: 'You are your own instrument in facilitating groups and organizations.' This was a new perspective for me, as I had considered myself, until that time, as an expert who offered knowledge and expertise. It was the start of a fascinating learning process about who I was as an individual, consultant and group member.

We started the program with an experiential group training, called a T-group, that lasted five days. I entered the residential centre in Belgium on Monday morning and met my fellow travellers. Half of them were from Belgium and the other half was Dutch. Also, there were as many women as there were men and the variety in age was considerable. We sat down in an open circle and after a short introduction from the facilitators, they told us we could start. After that they became silent. Nothing happened for a while. I felt uncomfortable with the silence and the apparent lack of a program. One of the participants suggested introducing ourselves to each other and so we did. After the introductions there was silence again, this time much longer. The alternation of silences and suggestions from group members lasted the whole day and afterwards I felt very tired of doing 'nothing'. I was surprised by the behavior of the facilitators, who said or did almost nothing. I had expected guidance from them, not silence. On Tuesday, the same thing happened. In the afternoon one of the participants, Martine, exploded and threw her chair into the centre of the group. She shouted: 'I want to do something, let's go and explore something!' After this incident things started rolling. The facilitators became a bit more active and suggested an exercise. It was a group exercise with a puzzle and I remember I stepped forward to provide an answer in order to get the group

going. For me, after sitting on my hands for two days, it was just a release of energy. But, later on, when we evaluated the exercise I was attacked by others for my actions. They told me they felt overwhelmed by my swiftness and that I had not included them.

The T-group training was my introduction into the theory of group processes. I learned how a new and unstructured group developed itself during the week. This time I wasn't an observer of a group, but an active participant helping to shape the process of which I was a part. What was particularly difficult for me in the beginning was the lack of structure and agenda, and I remember that I felt anxious and didn't know what to do. I later found out that every new group goes through a similar phase of finding out who they are, what purpose they are there for, and how to collaborate. Kurt Lewin, founder of the NTL Institute, developed the T-group process right after World War II as a way to learn about individual and group behavior (Jones and Brazzel, 2006). They were not the only ones. In the United Kingdom, the Tavistock Institute also pioneered in group development. The distinction that Wilfred Bion, a member of the Tavistock Institute, made between the work-group mentality and basic assumption mentality was insightful to me:

In work-group mentality, members are intent on carrying out a specifiable task and want to assess their effectiveness in doing it. By contrast, in basic assumption mentality, the group's behaviour is directed at attempting to meet the unconscious needs of its members by reducing anxiety and internal conflicts. (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994: 20)

This distinction affirmed my experience in many projects that there was always more going on than simply the task at hand. Especially when things turned problematic, all kinds of irrational behavior would surface that turned people's attention away from activities towards trivial matters that had little or nothing to do with the contents of a project. Examples of such distractions were lengthy discussions about simple procedures, consistently starting meetings late and talking about many things, except the project or matters that really had to be discussed. I could never really understand why people wasted their time, or mine, on such trivialities when time was obviously dear. With the experience of the T-group process, theory on group dynamics, and by reflecting on my consulting practice I slowly learned to pay attention to and cope with non-task behavior.

Things started to change for me during the program. I no longer used only models and theories to explain what happened inside organizations, but also started to explore what was happening in between interactions during meetings and conversations. I paid attention to myself during interactions with other people and started to make reflective notes at the end of the day. Being attentive felt scary, as I could no longer rely on my knowledge but had to become alert and sensitive in the present moment. As I considered myself a thinker, I often felt it difficult to immediately participate in the discussions that were going on. I would rather think things through for myself before expressing them. During one of the sessions René gave me the advice: ‘Not every intervention has to be gold.’ It was a remark that hit home, and it helped me to share my thoughts earlier and more easily with others by not trying first to figure it all out in my head.

### **Getting introduced into OD and Process Consultation**

The program introduced me to the world of organization development (OD), and process consultation. OD is a field of applied knowledge that consists of a more or less integrated set of theories, ideas, practices and values about social systems, change and agency. The underlying philosophy of OD consists of four key value orientations: a) a humanistic philosophy, b) democratic principles, c) client-centred consulting and d) a systems orientation (Jones and Brazzel, 2006: 16).

A humanistic view of organizations holds that people are inherently good, that they can change and develop, and that they act in the best interests of the company. OD advocates democratic principles such as broad involvement in decision making and direction setting. It strives towards egalitarian cultures inside organizations in order to make them more effective. The role of the OD consultant is that of a partner or helper for the client organization in order to facilitate self-directed change. OD regards organizations as systems and part of a larger and broader social, economic and environmental system. This system, of which everyone is a part, needs to be taken into account by individual organizations when they make decisions that will impact their environments (ibid: 16).

Process consultation was developed by Edgar Schein. It aims at making interventions that foster process learning and focuses on what really works in daily practice. In essence ‘process consultation is about a helping (client–consultant) relationship through a continuous effort of “jointly deciphering what is going on”’ (Schein, 1998: 6) in the ongoing interaction,

relationship and situation in order to make co-authored choices about how to go on (Lambrechts, Grieten, Bouwen and Corthouts, 2007: 5).

OD and process consultation helped me to change my role as consultant from being an expert in quality service towards a facilitation role in organizational development and change. Instead of designing solutions for clients I started to develop solutions together with the people from the client system. My focus shifted from designing structures, systems and processes towards facilitating people within processes. Instead of focusing on a particular problem or a specific part or function of the organization, I started to pay attention to interrelations between the parts, which is an aspect of systems thinking (Senge, 1994). One project that I was involved in during the program illustrates this shift.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) of a municipality in the Netherlands had asked me to design a new front office. I became project leader and as such directed the organization and the front office people in a specific direction. From the beginning of the project, I noticed resistance: people were reluctant to cooperate. One incident became a turning point in the project. In the design phase I had insisted on removing the security glass in front of the counters. This caused a big row. A couple of people refused to participate in the project any longer and contacted the CEO and the works council. I talked to them about their worries instead of trying to convince or coerce them, and I suggested introducing them to another client of mine, the Dutch National Post Office. They agreed and I brought them into contact with the people from a pilot location that had removed all security glass in their front office the year before. The employees told them that they felt safe and had a much better contact with their clients. This visit convinced the management and employees of the IRS, and they made a unanimous decision to remove the security glass. The change became a success, which I think was due to the fact that I had started paying more attention to the active participation and worries of the employees and let them become part of the decision-making process.

My attention had shifted from the mere content of a project towards taking care of the irrational worries of the people involved. The employees' resistance and suspicion towards the change project, and towards me, were so palpable that I had no other choice than to give them my attention. I started asking questions and had many conversations with them. When I started paying attention to their worries, for example their fear of aggressive clients, the

employees became more active and involved. What seemed to me to be irrational behavior with regard to the objectives of the project was very real for the management and employees in the front office. The psychoanalytic view on groups and organizations focuses attention on the unconscious and non-rational needs and goals of people that exist alongside the goals of the organization, and that have to be dealt with in order to be effective (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994). The board of directors had not paid attention to their worries, and the employees feared that I would not listen to them either. By taking their fears and worries serious and including them in the project, the employees could take their responsibility for making the right decisions.

### **OD and Process Consultation as idealizations**

OD and process consultation helped me to make a shift in my orientation towards the client organization and its people. But this didn't mean that these methods were as unproblematic in their application as I thought they would be at the time. In the case I described above, I had to deal with the collisions of value systems, perceptions and positions of (groups of) people participating in the project. By thinking that the principles and values of OD and process consultation were 'good' in themselves (Jones and Brazzel, 2006), I negated the fact that they were never self-evident and competed with other people's principles and value systems. I had, unknowingly, idealized the OD-values and principles, in doing so distancing myself from what was actually going on. By letting go of them and turning my attention towards the situation at hand, I enabled myself to deal effectively with it.

OD and process consultation contain an ideology of progress and improvement, which strongly appeals to managers and consultants. They hold the promise of offering solutions for problems, and for personal and organizational growth. According to Mannheim (1954), concepts become ideologies when ruling groups can no longer see the facts that undermine their dominant view of reality or their sense of domination. Managers and consultants should become more ethically aware of the fact that every new concept or value they introduce will create conflict in its functionalization into daily practice (Griffin, 2002), even if they do so with the best of intentions. Ends should never sanctify the means and managers who do so abdicate their responsibilities to others, according to Weber (Whimster, 2004). If they present their concepts or ideas as ideal and unquestionable, they negate the fact that it will inevitably create conflict and this will increase resistance to the proposed changes.

### **Developing a systems orientation**

The changes that the Cigo-program had set in motion continued long after I had finished the program. I would invite people in at an earlier stage of the change process to participate actively. I had become a more active facilitator of people and groups, and steadily let go of my role of expert. According to Jeff Hicks (2010), this meant letting go of the idea of predictability and controllability of organizational change, the assumption that knowledge is transferable and that the consultant–client relationship is the medium for the transfer of knowledge. I started placing more attention on processes of joint knowledge creation and collaboration. Especially, I started to create better collaborations with my clients as I invited them to start participating more actively in the change process. Finally, reflection had become an element in my facilitation as a means to improve learning on the job.

I had become more sensitive to the organization as a whole and, more specifically, towards the relationships and interactions between parts of the organizations, together regarded as a system (Meadows, 2008: 11-17), instead of focusing my attention on one part of the organization. Viewing organizations as ‘wholes’ made up of the parts is typical of a systemic view. People attribute overriding purposes to organizations and aim for strategic alignment of goals, activities and organizational elements. By carefully designing structures, systems, processes and behaviors, the fulfilment of its purpose and objectives can be obtained, so control and predictability are characteristic of this system’s view of organizations (Stacey, 2011). The Cigo-program had thus contributed to my systems orientation, which resembled a combination of formative and rational causality (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). While the former sees organizations as wholes that are already enfolded within its self-organizing processes of interaction waiting to be actualized (ibid.: 27), the latter emphasizes the existence of people’s free will to autonomously choose their own ends (ibid.: 24). It becomes apparent that these two forms of causality contradict each other when people are regarded as elements of an organization, hence illuminating the paradoxical character of a systems view.

### **A period of changing jobs**

By the time I finished the Cigo-program I had become a member of the partner team. One day we had a partners’ meeting where we were discussing normal day-to-day business. Suddenly the CEO asked me if I was willing to become the next CEO of the company. This question came completely out of the blue and, listening to my guts, I said ‘no’. After my answer, the meeting continued and the topic was off the table. I felt overwhelmed by the question and

irritated because of the sloppiness in the way the matter was handled. It was this lack of consideration for me, and for other consultants in different situations, that had become a pattern in our internal interactions with each other. This pattern was at odds with my personal values and consulting standards in which I tried to emphasize mutual trust and respect. The incident became a breaking point: not the fact that I had rejected the future CEO-position, but because I realized that the CEO's value system and expectations of the company and mine had grown apart. After nine years I decided to leave.

In 1999, I became a partner at one of the oldest consultancy companies in the Netherlands. I joined them because they had told me they were focused on change management, which was my main field of interest at the time. I found that they had a different perspective on change than I had. I wanted to develop change processes with people, while they wanted to apply change on organizations and people. For me it was more of the same thinking that I had experienced in the previous company I worked for: very cognitive and logical, and with little space for human processes that I was already used to and wanted to turn my attention to. So, after returning from a short retreat in the United States I resigned and left the company. I returned to the consultancy company I had left the year before, which had merged with another consulting company. At first, I liked the professional attitude and rigour of my new colleague-consultants and managers. It was what I had been looking for and I found myself in the right place for further developing organizational and individual change as a consulting practice. But soon I experienced the same old interaction patterns in the merged company that had stimulated me to leave a couple of years before. When the first Internet crisis hit the organization in 2002, another manager and I tried to persuade the CEO to reorganize, but our request was not listened to. As a result, the company entered into a steady decline of consultants and turnover. After three years I quit my job and decided to start my own consulting practice as an independent consultant.

### **Searching for another perspective**

During this period, I didn't exactly know what I was looking for. But I did know that I wanted to get away from internal politics and power relations. I disliked the wheeling and dealing that were continuously going on, and that I considered mostly as pointless, selfish or dysfunctional. Being confrontational towards others has never been a part of my attitude; it simply has never occurred to me as a possibility. My usual strategy would be to talk things over with people and to try to come to an agreement with them on a rational basis. Whenever

I had felt disappointed or angry, it was because of the experience of being treated unfairly, that I, when my opinions and/or interests were not being taken into consideration. Most times I bit my tongue and went my own way after having accepted the situation as it stood. I have experienced that this strategy created an interesting power base, in the sense that on the occasions that I became confrontational and held my ground, it always worked out well. It was as if I chose my battles carefully.

I have always preferred making my own decisions and disliked the experience of other people telling me what (or what not) to do. I guess that's why becoming a consultant attracted me from the start. I have come to realize that this autonomy is relative, as I do have responsibilities towards the companies and clients I work for. When I became a managing partner, my sense of autonomy changed considerably. I had to pay attention to topics that I was not interested in. The conversations with the consultants that I was responsible for changed from collaborative towards controlling, as we mostly talked about productivity and customer satisfaction instead of about impact and value for clients. This experience of managerialism (Costea, Crump and Amiridis, 2008), turned consultants and clients into instruments for the sake of the goals of the company, and turned my role into one of an inspector and a controller. Most of my attention went towards abstract metrics, problems that had to be solved and making plans for the future. They didn't motivate me at all and were a cause for dissatisfaction and the major reasons for me to quit and to return to the profession of consulting.

### **A more physical orientation towards life and learning**

When I was thirteen I started practising judo. I was fascinated by the grace of this martial art where tiny people were able to handle bigger ones without much effort. What I learned while practising judo was to develop my technique by means of practice. In the beginning a new technique would take a lot of concentrated observing, thinking and trying, but then sometimes it would suddenly work out well, as if the technique executed itself without me doing anything. That was great fun and a very satisfying experience. Over the years I developed my skills in judo and also started practising karate and jiu jitsu. On occasion, I participated in judo tournaments and free-fighting. These were not only opportunities for me to compare my skills with those of others, but also to start dealing with my fears of being in a ring, of being overpowered or getting hurt. I wasn't particularly talented or successful, sometimes I won and



sometimes I lost, but I became well acquainted with physical bodily interactions between people.

I've always preferred practising things instead of thinking them through. That's why I practiced several sports during my teen years, including running, cycling and dancing. I learn best when I literally move, when I am in action. It is what Robert Chia calls an Eastern mentality, where the ability to perform is primary to the ability to understand or to explain (Chia, 2003). In contrast, the Western mentality privileges observation and detachment over embodied action as a way of learning or a way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). Embodied action is a phenomenology of 'mindless', everyday coping that forms the basis of all intelligibility. For this reason, Chia coined the term being-in-the-world to refer to a state of non-reflective absorption in which the world around us is experienced as so much a part of us that it is not viewed as an object for us to apprehend. Instead, we 'dwell' in it (Chia, 2003: 955).

Many years later, when I practiced and taught the Japanese budo art of ninjutsu, the ultimate goal became to accomplish a state of 'no mind' while practising it. It means that you move skilfully within a situation without thinking about it. Actually, what happens is that the body moves instead of you moving your body. It is being in the situation of feeling whole and complete without any distracting thoughts or emotions. This experience doesn't fit the idea that an autonomous individual acts upon the world that he is separated from, which is typical of modernist thinking (Smith, 1776/1991). There is no goal of attaining an end result, but of simply being in the moment, conscious of what is taking place and responding skilfully to the situation at hand. In a way, there is no such thing as a self, because the separation between subject and object has disappeared.

In the last sixteen years I have developed this Eastern mentality further by means of Zen contemplation. In the form that I practise, you hold onto a specific question, such as 'Who am I?' for a long period of time, usually from three to seven days, in which you try to accomplish a direct experience of the question that you are contemplating. When that happens you directly know what the thing is that you're contemplating and this knowing goes beyond any cognitive understanding. Here, knowledge comes about by intensive discipline and the steadfast practice of a technique, and this knowledge when acquired cannot be discussed, nor can there be a debate about whether or not it is true. Learning takes place by means of

embodied engagement instead of logical detachment and it is more a process of unlearning in which you forget all that you have learned and even forget about you.

What Chia suggests in his article is that knowledge management has become preoccupied with explicit, cause-and-effect knowledge that resembles the Western mentality, while actionable, practical and embodied knowledge, resembling the Eastern mentality, is marginalized within our organizations (Chia, 2003). Choosing to oppose the two mentalities and preferring one over the other, I think he misses the point. For both mentalities, or qualities, are present in our organizations, and they complement each other. We can point to practices within our organizations where explicit knowledge is used for performing extensive analyses in order to develop well-thought-out scenarios for the future. And we can point to many practices of craftsmanship where professionals work closely together in order to attain impressive results, which can create feelings of flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) that closely resembles the Eastern mentality.

The real problem, I think, is that we tend to separate the two mentalities as being opposite to each other, while in fact they are both part of our embodied engagement in the world. We differentiate them into distinct functions and allow, or disallow, for them in relation to the specific situation at hand. Functional differentiation emphasizes thinking, doing and/or emoting with regard to specific functions, and regulates our lived experience in the world. As a result, we become detached from parts of our experience; this happens within Western as well as Eastern mentality. For example, I find it hard to express certain kinds of feelings when they don't fit my professional identity of being a consultant, facilitator or trainer. It is not the separation of thinking and doing, or the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge that is relevant here, but the allowance or disapproval of parts of our embodied engagement that contributes to feelings of alienation and separation.

## **Running Keynote Consultancy**

### **Working as a process consultant**

Today, I have been working as an independent process consultant for almost thirteen years. Besides consulting, I facilitate teams, and coach and train people. I work mostly for non-profit

and governmental organizations and sometimes for business firms. Whenever I need help I turn to people in my network and I choose those that I think best fit the situation. A couple of times I've been invited by other bureaus to partner with them, but I found out that being independent is what works for me. I can run my business the way I want and provide the best services for my clients. There is also a downside to being independent: it is difficult to keep developing my business, and myself, as I am always busy with client projects. Also, it is getting harder for a single-professional bureau, especially after the economic crisis, to acquire large, complex change processes. It makes me consider now and then whether or not I will associate myself with another bureau in the near future.

As a process consultant, I facilitate organizations in strategic and organizational development. What I like about this role is that I can contribute with my knowledge and experience, while being allowed to talk with different people inside the organization and ask them, sometimes, unusual questions. My main value is in bringing people from different functions and departments together in order to talk about a shared concern or topic. I create an environment in which they can dialogue together in a way that is different from their normal day-to-day conversations. Often, my facilitations generate valuable results that people appreciate and on which they want to act in the future.

### **The Appreciative Inquiry approach**

Since 1995, I have used the approach of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). It is a method of action-research that emphasizes what works and what is valued inside an organization, instead of what people perceive to be a problem to be solved. When I started using it, I felt attracted by its claim that organizations are 'mysteries to be embraced' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). What the founders meant with this statement was that the prevalent method of problem diagnosis in many organizations does not acknowledge the fact that:

organizing is a miracle of cooperative human interaction, of which there can never be a final explanation. In fact, to the extent that organizations are indeed born and re-created through dialogue, they truly are unknowable as long as such creative dialogue remains. At this point in time there simply are no organizational theories that can account for the life-giving essence of cooperative existence, especially if one delves deeply enough. (Cooperrider, 2013: 57).

What attracted me, and still does, was the idea that innovation, novelty and renewal become possible by starting different kinds of conversations amongst people. These conversations contain a different content, but are also run in a different way. It is by means of dialogue that opportunities can emerge in these conversations. A dialogue is a conversation in which people think together, dare to let go of their beliefs and interests and listen to each other from an experience of relating (Isaacs, 1999).

For me an important asset of Appreciative Inquiry is its ability to create a temporal space for constructive dialogue. In this space people bring stories to the fore about what is most valuable for them and what they appreciate, and they listen to the stories of others. So new realities may enter the conversations and they may spark novelty and change. The dialogue establishes a relational atmosphere of openness and safety in which difficult topics can be discussed and translated into shared future images and actions.

I have experienced Appreciative Inquiry as an effective approach, but it has also been criticized for a number of reasons. It tends to focus on the positive and neglect the potential for change and novelty in the negative. Fineman argues that:

[i]n exclusively favouring positive narratives, AI fails to value the opportunities for positive change that are possible from negative experiences, such as embarrassing events, periods of anger, anxiety, fear, or shame... moreover, in privileging positive talk, it fails to engage with the emotionally ambiguous circumstances of the workplace, such as when individuals feel torn between competing possibilities and differing voices. (Fineman, 2006: 275)

The desire in Appreciative Inquiry for the 'positivity narrative' fails to take this diversity of voices into account, and also the ambiguous circumstances in the workplace. According to David Boje, the positivity narrative ties up complexities into a convenient coherence for stakeholders whose interests are not necessarily explicit or negotiated. As a consequence, the dialogical aims of AI can get derailed and 'happy desires end up displacing unhappy actualities' (Boje, 2010: 240). The systemic orientation of Appreciative Inquiry makes it a macro-level theory that cannot satisfactorily explain how novelty, change and innovation come about in daily practice. Its claim, however, is that any social reality that we create, and that mirrors specific values, can be exchanged for a better one. This is because our social constructions are of our own making and can be re-made by means of culture critique, internal

critique and dislodgment of certainties (Gergen, 1994). However, the action-research method of Appreciative Inquiry implies a formative causality and such a causality can never explain real innovation or novelty.

Appreciative Inquiry looks for what already works and what people want more of. It builds on the strengths, competences and performances of the past and wonders how these assets can be mobilized in order to create the future that the people in the organization desire. In the appreciative discourse there is no room, nor are there words, for the loss or destruction that people may experience because of the changes and renewals that managers strive for. These are considered negative emotions that have no place within the vocabulary of Appreciative Inquiry and so these kinds of stories and emotions are excluded from the dialogue. People who bring these stories up run the risk of being excluded.

### **Taking a relational stance**

In essence, Appreciative Inquiry is a relational approach towards organizational development and change. A relational orientation takes collaboration seriously and focuses on the ways people interact and communicate with each other such that they can go on together in the future (Shotter, 2010). Relational aspects are often neglected, and only when conflict arises, attention is given to them in order to solve the problem. My argument is that the relational orientation of a team or organization is primary to the content, especially when power differentials are active, because ‘actors define and position each other in mutual relationships of inclusion or exclusion while defining the mere “content” of an issue’ (Bouwen, 2001: 363). I think that a growing awareness of what is actually taken place during interactions, by reflecting on it in action, can help improve the quality of it and thus its outcomes.

A lot of change and development processes are hampered by a lack of consciousness, knowledge or skills on how to build good-quality relationships, and establish and sustain good collaborations in such a way that differences can be dealt with without breaking up the relationship. This ability to go on together, not as a rational or intellectual choice for mainly functional reasons, but as an embodied orientation of being-in-the-world as opposed to a flowing-in-the-world (Shotter, 2015), is what interests me at the moment. I wonder how to bring it about in organizations where I see a strong emphasis on efficiency and short-term results, with little time left for talking things over. Time for reflection will not only lead to better decisions and actions but may also contribute to sustainable relationships.

## **Final remarks**

### **Moving from thinking to experiencing**

What I realized during the writing of this project was that everything I do happens in relationship with others. It contradicts the thought that I am an autonomous individual with a free will acting upon his environment. This ‘acting upon’ mirrors the position of somebody who stands at a distance from others, from relationships, topics, things and events, and observes what happens, thinks about it and then decides how to relate to it. It is a cognitive and rational kind of thinking that very much resembles my education as a business engineer, a marketer and a business consultant. And with it comes the picture of me as an independent individual with specific character traits, beliefs and opinions, drives and motivations, that makes up a stable and enduring self. It is this concept of autonomy that is central in my thinking style, as ‘the idea that universal moral principles (what is considered “good”) are the object of rational choice’ (Griffin, 2002: 102). I can choose my own conduct in an objective manner, how to act in the given circumstances, without being affected by it.

The events that I describe in this paper show the opposite of this thinking style. Every time I found myself in a situation, I acted or reacted in ways that were not solely of my own choosing, but were influenced by the situation and by other people. They shaped my responses and my responses shaped the situations and other people at the same time. Acting skilfully in the given moment, and being fully immersed in the situation, seemed more important than executing a principle, a plan or an idea. But it also meant that I was trying to control the situation, to move it in the direction that I wanted in order to keep my self-image intact.

A rationalist thinking style implies an absence of irrational emotions and beliefs that drive behavior without any pre-determined objectives or options, based on observable facts (Stacey, 2011). In the cases that I have presented in this paper, emotions, feelings and beliefs were clearly present, and I acted from an embodied response in which I did not make clear distinctions between thoughts, feelings, observations, actions or judgments. I simply responded as best as I could to what I perceived was the case. There was a clear discrepancy between what I thought my typical thinking style was at the time and what I actually did. Characteristic of a dialectical style of thinking is the notion that knowledge and experience

are not situated inside an autonomous individual, but they are ‘understood as historical, social processes of consciousness and self-consciousness’ (Stacey, 2011: 299). This means that, although individuals are free to choose their actions they can’t do so in an unlimited way, but are restricted by the same free choices that other people make at the same time. This inevitably brings out struggle and conflict between people; this continuous struggle is the reason that individuals and their environment shape each other all of the time in an interdependent way (Stacey, 2011). From a dialectical point of view, it is impossible for an individual to stand outside relationship.

However, how one stands inside relationship makes a difference. The DMan program invites participants to engage reflexively, that is to bend our thinking back on ourselves (Mowles, 2015: 61), in relationships, noticing what is actually taking place, what they think, feel and want, and even considering why they behave as they do, preferably during action. This is no small feat, and for many people this may be a bridge too far. How does one bring a reflexive mindset to work in an environment that is aimed at action, and at mindlessly following routines and methods? It is the ideology of managerialism that Chris Mowles talks about, that drives reflection into the background of daily activities and into parallel spaces that stand separate from work (Mowles, 2011). I wonder if and how reflection on people’s personal experiences, and a productive exchange of them, can be accepted as necessary for exchanging differences, resolving conflicts and as a condition for going on with each other.

### **Inquiring into conflict and power relations**

What has become clear to me is that I tend to avoid conflict. It is a concept that doesn’t fit my thinking style; I see it as damaging and dysfunctional in relationships. Whenever people come up against differences in opinions or interests, they find it hard to find a constructive way to inquire into their differences, and instead become offensive or defensive in their interactions. This happens especially in those situations when one’s identity is threatened, and these situations seem to increase wherever I look around me. But, according to Douglas Griffin, whenever we avoid conflict and try to keep our identities intact we fool ourselves (Griffin, 2002). Struggle and conflict are an inherent part of life, where people are trying to accomplish their often-conflicting needs and wants. If we can accept the fact that differences are a common element in our daily interactions with each other, and necessary for the emergence of novelty and change, then why can’t we let go of our individual or collective identities, especially when we realize that they are social fabrications after all?

One way to avoid conflict is, often unconsciously, to adopt certain ideologies and values, as the ones that I described in OD and Appreciative Inquiry. My motivation for becoming a consultant and helping people and organizations are also examples of it. By definition, ideologies are conflict-free and function as collective values, or cult values, for groups of people to strive for. They create a sense of unity or wholeness, as a shared experience, that connects activities with an idealized future (Stacey, 2011). By presenting ideologies as solutions for problems, such as better collaboration and trust or having a shared sense of mission, we move conflicts into the background. I am not the only one who did this, other people also tend to avoid conflicts in order to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. I notice that when I turn my attention towards the functionalization of ideas, concepts or values, and conflicts move to the foreground, the resistance towards confronting differences of opinions and interests increases. People do not only apply power to get what they want, they also use it to avoid uncertain and dangerous situations.

Adopting an ideology of equality and harmony establishes firm collaborative relationships with clients and colleagues. Managers, consultants, coaches and trainers share a common set of values: of being results- and future-oriented, pragmatic and flexible, and collectively aiming for continuous growth and improvement. With this shared value set, conflicts of interest are not very common and they explain the strong bonds between these professional groups. The result is a strong power base that consists of the intentions and goals of the manager, complemented by the experience and expertise of the consultant, trainer or coach. A difference of opinion can often be sorted out by re-negotiating the contract, but its fundamental power base stays intact. The systematic application of methods and techniques in order to fulfil the purposes and goals of managers, called managerialism, is supported by the profession of consultants who develop and supply the necessary methods and techniques:

...an ideology that claims a unique role and expertise for an increasingly large cadre of managers. These [concepts] are everyday, taken for granted ideas and activities in organisations to which we have grown so accustomed that it is hard to imagine organizational life without them. (Mowles, 2011: 8–9)

The symbiotic relationship between consultant and manager both enables and constrains consultants in their actions and effectiveness. On the one hand, they help their clients by providing support, experience and expertise. Especially when they are hired from outside, their enabling power can be strong. On the other hand, they are constrained by the fact that



they are connected to specific people, mostly the ones who pay and supervise them. This raises an ethical issue for consultants: the question of what they provide or produce is good for whom? The answer is not self-evident and the consultant must negotiate his way through the manifold interests of the stakeholders involved. If he wants to be effective he has to act politically regarding which position he takes and establish effective relationships with those in other positions (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994).

### **A direction for the next project**

Recently, I have become interested in the micro moments of interactions that take place between people and what they are ‘making’ together in relationship. One of the questions I have is why people, myself included, often deviate between what they say they want and what they actually do, and why they do not see the gap they create between the two. My intention is to move towards these situations, and increase the consciousness and self-consciousness of people, including myself, about what is going on and what the implications are of their increasing awareness about what is happening. That is, becoming reflexive-in-action.

Ideologies, values, opinions and agendas mould the many daily conversations and interactions that are going on between people. Their functionalization, when decisions have to be made and actions agreed upon, create the agreements and conflicts that determine if and how people continue their relationships with each other. I wonder what people actually do in their interactions with each other, what kinds of discursive strategies they use, what they include and exclude in the relationships they sustain, and what they avoid and confront. The point is not that differences exist, what I’m interested in is how they are handled, enlarged or diminished, and whether or not this happens on purpose or despite people’s intentions; if so, this demands a closer investigation into what is actually happening.

In my next project, I will turn towards the consultant–client relationship in order to explore what is actually taking place. On a superficial level, this relationship is regarded as a purely economic one, where the client is in demand of a specific service that the consultant can provide. But when you take a closer look, the relationship is much more complex than that and other interests come into play. This includes the mutual need for recognition and control, safeguarding or strengthening professional identities and positions, private agendas and how to handle contextual developments well.

I want to explore the political aspects of the consultant–client relationship in which power relating is central. Because my primary view of the relationship, and also my preferred view, is a collaborative one I must assume that I’ve developed a blind spot for the political aspects of the relationship. This doesn’t mean that I consider myself to be politically naïve, but I do presume a partnership with the client in order to practise politics for the benefit of the intended change. From a collaborative point of view, consultant and client complement each other and strive to accomplish shared goals. Taking a more political stance places emphasis on the conflictual aspects of the relationship that are often not recognized; when they are, they are solved in order to continue the collaborative relationship. What is not considered here is the possibility that the relationship might structurally contain conflictual elements that both client and consultant have to deal with during their collaboration. This is what I will take up in my next project.

## **Project 2 – Collaborative strategy as power relating in the consultant–client relationship**

### **Consulting as relationship building**

Many people participate throughout office hours in different work settings with groups of people discussing a great variety of topics. What is specific for management consultants, though, is that they are likely to enter different organizations during the day with unique groupings of people, cultures, types of problems and client relationships that demand a different fulfilment of their role. According to the situation at hand the consultant may change his role from, let's say, being a catalyst, an empathetic listener or a knowledge provider to a mediator. By doing that he adapts himself to the specific situation at hand.

Although his occupational roles differ it seems that the consultant is more restricted in the relationship that he builds and sustains with his clients:

Consulting is traditionally conceived of as the sale of solutions to problems specified by the client prior to the assignment. Consultants are assumed to act as external experts who sell their expertise to passive and receptive client firms. (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003:277)

In reality, the consultant–client relationship is not as unidimensional as stated above, nor are consultants or clients bound to such an active–passive relationship. Research shows that depending upon their attitudes, the specific context and earlier experiences with consultants, clients exert more or less control over the relationship with their consultants (Pemer and Werr, 2013). Scholars argue for a more context-related understanding of the nature and the dynamics of the consultant–client relationship in contrast to abstract and universal descriptions (ibid).

The latter view reflects my own experience, that clients are always actively involved in the co-creation of the changes they intend to realize. They expect the consultant to add knowledge and experience they lack to the process, and of which they are the owner. Knowledge creation, in the form of practices and techniques, is still seen as the main function of external consultants (Fincham, 1999, Nikolova and Devinney, 2012, Messervy, 2014). The consultant–client relationship is pictured as a collaborative one that reflects a tendency of

strengthening and complementing each other, of forming a coalition in order to attain the client's goals. The client seeks knowledge and advice from the consultant that will contribute to reduction of the uncertainties and anxieties that are inherent in the management task (Kipping and Engwall, 2002). But the consultant may unconsciously give rise to other uncertainties and anxieties with regard to their performance, reliability and collaboration with the rest of the organization (Pemer and Werr, 2013). This indicates that the consultant–client relationship can never be the fully complementary one that is often suggested by contemporary consulting literature but that, in reality, is a dynamic, uncertain relationship that forms and is formed at the same time by the mutual interactions.

The dominant collaborative view of the consultant–client relationship doesn't match my experience, and I will argue that the relationship is much more dynamic, ambiguous and uncertain than many writers and consultants hold it to be. The assumption that the relationship is considered a rational and an economical one, with the goal of reaching pre-established, mutually agreed ends emphasizes the outcome of the relationship and not the relationship itself. I will argue that the dynamics of the relationship should be a focal point for consultants during their engagements with clients, and not only the outcomes. Actually, what a consultant does is to be in constant interaction with his clients, out of which relationship, results and effects emerge. It is in paying attention to these constant interactions with clients that consultants can learn to understand what they are actually doing, and how this affects the outcomes of the collaboration. Interacting might be all they are actually doing; if this is true, then reflecting upon it can shed light on how consultants bring about change.

### **Researching lived experience**

In general, I experience the consultant–client relationship as an uncertain endeavor that is to me the essence of consulting work. Interestingly, I seldom talk about the nature of this relationship with clients, nor do they discuss it with me, as it seems that the relationship is self-evident and taken for granted by the both of us. Instead we talk about the business, the reason for our collaboration with each other, and the goals and solutions to be attained. The discrepancies I often experience between these business-oriented conversations and the actualities of the relationship that I find myself in when consulting is the topic that I want to explore in this project.

More specifically, I want to turn my attention to the collaborative aspects of the relationship. The contemporary consultant is expected to be a sparring partner, a trusted adviser, or even a coach to his clients instead of a distant and objective expert who provides knowledge and adds value (Marsh, 2009). What is actually happening when I, as consultant, collaborate with the client? What kind of relationship do I establish and what are the nature and dynamics of this relationship? What do I mean when I talk about the consultant–client relationship and how does it relate to the actual work that I do? The underlying assumption here is that the relationship works fine when consultant and client collaborate effectively towards the agreed-upon goals and results of the project. But I want to suggest a more ethical position in which the consultant reflects on his tendency to collude with the client’s agenda too easily, what happens during the collaborative process and what emerges from the relationship.

I want to explore what is actually going on between consultant and client when they engage in their working relationship with each other, instead of talking about the desired functionality of the relationship. Becoming engaged in the relationship implies a relationship that concerns doings, thoughts, feelings and emotions, and I will pay attention to the latter two as these are not often written about in contemporary literature on consulting. Also, I want to explore what is often invisible or not spoken of, but which does influence the relationship, the collaboration and the outcome of it. Becoming aware of these aspects may help to include them more in my interactions with others. I think that when we become more reflexive about our interactions and conversations with each other and, if only temporarily, step out of our overly functional and instrumental orientation, this might contribute to more sustainable change.

### **Establishing a collaborative relationship with clients**

During my consulting work I have gradually developed a preference for a specific type of consultant–client relationship, which is called a collaborative style of consulting.

Collaborative consulting places high emphasis on the quality of relationships between consultant and the client system, and the productive use of differences towards a shared goal or purpose. I want to elaborate on the main characteristics of it, as it reveals some important underlying assumptions.

I prefer to establish a close and trusting working relationship with clients. This helps me to receive valuable information, get access to people and get things rolling quickly, as my time is limited and I lack the formal authority to enforce things. My main role is to facilitate clients in a change process that is going on or that they intend to start. The primary responsibility for realizing the change stays with clients and I support them as much as I can with my knowledge and experience. Although I have worked for many years as project and program manager, this is a role that I like and in which I can provide the most value for my clients. I also enjoy working with groups that hold different kinds of opinions and interests, and trying to reach consensus in which people can and will continue their collaboration with each other. And I prefer working in an appreciative way. By taking an appreciative stance I pay attention to what people value, what they want to have more of, as an act of recognition (Whitney et al., 2010) and including them in the process of realizing their ambitions.

My collaborative working style is aimed at co-creating conversations between groups of people and individuals that generate new meanings and perspectives for them, and initiate actions that effect novelty and change. Change is considered to come about, from a discursive point of view, when the conversations that people have with each other change (Hosking, 2004), when they are generative, and become a precursor for real changes that take place in daily practice (Tsoukas, 2005). This ‘practice turn’ goes beyond the reflective stance of process consultation, where the client–consultant relationship focuses on the effort to jointly diagnose what is happening in the situation under scrutiny in order to make co-authored choices about how to go on (Schein, 1998: 6). Although both conversations and reflections are part of the ongoing ensuing process and not separate from it, the ‘practice turn’ adds to that the idea of practices as embodied, materially interwoven actions and interactions (Schatzki, 2001: 12) and shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge to the centre of its vocabulary (Reckwitz, 2002: 259).

### **Idealization of collaborative consulting**

I realize that this way of consulting collaboratively is an idealization in which a specific practice with corresponding values, norms, knowledge and techniques is promoted. There is a means–ends assumption underneath this style, which implies a linear causality, that by co-creating a collaborative relationship success will come about. This thinking style fits well

with the managerialist style of clients that emphasizes methodical approaches of production, change and development that are highly predictive of outcomes and controllable of processes. Consultants and managers do speak each other's languages very well and are complementary in their roles, where consultants, acting as trusted advisers, provide the tools and techniques that managers apply in their striving for control and predictability. This can create the risk of a collusion of identities where differences are denied (Griffin, 2002) and the potential for change is diminished. This risk might be further enhanced by the increasing professionalization of managers as being formally educated and trained by consulting firms or having worked as management consultants before becoming a manager, that by some authors is described as a process of colonization:

consultancy is being brought into management, more generally, in the form of, what one practitioner-expert described as, individual '*consultant managers*' (Czerniawska, 2011 quoted in Sturdy et al., 2016)

The ideal of a collaborative relationship suggests a rational and cognitive perspective, in which the consultant and client seem to be able to choose wisely what kind of role to take in a particular situation and select a preferred role or combination of roles. This implies that the relationship can be designed, manipulated, or functionalized, towards what the consultant and client consider the 'best' possible outcome. Such a choice is meant to generate predictability and reliability in and of the relationship, in that the consultant, as well as the client, knows how to behave and what to do in their interactions. I will argue that this idealized choice expresses a desired relationship that is considered good, that contributes to desired outcomes, and generates compliant and conflict-free relationships.

This can turn collaboration into a cult value (Griffin, 2002) and drive out other values at the expense of variety, dispute, difference and conflict. Cult values are 'universal idealizations ascribed to collectives understood as if they were individuals and to be applied in all circumstances' (ibid: 117). They reflect the idealized generalization of an organization (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), what it stands for, and contribute to desired organizational and individual identities. But they mask the fact that this particular kind of relationship is reflecting a power position that aims at attaining specific outcomes while avoiding others. It creates the paradoxical situation that striving for a collaborative relationship inevitably brings with it conflict and resistance, which are symptoms of striving and competition, and as such the opposite of collaboration. This brings me to the question what a relationship is.

## What do we mean by relationship?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary uses the following definitions for relationship:

- 1 *a*: the state of being related or interrelated;
- 2: the relation connecting or binding participants in a relationship;
- 3 *a*: a state of affairs existing between those having relations or dealings or *b*: a romantic or passionate attachment.

These definitions describe relationship as a fact or a state existing as something tangible that consists of certain qualities that seem to be givens prior to the relationship. When Schein explains the consultant–client relationship as a helping one (Schein, 1998), he defines the nature of it: how people in the relationship ideally should behave, and if they follow his recipe, how the outcomes will naturally follow. With his description he implies stability, certainty and assurance in and of the relationship as a social object (Mead, 1934/2015), in which the respective identities and behaviours of both client and consultant are more or less set. The consultant–client relationship as a social object is a generalized gesture, with many tendencies to respond to that gesture by individuals who together form part of a complex social act. Characteristics of a social act are that its meaning lies in the response of the listener to the gesture of the narrator and that isn't restricted to the intended meaning of the latter (ibid). The social object appears in the experience of every individual as a viable pattern of action in relation to the future of that social act (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), meaning that the consultant and client have certain expectations of each other's roles, behaviors and contributions which make up the consultant–client relationship as a generalized tendency to behave and act. The social act, then, is the complex interweaving of the actions of the people involved as complementary acts of gesture and response that constitute meaning (Stacey, 2003).

This definition of relationship turns it into a reified symbol, which means that the word derives its meaning from an explanatory framework that adds an additional context to the interaction that is actually taking place (Stacey, 2003). Talking about a collaborative consultant–client relationship, then, simultaneously refers to an abstract, systematic framework that fuses with the phenomenon that somebody is referring to and that, as a result, partly derives its meaning from it. People think they know what they're talking about, while in reality they might be talking about different things, because they come with their own



histories and biographies attached. Stacey mentions that the use of reified symbols can alienate people from their lived experience in the present moment (ibid), and so deny or neglect the conflicting elements within their collaborative relationship.

I can sympathize with the definition that Crossley (2011: 28) uses, when he talks about a (social) relation as ‘a shifting state of play within a process of social interaction’. Here, the relationship is not static and an *a priori* defined entity at all, but a dynamic and unpredictable process that is co-created by people who interact with each other or, to be more precise their bodies, that is unfolding over time and makes relationship to be an emergent aspect of the unfolding process (Burkitt, 2014). Crossley’s definition is in line with a relational perspective in which things derive their meaning, significance and identity from the relative positions they take in social relations and not from any inherent meaning attached to the things themselves (Emirbayer, 1997). Within these social relations, we include our histories with things and with each other, so that our relationships resemble the particular patternings of experience from which meanings are negotiated. I find this a valuable perspective that helps me shift my attention towards what is actually taking place when I describe particular experiences of the consultant–client relationship instead of overly generalizing by attaching different kinds of prescriptions to it. It enables me to put my experience of the consultant–client relationship in a relational context, instead of keeping it strictly individual and private, generalize my particular findings and then make them meaningful for others. This relational view is in accordance with Dewey’s view on experience as being constituted in relations and in the context of one’s immediate situation (Burkitt, 2014; Dewey, 1934/1980).

### **Narrative 1: The start of a change process**

In 2015 I started facilitating a division of the mental health institution (Health Inq.) in the Netherlands on the topic of addiction recovery. Core was to put the addictive client in the lead with regard to his recovery process instead of being in a dependent, passive and compliant relationship with the therapist. The visioning process had started in 2012 with the mission statement that communicated to its clients and employees that ‘Every person counts’, and with the following values at its core: trust, equality, hospitality, respect, competence and optimism. After three years of executing the process the CEO intended to give it a boost for

its further development. I was asked to bring in my expertise about the change method Appreciative Inquiry and to facilitate the change process.

In the early stage of the project, the contracting phase, I met with Diane, who was interested in speaking to me about my possible contribution to the addiction recovery project of Health Inq. At the time Diane worked as a project leader in Learning & Development for Health Inq., had known the organization for many years and had formerly been a manager within the organization. Diane was looking for ways to revitalize the process of addiction recovery and wondered whether or not Appreciative Inquiry could contribute to that goal. One of her colleagues, who had recently participated in one of my training sessions, had connected us in order to talk about the possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry to help accomplish that goal. I told her about my experiences with organizational development and in particular with Appreciative Inquiry, and the recent projects that I had facilitated. Her response was positive and she suggested meeting with the CEO of Health Inq.

For two months I heard nothing and then suddenly there was an appointment with Harry, the CEO. He came across as a friendly person and was visibly dedicated to the organization's vision of addiction recovery. Our meeting was pleasant and productive, and at the end of it he asked me to write a proposal. I agreed, and within a week I sent him and Diane my proposal with suggestions on how we could start our collaboration. For more than a month I heard nothing from them. One day I received an email from Diane that the management team would discuss my proposal on short notice, with a good chance that it might pass. After another two months I received an email from Harry that they wanted to continue with me and he asked me if I could send him information about my consulting fee, which I did. In total, the whole contracting phase had taken almost six months, and what was peculiar about it was that I had only met two people in the organization, and wasn't involved in the decision-making process that had taken place. Usually, I am invited into several meetings with people in different roles in an organization in order to get to know each other, to tell them something about who I am and the way I work, to introduce Appreciative Inquiry and to discuss how we can start collaborating with each other. I consider the contracting phase as a trust-building phase that leads to a mutual go/no go decision to start the collaboration. None of this had happened and, although I was happy that the project would start the contracting phase, had left me with questions about how I would enter the organization and start collaborating with the client organization.

This question became more urgent when Harry told me that Diane would no longer be project leader and would soon move towards a new position within the parent company. This meant that I would lose my sparring partner before we had even started the project. The decision came as a surprise to me and, it seemed to me, was a surprise for Diane as well, and it wasn't clear why this decision had been made. In response to my question of who would replace Diane, Harry answered that probably one of the other management team members would fulfil the role of project leader. But in fact, no one replaced Diane; no new project leader was appointed.

### **Notions of uncomfortable feelings**

Although I describe the events in the narrative in a rational fashion, actually I've selected them because they were events that stood out for me. My first experience with the organization had left me with an uncomfortable feeling of not being sure what I was getting myself into. The person that I had come to know best, Diane, had left; besides Harry, there were only a few other people that I had just met. After Diane's departure, Harry became my main sparring partner and contact person during the project, and this change affected my relationship with the rest of the organization. I didn't get the access and the visibility that I was used to getting whenever I started participating in a project, and so the rest of the organization stayed invisible for me.

I didn't communicate my initial feelings, I kept them to myself, including the disappointment that I had felt when Harry told me that Diane would no longer be project leader. I felt her departure as a loss and I wondered why I, or Diane, hadn't objected to the decision that Harry had made. I remembered thinking that his decision was an internal affair and it was not up to me to question it. Also, I didn't know what was going on inside the organization, what had happened between Harry and Diane, and so I kept quiet. And I had felt unsure whether or not my disagreement would be considered as an intrusion into internal affairs that might have complicated the situation. As a result, I didn't express my doubts and missed the opportunity to influence the situation.

By judging my internal dialogue as deviant from what I considered to be a helpful consulting style, I had separated myself in my interactions from the actual situation. Paradoxically, my collaborative style contributed to a non-collaborative relationship, because I didn't start to explore our different views on the working relationship. Our supposedly complementary roles did in fact negate conflict, or difference, and hampered the mutual and active inquiry into who we were, what we were supposed to do together, and what we expected and needed from each other. Reflecting on it, I had kept a part of me out of the relationship and restrained myself from communicating my personal experience of what was going on because it didn't fit the role that I felt obliged to fulfil. And this created feelings of alienation from my own lived experience.

Instead of trying to understand what was going on, figuring it all out in my head, I could have used my feelings to actively start participating in the relationship with the client. That would have been a relationally responsive act instead of an individualistic, rational-cognitive one. I did not consider the interaction that was taking place to be an opportunity to affect change in our relationship and had separated my intervention in the interaction occurring from the change process itself (Lambrechts et. al, 2009). I had confused my ideal of interaction with what was unfolding as a result of the actual interactions that were taking place. This is an interesting notion, as it reflects the tendency to relate myself to the situation based on personal preference instead of based on what is actually occurring (Griffin, 2002).

I wonder why I didn't pursue this option. One explanation is that it contradicted the definition of being a collaborative or helping consultant, that is to focus on the needs of the client and to participate in his issues as 'helper' or 'partner' (Lambrechts et. al, 2011). Another explanation is the occurrence of countertransference, a psychoanalytic term, in which perceptions from past experiences are triggered by current interactions with the client, which directed my behavior towards situations that I already was familiar with, that wouldn't cause unnecessary conflict, and would contribute to a beneficiary relationship (Czander and Eisold, 2003; Trevithick, 2011). Both explanations reflected my tendency to keep a grip on the relationship in order to preserve particular outcomes and to avoid undesirable ones.

## **The relevance of emotions and feelings**

It is interesting to explore how emotions and feelings are enacted in interactions with clients. Within consulting, they don't fit the general image of a masculine profession (Marsh, 2009). When you look into literature on consulting, consultants are portrayed as professionals who are confident, strong persuaders, influencers and opinion formers, typical knowledge workers and in control of the situation (Sturdy, 1997, Fincham, 1999). This masculine image emphasizes rationality, objectivity and a result-oriented style of thinking and acting. It seems to me that consultants and clients ascribe a lot of value towards cognitive abilities, and to the separation of thinking and feeling. But Damasio has made it clear that the corresponding faculties in the brain are closely connected:

The apparatus of rationality, traditionally presumed to be neocortical, does not seem to work without that of biological regulation, traditionally presumed to be subcortical. Nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also from it and *with* it. The mechanisms for behavior beyond drives and instincts use, I believe, both the upstairs and the downstairs: the neocortex becomes engaged *along with* the older brain core, and rationality results from their concerted activity. (Damasio, 1994: 128)

Although cognition and emotions are closely connected, there is a tendency to neglect or avoid the latter. I think this is due to its disturbing character, especially when we talk about the negative ones. In general, we find negative emotions hard to deal with, especially in particular social settings. For example, nurses try to avoid crying in front of patients and choose another time and place for the expression of their emotions (Lees et. al, 2013). As a result, Western society has created particular places and circumstances in which people are allowed to express their feelings and emotions:

current concepts of feeling reflect a powerful tradition of Western culture that diminishes feeling in favour of reason... We have subordinated emotion to reason so completely and for so long that we no longer question its marginality. We build special quarters for the exercise and display of emotion, such as the concert hall, movie theatre, football field and therapist's office. Where emotions are especially intense, such as in love or grief, we confine them in ceremonies or rituals to regulate their appearance and expression. (Sandelands and Boudens, 2000: 47)

Emotions and feelings are often used interchangeably. It is common to regard emotions as the expression of bodily feelings: ‘All emotions seem to be certain types of feeling, but not all feelings are emotions’ (Burkitt, 2014: 7). In contrast, Damasio puts emotions before feelings when an external stimulus creates a bodily reaction that we associate with an emotion. To connect that emotion with a particular situation, people attach feeling to it as a cognitive process in order to know what to do. He regards emotion as the reflection of a changed bodily state with the corresponding feelings as the experience of those changes (Damasio, 1994). His description of feelings and emotions is individualistic, sequential and cognitive, while for me they are part of one and the same experience.

Burkitt (2014) acknowledges that emotions and feelings are sometimes hard to differentiate, and it is the social meaning and the specific situation that dictates when the feeling becomes an emotion. We tend to select our emotions and feelings retrospectively in order to attune ourselves with the situation that we find ourselves in (Dewey 1929/1958), and that is why Burkitt talks about emotion as an aesthetic phenomenon in which bodily or feeling experience is essential. It is what makes emotions relational, instead of being individual properties, and part of our interactions and activities with each other. People are not, however, completely free in choosing their emotions, as they are part of social networks that contain certain emotional scenarios (Gergen, 1994) and emotional habits that allow for specific emotions in particular situations while rejecting others.

Emotions and feelings are considered to be innate, ‘hard-wired’ and mainly biological, aimed at our survival. It makes them seem rational in the sense that they become purposive and guide our actions such that we can be effective in particular situations. This cognitive-behavioural view turns emotions into determinate processes based upon innate brain patterns, which are laid down by a long evolutionary history (Damasio, 2000: 51). But the neurologist Luria (1966) suggests that our brains are much more plastic than that and can, within certain limits, be reshaped functionally. As our emotions and feelings are highly social and come from the patterns of relationships that we are engaged in (Burkitt, 2014), emotional conflicts and tensions between people cannot be derived from their brain functions alone, but arise from the situations that people find themselves in and the meanings they attribute to these situations.

According to the philosopher John Dewey, the body–brain is always acting in synchrony in order to evaluate what is going on in its immediate surroundings. The locus of mind can't be found in the central nervous system, but in 'the qualities of organic action, so far as these qualities have been conditioned by language' (Dewey, 1929/1958: 291; Burkitt, 2014). That's why Dewey talks about the 'psychophysical' sphere to overcome this tendency and instead describes human beings as active, thinking organisms, in which action and thought are inseparable (Dewey, 1929/1958).

This pragmatic point of view puts our emotions and feelings firmly in the action domain, and makes them social. They resemble what we value within the particular relationship, and guide our action with regard to a preferred solution in the immediate future. Our feelings and emotions are aspects of patterns of relating that regulate our interactions with each other, and reflect the nature and dynamics of our mutual relationships (Elias, 1939/2000; Mead, 1934/2015; Stacey, 2003). They consider feelings and emotions as activities that help us to determine who we are in relation to others, what our possibilities and restrictions are, and how we can or will act in order to reach a desired outcome. They are highly sophisticated devices to find our way around the manifold and complex social situations that we encounter (Burkitt, 2014), and it is by recognizing themes in conversations, power relations and ideological choices that we experience ourselves as being more or less effective in our dealings with others (Stacey, 2011).

If I had considered my feelings to be of a social nature, this probably would have stimulated me to start asking questions about what was going on within Harry's organization. But I didn't. Elias (1991) refers to the social mechanisms of shame, guilt and embarrassment that constrain people because they run the risk of being excluded when expressing feelings and emotions that may cause feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt or even panic. Socialization processes have increased the ability to restrict ourselves in our behaviours in order to avoid the situations in which we might experience feelings of shame or embarrassment. Running the risk of being excluded reveals power relations in the patterns of relationship between people, which is considered to be threatening for our identities, our communication with each other and the access that is denied towards particular resources and privileges.

## **Sustaining professional identity**

There was another reason for my reluctance to act on my feelings and for expressing them. Doubt and disagreement don't correspond with the image of being a professional consultant: that is, being self-assured and knowledgeable, knowing how to act and behave in a rational manner in client situations. Sustaining this image creates predictability and propagates certain behaviours while avoiding others. This includes holding an image of what the client expects from a professional consultant, which also directs my expectation of myself. Distorting these images feels threatening because they may result in a decrease of respect and of diminishing the influence that a consultant can exert on his client, the organization and the change process. As such, feelings are connected to professional identity, and contributing to protective behavior, with the past acting upon the present by means of thoughts, feelings, assumptions and convictions that may restrain the freedom to act in the way most appropriate to the situation.

The regulation of our professional and self-identity is mediated by discursive practices about who we think we are, our action orientations, social relationships and the contexts in which we find ourselves (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). I think this is mainly an unconscious process by which consultant and client simultaneously protect parts of their respective identities and also try to regulate the identity of their counterpart in order to sustain their own identities and to control the outcomes of the process. If they are successful, the collaborative relationship will confirm their (professional) sense of self, and the coherence and distinctiveness of their identities, which will create a direction and a shared value system for the relationship (*ibid*). This might turn into a collusive process between consultant and client in which they unconsciously strengthen and complement each other, and form a coalition in such a way that it might hamper the change process or the organization. This collusion of identities contains a risk where differences are denied (Griffin, 2002) and the potential for change is diminished. Pettigrew (1975) refers to the intention of consultants to create collaborative relationships as a tactical manoeuvre to anticipate the threat that they pose (as expert and competitor) towards the status and position of the client in order to reduce his anxieties. It will be likely that this manoeuvre will be denied or neglected by both parties in order to reduce anxieties on both sides. It is the past of relational patterning that shows up in the present of the ongoing interactions, and it is this that is unconscious.



## **Regular irregularity**

While writing this project, it became clear to me that the ‘striking events’ or ‘living moments’ (Shotter, 2010: 202) in my narrative were out of line with my expectations or ‘best way’ of collaborating. Inconvenient feelings revealed the expectations and habits that I unconsciously carried with me and brought into the relationship, such as the need to build a climate of trust and openness with the client and to start participating from the very moment I meet a new client. These events turned out to be unwanted irregularities against the background of my regular, or habitual, way of working that is based on former experiences and underlying assumptions. Here, the past acts upon the present. Just as I have developed my routine ways of acting, the client has developed his too, which means that establishing a collaborative relationship is always a process of negotiation that will create uncertainty in both of us about whether or not we will find a productive way of working together.

Reflecting on this tendency of developing habitual ways of working I see that it enhances an efficient way of working, because one doesn’t have to think the whole process through every time a new project is initiated. It establishes a sense of control over the relationship, and the outcome of the process, which brings power and difference as characteristics of the consultant–client relationship to the fore. These characteristics go against a collaborative consulting practice as described in the ethical guidelines of the organizational development approach:

Collaborative relations between clients and consultants – from jointly deciding the consultant brief and outcomes to deciding how to collect valid data, how to jointly analyse the data and how to choose the best route of intervention, what to evaluate at the end etc. We are the helper, not the guru and expert to direct the change work.

Those who direct the change work are the leaders and managers of the organization. Consultants honour and dedicate time and effort to build high-quality, authentic and trusting relations with clients in order to build the platform to help (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011: 20).

According to this description, a collaborative consulting style does acknowledge power in the relationship, but the consultant places it in the hands of the client. That is a power move, and reveals that the client is already dependent on the consultant because of his need for help. Not only does it make joint activities less equal and mutual, the implication is that their outcomes

are also less intentional and predictable (Shotter, 1984). Although the collaborative consultant should give up his power ‘for the good’ in order to establish an authentic working relationship with the client (Mowles, 2009: 282), this doesn’t automatically happen. I didn’t want to give up control over the relationship entirely, and tried to assert influence over it by choosing moments of communication and ways and opportunities of how to facilitate their process. The mutuality of joint activities was never taken for granted, and had to be negotiated at every meeting, which turned my interpretation of the relationship from a helping into a political one.

## **Narrative 2: Facilitating two meetings**

The first meeting that we held took place in July 2015, in which I was asked to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to a group of 35 employees, who together would form the support team. After I had sent Harry the proposal and the information requested about my fee, I unexpectedly received an invitation for the first meeting on a date already set. I was surprised that the first step of the process was not discussed with me, such as who was to be invited, what we were supposed to do and how we would invite the selected group of employees. The invitation came from Harry’s personal assistant (PA) and was directed towards the whole group. It stated:

During our meeting last week we discussed Appreciative Inquiry as a method to apply to the development of addiction recovery. You all have decided to go along with the method and hence we invite you for a meeting in order to work out how to make use of it. Harry would like you to meet before the start of the summer vacation, on a Friday, and although we realize that not everybody can show up, we hope you will make the time to come to this meeting.

Some people replied that they couldn’t attend the meeting and I could tell from their reactions that they were disappointed about the way the invitation was sent. I experienced an emotional reaction myself that related to the invitation as a thoughtless decision that hadn’t taken the consequences into consideration towards the people involved, including me. I felt that the meeting was forced upon people in order to make a start before the summer vacation. The email that was sent by the secretary of the board lacked a sense of thoroughness that was important for me in working with people as an inherent part of the method of Appreciative

Inquiry. The communication contrasted with the appreciative approach, in which one tries to be open and transparent about the process and the decisions made, and to involve stakeholders by inviting them instead of coercing them into the process.

The introductory workshop however, which lasted a day, went very well and at the end of the day the participants voted unanimously ‘yes’ to continue with Appreciative Inquiry and the change process. During the day they had been introduced to the method and discussed the applicability of it for the change process of addiction recovery. Right after the workshop the management team planned a large conference to be held in the second part of the year. In preparation for that, they suggested organizing a design workshop to be held in September with the same group of people who had attended the introductory workshop. The preparations for that meeting would be taken care of by a small group of participants during the summer, including Harry and myself.

We met on July 30<sup>th</sup> to prepare for the design workshop. I had written a short proposal to discuss with them. Harry was absent, due to circumstances, and so I met with this small group of people consisting of managers, therapists and staff. For the first time I gained insight into how people thought about the change process as they shared their views and concerns with me. According to them, the process needed to speed up and expand to a broader group, because too many people didn’t know about it yet. They wanted people to start contributing to the process, start taking initiative and moving towards results. Some of them were also critical of Appreciative Inquiry, which they already knew of it as occupational therapists and/or managers. They were reluctant to introduce another new change method into the organization. From their remarks I concluded they were not as positive about the change process as Harry was, but despite their reservations we developed an interesting program for the second meeting.

We started the second workshop in a beautifully illuminated room, with lots of sunlight, with the same group of people who had participated in the first meeting, along with some new faces. Harry welcomed everybody and started the program by presenting his vision on the future of addiction recovery. His vision flabbergasted everybody in the room, and I remember thinking that it might restrain people from starting to explore their own wishes and desires. But this didn’t happen; the group split up into subgroups to start reflecting on Harry’s vision and discussing its desirability. Everybody was invited to add other vision elements that they

considered desirable. I watched the discussions in the subgroups evolve, and with everybody visibly engaged the morning passed by very quickly in a good and productive atmosphere.

I worried about the time schedule though, because we were delaying. People returned late from the first assignment, because they needed more time to end their discussions. After the subgroups had presented their commentaries on the vision, we started with the design of the large conference to be held in November. I had split up the group into five subgroups and every group worked on a different design topic. At about 3 pm, while everybody was busy working on the next assignment, the host of the establishment approached me and said we had to move to another room because of a wedding party. It turned out to be a disco room, much smaller, with dark colours and not a single window. I was unpleasantly surprised, but had no choice other than to accept it. I knew it would make the upcoming presentations and decision making more difficult, especially because it was Friday afternoon and people were getting tired. I knew that the group had to make some important decisions about the upcoming work conference, such as what the topic would be, who we would invite and when and where the conference would be held.

When the people came into the room, some of them were visibly annoyed about the changed setting. Each group presented its discussion outcomes and the plenary discussions that followed were animated. Besides the design topics, a theme emerged about the relevance of the upcoming large-scale conference. I welcomed this conversation because it was the first time that people expressed their concerns about the change process, and so I encouraged the conversation, as I had sensed unspoken feelings and opinions about it. I invited them to explore these questions, well aware of the fact that we were getting towards the end of the workshop. One participant was outspoken in his arguments against the conference and some people agreed with his concerns. I noticed that Harry was becoming agitated; I knew that he had to leave at 5 pm because of another appointment, and quite suddenly he interrupted the discussion and expressed his dissatisfaction with it. He ended the meeting by saying that we would continue the change process and organize the work conference based on the proposals that had just been presented. He thanked everybody for their participation, wished them a nice weekend and said he couldn't stay for the party afterward because he had another appointment. Then he left. We broke up, a few of the people stayed for a drink but very soon everybody was gone. I was the only one left, I felt lonely, collected all the flipcharts and left disappointed and tired.

## **Emerging habits and conversations**

The facilitation of these events was my introduction into the organization of Health Inq. I had met a varied group of employees, consisting of psychiatrists, controllers, managers, therapists, ex-clients and supporting staff, and had talked with them about the process of addiction recovery. The workshops hadn't taken place in one of the organization's locations, but were organized in a conference centre, so I hadn't met them in their familiar working environment.

Being an outsider to the group I had witnessed habits and customs that I think were common for the people of Health Inq., but that I noticed as being deviant from what I was accustomed to. Their natural ways of interacting with each other, and with me, revealed some habits as more or less unconscious ways of participating in their normal, daily interactions with each other, which Bourdieu calls 'the game' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 430). I think that the way I was appointed is an example of such a habit. Another example was the way people connected to me. They were all very friendly people but didn't try to include me. During lunchtime at both meetings everybody went into their own subgroups, and no one invited me to join them. At the end of the second meeting nobody offered any help to collect the flipcharts and other materials, but people left quite abruptly and without saying goodbye. The feelings that their particular habits had aroused in me made me wonder about what might have caused them. I don't think that they tried to avoid me deliberately, or that the PA intended to irritate colleagues on purpose. I think their actions were habitual and reflected patterns of relating with each other, and with outsiders, that they themselves were not aware of. If these patterns were going on within the organization, then becoming conscious of them was a prerequisite for effecting change in the organization.

## **Unconscious process going on**

When speaking about unconscious dynamics in normal day life, we mostly talk about matters that are beyond our awareness and opposite to the things that we are conscious of.

Psychoanalytic theory, for example, makes a distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Here, unconscious is explained as an attribute of an individual's mind that represents internal drives and fantasies that are or have to be repressed, and this happens by means of individual and social defences that act as a barrier against their expression. People become more integrated or 'whole' when the unconscious and conscious integrate, where

psychological balance is restored and people have ‘repaired’ themselves. The psychoanalytic or psychodynamic therapist or consultant helps his clients by lowering defence mechanisms, containing the anxieties that arise and turning unconscious thoughts and feelings into conscious ones (Stacey, 2003; Hirschhorn, 1990).

This distinction between the conscious and the unconscious might help to explain the apparent gap between the client’s visible intentions and the outcomes of the change process. I can recognize the distinction that is made here; what I have problems with, though, is locating the cause for it in the internal repression of inner drives and fantasies, which would force me to turn towards the ‘intra-psychic’ of the group or organization. I find this a conceptual endeavor that might risk losing the client in a shared analysis of what we think are the causes of an assumed group unconsciousness. It might also result in a turn towards the past instead of keeping our attention focused on the present and on future results, as suggested by the Appreciative Inquiry approach. I would rather turn towards what happens in our interactions and conversations with each other, and towards the patterns that form our experiences and expectations of each other.

Stacey (2003) considers this demarcation between conscious and unconscious a systemic kind of thinking in which the unconscious is made primary to the conscious in order to repress unwanted feelings, emotions and fantasies. In contrast, he sees conscious and unconscious processes as individual and social at the same time, and part of processes of communicative interaction and power relationships between people. These processes bring forth knowing in the form of themes that bring people together, create meaning and stimulate action. Some of these interactions, the power relating that is going on and the themes that emerge happen unconsciously because they contribute to anxieties in people and are therefore avoided. These anxieties are of a social nature and reflect the possible threat of social exclusion from a group that people belong to, and of the detrimental effects of power relationships. This might explain why people avoided expressing any objections to the change process and remained silent.

Stacey’s explanation avoids the tendency to define unconscious process as the ‘undertow’ of organizations (van Beekum 2012, 2015) as a metaphor that denotes invisible and potentially dangerous undercurrents in the water for the organization. Undercurrents contain repressed feelings, thoughts, desires and fantasies that are socially or individually censored and hidden

from public view. If people start paying attention to the undertow in their organizations, they might reveal the barriers of resistance to the intended changes and, by removing them or understanding them better, contribute to better change and transformation. Ideally, the consultant, when facilitating change, acts as a reflection board and uses what resonates within him whenever he enters and starts working with the client organization. My objection to this kind of psychodynamic thinking is that it suggests the existence of a collective unconscious that people can discover, or unravel, and of which they are no part, to take responsibility for it. It can alienate people from their own experience and, instead of solving or explaining things that are going on between people, might create confusion and resistance and create distance from the change process. Stacey's explanation of unconscious process is an invitation to start exploring one's own lived experience when interacting with others in order to enable unconscious thoughts, feelings and emotions to surface and include them in the ongoing interactions.

### **Exploring parallel process**

The unconscious patterns of relating that were going on within the support team might reflect parallel processes going on that are part of the normal day-to-day interactions within the organization. A parallel process is one in which a specific kind of relationship is re-enacted in another relationship or context (Clarkson, 1991) as covert dynamics happening in one part of the organization get played out in another part (Smith in Gilmore and Krantz, 1985: 1164). Another term that is being used for a parallel process is 'equivalence' (Hopper, 1996) as the: unconscious feelings and fantasies associated with the topic under discussion are manifested through projective and introjective processes into the wider arena with which they are connected. (Hopper and Garland, 1979: 100 in Hakeem, 2010: 531)

The explanation for this phenomenon is that people carry with them basic feelings of anxiety and fantasies that arouse defensive behaviours that they express in an unconscious manner. Menzies Lyths' research (Armstrong and Rustin, 2015), for example, showed that nurses experience high levels of anxiety because they have to deal with sick and vulnerable people, death and suffering that arouses very strong feelings in them (Lees et. al, 2013). If these feelings can't be expressed properly, in other words, if there isn't a possibility for

containment of these anxieties, then defensive behaviours will be played out in the organization, mostly unconsciously (Bion, 1962).

In a clinical setting it is the anxieties, confusions and fantasies of the clients that are introjected by the staff and brought into other areas of the organization by means of externalization and internalization, of which projective and introjective identification are a part (Hakeem, 2010; Hopper, 1996). Projective identification is a psychological defence mechanism against unwanted feelings or fantasies that are first denied and ejected by the owner, and then transmitted towards another person who starts thinking, feeling and behaving in a manner congruent with the thoughts and feelings of the owner (Gilmore and Krantz, 1985: 1161). Introjection happens when somebody incorporates, as a form of identification, certain attributes or characteristics of another person (Trevithick, 2011: 396). This is different from the phenomenon of transference, where one's own past interferes with the present situation (ibid: 403).

### **Typical behaviors of addicts**

In the Netherlands the prevalent image of addicts is a negative one; on a societal level they are stigmatized (De Wildt and Vedel, 2013). But it is not only the image of the general public that is negative, the addicts themselves and the therapist hold similar negative images of being hopeless cases of people who are demoralized and can't find a way out of their addiction (ibid). De Jong (2016) talks about a parallel process going on between the therapist and client that creates a vicious circle of hopelessness and in which addicts (I can't be helped) and therapists (see, this person won't be helped) see their expectations come true in their interactions with each other. Therapist and client collude in their behavior, and as a result their expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy (ibid).

When reflecting, I realized I was myself colluding with Harry, the CEO. What I colluded with was his approach to the change process that contributed to my feelings of exclusion from the organization, and created dependency on his actions, and diminished my effectiveness. The underlying assumption behind the vicious circle that De Jong described was the powerlessness that both the client and therapist experienced, that they wouldn't be able to change the client's situation. The further the change process progressed, the more pessimistic



I became that the project would become a success, and the fact that this wasn't openly discussed contributed to my feelings. On the occasions I did mention my worries and doubts in my discussions with Harry, the management team and the support team, they were listened to attentively but never followed up by any actions or further discussions. One time I received the feedback that my remarks were contrary to the appreciative approach, which was the original cause for me being hired. The effect these comments had on me were that I felt myself manoeuvred into a checkmate position, and that contributed to further feelings of helplessness.

Research about typical addictive behaviours mentions that a large population of the addictive client group finds it hard to start therapy, and when they do they often procrastinate in their appointments, and don't show up without letting the therapist know in advance. Homework is often not done, and client and therapist remain unsure whether or not the client will successfully end therapy. Even if the client does end the therapy, there is no guarantee that the client will remain clean, and he or she might slide back into old addictive behaviors (De Wildt and Vedel, 2013). These typical behaviours contribute to the vicious circle of which I talked earlier.

To me, this inherent uncertainty of a successful outcome of the therapy must be part of the therapist–client relationship and contribute to feelings of confusion and bewilderment about the capricious behavior of the addictive client. I regularly felt confused, irritated or surprised when appointments were not followed up, and every time the support team met, I was unsure who would show up and whether or not I would see new faces. Our gatherings were fluid, as if they lacked substance and continuity, which made it hard for me to know how to relate to whom or what. People showed intention and will during meetings, but afterwards there was lack of follow up and commitment to the change process. Most people were proficient in expressing their opinions and feelings, and attentively listened to each other, but reaching consensus and setting a clear direction for action was hard to do. The two design meetings that we organized resulted in twelve action plan items, of which only very few were followed up despite the visible enthusiasm of the people involved. It was as if we were driving a car with our foot on the brakes. People didn't seem to believe in the success of the change process, as if they didn't believe that the client would recover and remain clean after the treatment.

## **Avoiding the complexities of the situation**

The desired change in the consulting room that Health Inq. was striving for is to move the control of the recovery process from the therapist towards the addictive client. This seems to be a straightforward ambition, but given their precarious relationship, it is also an uncertain one. The relationship is of a dual nature, because when the situation is urgent the therapist has to intervene directly and without comprehensive consultation with the client. When there is no crisis, the therapist can become a coach and give the client the amount of control that is desirable. The ambivalence of the helper role is to skilfully mediate between drawing clear boundaries and boundlessness (De Jong, 2006). This duality was expressed in two stories from an internal Health Inq. coach and an ex-addict. The coach had interviewed a therapist and asked her about the desirability of the intended change. She answered clearly that nobody was going to tell her what to do in the consulting room, and with that comment she left the interviewer flabbergasted. One of the ex-addicts that I met during one of the meetings confided to me that the open, dialogical meetings he experienced within the support team were in contrast with what he had experienced in the consultation room. There he was simply being told what to do, and he experienced little room for co-creating the consulting relationship.

With the probability of erratic behavior by the addictive client, the images that the client and therapist hold of each other, and of the 'disease', the societal stigmatization of addicts, and the radical changes that are taking place in the mental health sector make realization of the vision of Health Inq. a complex endeavor. Hakeem (2010) talks about the defensive phenomenon of binary rigidity when complexity is denied, or circumvented, and turned into a binary choice between good or bad, or for or against. Reducing complexity to a single vision denies the tensions and dilemmas that arise when an ideologically driven vision has to be operationalized (Griffin, 2002). This reductive tendency, which might also be taking place in the consultation room, was visible in the change process when I tried to discuss the process with the management or the support teams. Because of the time constraints we faced, we were always in action mode. Only my informal meetings with Harry were of a more reflective nature. The binary rigidity excluded a nuanced discussion about the vision within the organization that could have invited people who were less supportive of the vision into the process. Inclusion of the complexities that existed within the organization, as well as inviting

more and more people, could have contributed to a steady increase of ownership of the change process throughout the organization.

When reflecting on the application of Appreciative Inquiry, and my appreciative role, I see the risk of it contributing to this dual or binary standpoint and reducing the complexity of the issue. That is because Appreciative Inquiry emphasizes a positive view of issues and aims at developing a shared vision with a corresponding design of organizational conditions and actions. Creating an attractive future vision is in itself a reductive process in which the many different needs, desires and future images that people hold are compressed into a unified whole. In such an atmosphere it can become difficult for people to express deviant, especially dissenting, stories that can easily be explained by the advocates of the vision as signs of resistance, and lead to exclusion from the change process (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). This might give rise to feelings of anxiety and contribute to defensive, often unconscious, behaviours.

### **Revealing vulnerability**

Parallel process reflects the contamination that is taking place between what is happening within the organization, the consulting room and the change process. The contamination covers over what seems to me the actual nature of the primary task of Health Inq., that is, the treatment of addictive clients without the guarantee that they will be completely cured. This must contribute to anxious, painful, confusing and ambiguous feelings within staff that I think are covered over within the organization, and as a result also within the change process. The varied feelings that I experienced were confusing for me and I was not sure if I could or wanted to express them. This affected my consulting work and made me feel less 'real' because of the discrepancy between my 'lived' experience and what I expressed of it. I think this relates to the pattern that exists within the organization to persevere, that is to make the change come true despite the presence of resistance, complexities and other developments within the organization. The determination of Harry and some of his colleagues hid the reality of conflict, as well as the existence of dissenting voices, that they could have dealt with instead of covering them over. I think this pattern reflects a parallel process in which the therapist denies his or her fallibility in curing the client and lack of ultimate control over the client relationship. Ex-clients had to make therapists become conscious of the fact that their

clients might not be cured but would have to continue living with their addiction as a chronic disease. I suspect that this fact was not easily accepted within Health Inq. and still isn't.

If employees of Health Inq. start realizing that they're not omnipotent, that is, not fully in control of the change process or able to cure the client permanently, this must affect their organizational and professional identities. It brings fundamental questions to the fore within the change process, such as what this organization is, or what it is becoming when the relationship between the organization and its clients is changing in such a fundamental way. Undoubtedly therapists and other staff must ask themselves similar questions about their professional identities, and who they will become with these changes going on. These identity questions will provoke feelings of anxiety and unwanted fantasies that contribute to the defensive behaviours that the parallel processes illustrate. This implies a willingness to start exploring these questions with their corresponding feelings and fantasies, that could make the people feel vulnerable towards each other. If the organization can allow for this vulnerability to be expressed, and reduce defensive behaviours that prevent it, then people can come closer to their 'lived' experiences of the change process and so embody the change that is taking place.

### **Reflecting on parallel process**

Parallel process can be an unconscious thematic organizing of experience, the expression of the social through individual consciousness, or can be a social defence mechanism for people in order to avoid their anxieties. I think I experienced some of the anxieties of others, such as the feelings of confusion, powerlessness and helplessness, but at the time I didn't identify them as not being mine. Actually, I thought they were mine, and that they resulted from my experience of being kept at bay by the organization and feeling unable to handle the situations in which I found myself in a proficient manner. What kept me from expressing them was that I considered these feelings to be private, not part of the professional relationship, and feared that, when expressed, these feelings might be trivialized and might undermine my professional identity.

Feelings and emotions are not easily introduced and discussed in a business setting, especially when anxieties are at play, as illustrated by the descriptions of parallel process. They can be

explained as a moral judgment by other people or be seen by them as a manipulation, and for that reason be rejected. Feelings and emotions reflect social conflict as the discrepancy between what people experience and expect to happen, and their struggle whether or not to express them. This struggle makes feelings and emotions part of the power relating that is going on, and this may further arouse feelings of vulnerability, shame and embarrassment. Such feelings reveal our mutual dependency upon each other, whether or not our emotions and feelings are likely to be accepted or rejected, or regarded as sincere or not. This is, I think, enough reason for people to be careful about expressing them.

Becoming conscious about what is happening besides people's observable conduct and utterances is a necessary condition for learning and change. But this is hard to do when one is experiencing anxiety and becoming defensive or collusive in one's behavior, as I sometimes did. Looking at parallel processes going on, exploring my own actions and reactions, helped me to become aware of the complexities and ambiguities of the interaction process. Becoming attached instead of staying detached, considering myself as a facilitator who is not part of the internal interactions going on, can contribute to the alteration of helping patterns of relating. Shaw (2002) refers to the difference between facilitating and participating as attitudes of how an external consultant approaches groups, with the latter attitude being more inclusive and active. Being seen, and regarding myself, as an appreciative facilitator didn't help to allow for 'negative' feelings and emotions to be expressed by me or anyone else. The approach turned out to become constraining when trying to reflect on our mutual lived experience.

Adding reflection to our actions is a necessary condition to become conscious of what we're doing and making together and how we are performing. Especially, becoming conscious of the patterns of relating that people tend to circumvent and deny, including me as a facilitator, is, I think, a prerequisite for the changes that Health Inq. strives for, and for change in general. Reflecting on what is emerging as or as part of the relationship is just as much an integral part of change as is designing, decision making and problem solving. A too-strong emphasis on action can be a defensive behavior in itself, and especially for people within healthcare who have a tendency to show resistance against invitations to reflect on what and how they're doing (Kraemer, 2015), with the risks that they might face criticism or even 'operational breakdown' (Lees et. al, 2013).

## **Concluding remarks**

Reflecting upon the narratives in this project, I've come to the conclusion that relationship, or what shows up as relationship, can't be prescribed as consisting of specific characteristics. It is a multi-faceted, dynamic, emergent and highly social process of interaction in which a multitude of interests, roles and meanings are enacted. The mainstream literature emphasizes what the consultant–client relationship, and consulting in general, is about, or should be about, but says little about what is actually going on (Sturdy et. al, 2009; Engwall and Kipping, 2013). It seems to me that many scholars are writing theoretically about the consulting profession and the consultant–client relationship, but do not research it from an experiential level. With this project, I want to illustrate that the emergent character of relationship makes it hard to define, prescribe or to predict its outcomes. I argue for a different orientation towards the consultant–client relationship, one that is reflective upon what is emerging out of it as a result of the interactions taking place.

I started my project from the ideological position to start working with the client in a collaborative manner and to establish a partnership with him. In the beginning, I considered this to be an ethically just position that could only be considered 'good' for both parties. Now, in finishing this project, I have abandoned that position because I see some serious flaws in it. The current popularity of the helping approach reflects the transformation of the relationship that is taking place within the field of strategy, change and organizational development consulting. Consultant and client increasingly prefer an equal relationship in which they work closely together in a joint effort to realize particular results. The consultant is moving away from the position of an independent professional role towards becoming the client's trusted adviser. The result is a diminishing of distance between the two, and I will argue that this raises ethical questions. Forming a partnership does not remove inequality from the relationship, but instead hides it and tries to make it disappear.

The collaborative relationship tries to solve the power differential that exists by claiming that consultant and client need each other in a joint endeavor (Fincham, 2002). By attempting to reduce the complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties, this kind of relationship assumes that desired, mutual outcomes can be attained, and that they contribute to mutual learning, growth and generative conversations and actions (Lambrechts et. al, 2011). But, in reality, this idealized relationship masks the very nature of relating that is taking place, in which

negotiations about personal and professional identities, means and ends and power relating are ongoing. Keeping these elements out of sight, consciously or not, eliminates the opportunity to take responsibility for what people are doing together and to act in an ethical manner. Then why aren't we bringing these issues to the fore? I've asked myself that question several times during this project.

Why didn't I discuss the precarious moments that I've written about in this project with my client? That was the question that Harry also asked me when we discussed this paper recently. Why hadn't we expressed our doubts and critiques towards each other during the project? One explanation is that we do not only enable, but also constrain each other by our habitual ways of collaborating, and we don't explore the mutual experiences of this dynamic enough. Collaborative thinking conceals the power dynamic that is going on during the mutual enabling and constraining that consultant and client exert on each other. The mainstream literature talks about power as possessions of knowledge, relations and resources that parties grant each other access to, or deny, by means of settlement of a collaborative contract. This hides the discomfiting paradoxes that exist within the relationship about closeness-distance, reassurance-anxiety and cooperation-competition. Their complexity is reduced by separating them and favoring one above the other. But I argue that such a reduction is neither possible nor desired, and that the relationship can't be reduced to a stable and predictable entity.

When people collaborate with each other, they co-construct ongoing patterns of power relations in the present as negotiated meanings on the basis of previous patterns of experience. Power is not a thing that someone possesses, but a structural characteristic of human relating (Elias, 1978) that reflects the fact that we depend on each other, and as such enable and constrain each other at the same time. Power relations emerge in the continuous interactions that take place between people as feeling states, and as such are emotionally communicative, and they are dynamic in character (Stacey, 2011). As a result, collaborative relations will always show aspects of competitive behaviour, and of emotions and feelings too.

Power relating expresses itself as anxiety when consultants' and/or clients' interpretations of what constitutes 'good' management or consultancy comes under threat. The consultant must, as trusted adviser, inevitably conform to his client's agenda, and this may endanger his identity as an autonomous professional and change agent. The client, who has hired the consultant for his or her knowledge and experience, must admit a knowledge deficit and this

can be regarded as a sign of weakness by others. The collaborative relationship tends to conceal these identity-related tensions and serve as a façade for both consultant and client, as well as for other stakeholders. It tends to create a ‘we’-identity that contributes, paradoxically, to the fear of exclusion from this collective identity.

This fear of exclusion is an essential mechanism in the consultant–client relationship and not easily discussed with the client. Pursuing a collaborative strategy with a client can secure the consultants’ involvement in the change process, and grant him access to the resources and relationships that only ‘insiders’ are privileged to (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Denying him this access will not only influence his contribution, but also affect his self-identity in a negative way, and contribute to emotions and feelings of doubt, shame and embarrassment. But the client also fears exclusion, for if the change process doesn’t lead to success, if he doesn’t collaborate successfully, it may cost him his job, a promotion or damage his professional identity. The mutual anxieties that exist will be differently motivated, and give rise to different intentions and behaviours in order to control the direction and content of the relationship, which will lead to cooperative as well as competitive behavior. Bringing these experiences of the relationship itself into the discussion may enhance feelings of anxiety further, and will likely be avoided by both parties. Therefore, the collaborative relationship should not be idealized as a kind of relationship in which anything can be said or be reflected upon.

Feelings and emotions may give cause for relational exploration and discussion of power and identity issues. In fact, feelings and emotions are expressions of power relating and of identity threats. They are not simply the expression of some inner drives, fantasies or conflicts, but reflect our understanding of what is going on in the environment in which we find ourselves. They create ‘feelings of tendencies’ about how to go on (Burkitt, 2014: 55; Shotter, 2008: 86) with each other, and are not solely ingredients of some form of emotional labour in which the consultant rationalizes his feelings and emotions, instead of expressing them, for a functional purpose (Marsh, 2009). This is what I experienced myself, and it was the restraining effects of the relationship with the client that gave rise to feelings and emotions, rather than the other way around.

Fletcher (2004) posits a collaborative consulting style as a gender, and therefore a power, issue. Collaborative and relational elements belong to the feminine discourse, as well as



behaviours such as empathy, interdependence, relations and emotions. Fletcher argues that gender discourses are connected to logics of effectiveness, or what constitutes ‘good’ work, in which men produce things and women ‘grow’ people (ibid). Elements that constitute the masculine discourse are individualism, control assertiveness, separation and advocacy. Both discourses function as idealized images (Foucault, 1980; Lukes, 1974) that oppose each other and force people to ‘do gender’, that is to enact their identities. The discourses are not valued equally, with the masculine discourse favoured above the feminine (Marsh, 2009):

Male identity ... is characterized by a preoccupation with difference, separateness and distance in ways that female identity is not ... Privileging male separation effectively denies a female self. (Marsh, 2009: 250)

From this gender perspective, a collaborative consulting style is not a value free activity. And when clients unconsciously associate collaboration and helping with the feminine discourse, they might equate it with notions of powerlessness and non-reciprocity, that is feeling no obligation to do something in return for the consultant. Although they might regard the collaborative, processual consulting style as valuable and complementary, they will nonetheless position it as subservient to the managerialist, masculine, agenda of the organization. The collaborative relationship will accommodate and anticipate the latter one, which illustrates power difference, but one that is hidden by the helping relationship. The same is true for the Appreciative Inquiry process when it is interpreted as belonging to feminine discourse.

Choosing a collaborative consulting style doesn’t eradicate power differences and doesn’t guarantee conflict-free collaboration, though that may be what the terminology suggests. On the contrary, as an idealization it stimulates the tendency to mask these aspects of the relationship instead of revealing them as an act of collaboration. Feelings of anxiety make up an inherent part of the consultant–client relationship that contribute to the covering up of power relating, emotions and feelings, and of unconscious processes occurring that are essential parts of our lived experience that, when reflected upon, may contribute to the changes that we’re looking for.

## **Considerations about my next project**

Going beyond collaboration as an ideal, one can wonder what we're actually doing when we say that we're collaborating with clients or, better, participating in a collaborative relationship. Does it always mean that we're colluding with clients, or can we take another position in the relationship and still persist in saying that we're collaborating? What is this alternative position? We automatically assume that the nature of the consultant–client relationship is mainly functional and instrumental, and that it emphasizes the economic dimension of the relationship. But I wonder if this is true and want to explore what is really happening when we intend to participate with others. This will be the topic of my next project.

## **Project 3 – Going beyond an instrumental relationship and becoming responsible**

### **Introduction**

In Projects 1 and 2, I elaborated on the collaborative consulting style that I favor and put into practice working as a consultant. Besides explaining what this collaborative style meant, I contrasted the theory with my daily practice, and concluded that collaboration is an ideology that produces elements of competition that tend to be negated or denied in the name of cooperation, shared purpose and interest. What I showed, particularly in project two, was that the actual behaviours of consultant and client were often motivated by political intentions or turned out to be, despite collaborative intentions, behaviours of a non-collaborative, and even a competitive nature. The reason for this is that the motivation for their collaboration concerns change regarding which things have not yet been settled and where different needs, value systems and interests have to be negotiated. From a ‘complex responsive processes of relating’ perspective, competition and cooperation are paradoxical and form two sides of the same coin, that is of human social evolution (Mowles, 2015; Mead, 1934/2015). This includes competition, conflict and strife as inevitable aspects of human relating and necessary for novelty and change to occur.

A collaborative attitude implies the promise that, with the right intentions of the parties involved, good communication skills and a well facilitated dialogue, conflict can be reduced and a quality of relationship attained that will contribute to desired outcomes (Shotter, 2010). This assumption makes the concept of collaboration part of managerialist ideology as ‘the belief that rational techniques of management will produce better outcomes’ (Stacey and Griffin, 2008: 21), and that these outcomes can be controlled and predicted. But the theory of complex responsive processes of relating suggests that such an outcome can’t be guaranteed nor engineered, and that the potential of conflict is always present, as my narrative in Project 2 showed. This experience left me with the question how to relate to this in my future consulting work. Should I, instead, adopt another consulting style, and if ‘yes’, then what would this be? I don’t have an answer to that question, and even doubt if it is possible to make such a change deliberately. I have noticed during my writings about collaboration that its underlying values, emphasizing harmonious relationships, are firmly rooted in my personal and professional identity. Not only that, it has become a dominant ideology within

contemporary organizational life (Rose, 1990). One conclusion remained, namely that I could become more aware of the competitive and conflicting aspects in my collaborations with clients, of my particular attitude and behaviours in those moments, and see if I could become more detached in these situations, especially to my emotional experiences of them. This might help me to become aware of what is actually going on and start valuing difference and conflict as inevitable aspects of the consultant–client relationship.

## **Research question**

Although I explored collaboration as an important aspect of the consultant–client relationship, I didn't ask myself the question: collaborating in what and with whom? To me, the answer to this question seems self-evident, as clients ask me to help them to reach a solution to a problem, or to help them realize change in or of their organization. But, when reflecting upon my last project, the answer to this question became less self-evident than I first thought it would be, along with the question of participating in a collaborative relationship with clients.

Collaboration tends to neglect the power differentials and the differences in interests that exist within organizations, given the assumption that the objective of the assignment aligns the perspectives and interests of the parties involved. In Project 2, I showed that this was not the case, and that competition was also part of the relationship-as-cooperation. It means that a collaborative effort will always result in the exclusion of goals, interests and perspectives of specific groups of people, and as such can be defined as an act of power relating. I hadn't realized that when I started writing Project 2.

Whenever I collaborate as a consultant with a client, I have to ask myself the question 'with whom and what am I establishing a collaborative relationship, and what does that tell me about its nature'? Because when I intend to collaborate with others, I make an ideological statement of the kind of connection that I want to establish. I showed in Project 2 that this kind of relationship was not only unattainable, but also not desirable, as the relationship easily turned into a collusive one that I didn't experience as collaborative anymore. Trying to establish a collaborative relationship with the client turned out to be an ethical act that led to undesirable outcomes for myself and others.

This conclusion is important, because a significant amount of the scientific and the popular literature on consulting is oriented towards this concept of collaboration. More generally, descriptions of relationship in business settings are increasingly described in collaborative and co-creative terms, where professionals fulfil the role of helper (Schein, 1987) or partner towards their clients, whether or not they are patients, customers or citizens. With these kinds of descriptions, the nature of the relationship is idealized and conceals the power differential, the unilateral dependence and hence the conflict that is inherent in it. Idealization of the relationship becomes an act of power relating that runs the risk of silencing or excluding specific groups of people, their interests and their wellbeing.

I concluded in Project 2 that the consultant–client relationship is subject to power relating and inherently political. This raises the question that, if I’m not collaborating in an ideal way, what am I actually doing when I say that I’m collaborating with the client or, better said, participating in the relationship? It is automatically presumed that the nature of the consultant–client relationship is mainly functional and instrumental, which emphasizes the economic exchange taking place. But I wonder if this is what is really happening, or if the only thing happening is the exchange of knowledge and money. That is what I want to take up in this project.

### **Introducing Environment Protect**

Recently, I facilitated a meeting with the senior and middle management of an organization that I had helped to develop a new governance policy a year before. The meeting was about answering the question of how management wanted to proceed with the new policy, given the positive decision they had made about it. In between this decision and the meeting lay a period of almost five months in which there was little follow up to the decision being made. I regretted this long pause, because I would have liked to continue facilitating the process. I also felt an obligation towards the middle managers who had expressed the need to continue the process after the decision had been made. I also thought it necessary for the development of the organization. The comments that I had received from some employees confirmed my worries about the loss of momentum of this project within the organization.

I will start with a short introduction of this young government organization. Next, I will reflect on the period in between the decision being made about the governance policy and the meeting. This forms the background and introduction for my narrative of the meeting. Then I will reflect on the narrative and end with some final remarks. The people featuring in my narratives are:

- Sue: CEO of Environment Protect, chairperson of the management team and responsible for the new governance policy;
- John: Senior manager and Harriet's manager;
- David: Senior manager;
- Harriet: Project leader, responsible for the development of the new governance policy;
- Larry: Middle manager, responsible for the Energy Saving Project;
- Conny: Middle manager;
- Harry: external consultant and a former colleague whom I hired.

The organization I am writing about, called Environment Protect, is a local government executive organization, responsible for the provision of licenses, surveillance and maintenance with regard to environmental issues. The organization was established in 2013, together with twenty-eight similar organizations in the Netherlands that cover the whole country. The regional fragmentation of responsibilities that had existed up till that time had resulted in some serious environmental disasters, such as the firework accident in Enschede, in which twenty-three people were killed and approximately nine hundred and fifty injured.

The new organizations were mergers of former municipal and county departments, and governed by the same organizations from which they had been split. These now act as owners, clients, financiers and auditors, fulfilling all these roles at the same time. Some of the organizations were against the merger, but unable to stop the national government from establishing this new bureaucratic layer. Three years on, they have become increasingly critical about the performance of Environment Protect, and demand transparency regarding its costs and effectiveness. Senior management is under pressure to adapt to their demands, which was one of the reasons to develop the new governance policy. The policy reflects the intention to transform the organization into a customer-oriented, instead of function-oriented, organization that has to deliver and will be held accountable for its performance.

## **Developing the new governance policy**

John, a senior manager within Environment Protect whom I knew from former assignments, asked me last year to facilitate a team for the development of the new governance policy. The team consisted of the project leader, Harriet, the CEO of Environment Protect, Sue, a member of the employees' council, three middle managers, an account manager, the controller, my former colleague Harry, and myself. The reason John had asked me was the lack of trust on the part of the middle managers and the employees that the new government policy would adequately reflect their worries and interests. I was to ensure that the new policy would have enough support within the organization to be carried successfully into the next phase.

Within four months the team produced a remarkably coherent governance policy that the team members agreed upon unanimously. It was also agreed upon by senior and middle management and the employees' council in a relatively short amount of time. The team members had evaluated their collaboration as positive and illustrative for the way of working described in the governance policy. They had experienced a willingness to listen to each other, to open up and express themselves towards each other, to talk about their differences and to participate in the discussions. Me and my colleague William were satisfied with the final result, as well as with the successful collaboration we had forged among the team members within this short amount of time.

We finished the project in August 2016 after a decision-making meeting with senior management. Shortly after, Harriet confided to me that, according to Sue, the project was finished and that the next January, senior and middle management would meet again to discuss the follow up of the governance policy for 2017. I knew that Sue was in the middle of a conflict with the County Department about the re-allocation of the yearly budget and so I could well understand her shift in priorities. But I also expected problems ahead, as the delay of the government policy might signal towards the employees that writing the document was more important for senior management than executing the policy and the changes that middle management and the teams wished to see realized.

I had an opportunity to talk about my worries with senior management two months later, when I evaluated the former assignment with them. During the meeting, the managers expressed their satisfaction with the results and David, one of the managers, told me that they

were pleased with the more cooperative attitude of the middle managers who had participated in the team effort. They had deliberately selected the ‘hard liners’ from middle management and invited them to join the development team. As they had expected, their invitation turned out well and the middle managers who participated became active members of the team and enthusiastic ambassadors for the new policy. Their participation impacted other middle managers, and David commented with satisfaction that ‘finally, middle management had taken the lead’.

I was pleased with the compliments they had given me, but less happy with David’s remark about the middle managers. He gave me the feeling of being used in manipulating them for an agenda that was unknown to me when I started. I also realized that he was the only manager of the team that I hadn’t met until late in the project and I regretted my omission of not getting to know him at the start. My disappointment was due to the fact that selecting the ‘hardliners’ without me knowing it might have seriously affected the quality of my work, and as a result the success of the project. From a collaborative point of view, I would have expected to be involved in, or informed about, the decision. It affected the joy and satisfaction that I felt with the compliment they had given me, and made me feel reluctant to share with them the concern I had about the follow up of the governance policy. It was as if I was spoiling the party by starting a conversation about something that I sensed they were not willing to talk about. Despite this feeling I did so, and started talking about two incidents that had happened during a training that I had given the week before.

Both incidents occurred in a training for a group of John’s employees, which I had connected to the governance policy project. One in particular had upset me, where one participant had unexpectedly burst out in tears after a half-joking remark made by a colleague. What had upset me, as well as several of the other participants, was the enormous dissatisfaction that the intensity of the outburst revealed, of long-lasting, high work pressure experienced by her in her former team (she had recently changed teams). I told the managers about the incidents and shared my concern with them that both incidents mirrored elements of the governance policy that lay waiting. To my surprise, they didn’t respond to my story by asking questions about the incidents or about the connection that I had made between the incidents and the governance policy. Instead, John said that he would take action to find out what had happened. And with that remark, the discussion ended. Their reaction made me stop, realizing



that my perception of the incidents differed from theirs, and I knew that I had to wait until the next meeting in January. In my opinion, valuable time was lost.

### **Experiencing ambivalent feelings**

As the narrative shows, my feelings during and after the meeting were mixed. On the one hand I was glad to hear about the positive results, which were clearly meant as a compliment towards my colleague and me. On the other, the compliment constrained me in sharing my concerns with them and served as an obstacle in discussing a topic that was less positive and favorable to talk about. Their silence and reluctance to discuss the matter felt as if a door was being closed in my face without me knowing why this was happening and who was closing it. This created the paradoxical and confusing experience of feeling welcome and not welcome, of being included and excluded at the same time. Mainly rational I knew that the project would continue within a couple of months, so why bother to tell them about my concern now?

I suspected that they might explain my behavior as an attempt to acquire another assignment, which raised feelings of insincerity in me with regard to my presumed motive. The thought generated feelings of shame and embarrassment, despite me knowing there were other motives behind my actions. I worried that senior management might not continue with executing the governance policy, which would signal towards the members of the core team, as well as to the rest of the employees, that the governance policy's underlying problems were deemed to be of no importance anymore. I suspected that this would negatively impact the credibility of senior management and hamper the development of the organization.

Altogether, this resulted in an experience of the meeting as a combination of feelings of delight with the evaluation, concern for the incidents that had happened, insincerity about the possible perceived motive for my action and worries about the consequences of the delay in the execution of the governance policy.

Ambivalent feelings are explained in the literature as either psychological, that is experiencing positive and negative feelings at the same time regarding a specific other or object (Fineman, 2000; Huy et al., 2016), or sociological, which reflects problems of role conflict or societal changes (Fineman, 2000). These authors describe ambivalent feelings as being mainly rational and suggest that from an individual point of view one can make a

deliberate choice of how to successfully handle them and solve the problem of ambivalence. As a contrast to that image, I suggest that feelings and emotions reflect the ways people attune themselves to social situations that make them meaningful for them (Burkitt, 1999/2012/2014; Dewey 1922/2007; Elias, 1987; Gergen, 1994). It was how I experienced the situation: not as a cognitive puzzle to solve, but as a myriad of socially meaningful relationships that was going on, which made the situation an emotionally complex one and contributed to the experience of indeterminacy in how to proceed.

### **Thinking about participation**

When we participate in interactions with others, these are less cognitive than we think they are. The meanings that arise out of conversations with others are not purely representational, but emerge as complexes of feelings by which we come to know in a practical sense how to get along with each other (Shotter, 2010). We don't have to make a deliberate decision to step in and participate in a conversation, because the interaction is already taking place from the moment we meet. According to Shaw, participating is not a rational act but a movement of sense-making in our ongoing everyday interactions with each other (Shaw, 2002). They are interactions of living bodies (Stacey, 2003), immediate, mutual and responsive. When we're discussing content with each other feelings are constantly resonating in the background as sensitizing devices that allow us to evaluate whether or not the situation is unfolding in a satisfactory way for us. We form, and are formed by, each other simultaneously in this constant, interactive process (ibid) and as such it is strange to keep on talking about people as autonomous individuals who can choose to participate, or not, in order to unilaterally influence the situations they find themselves in. From this paradoxical way of thinking it is impossible to uphold the distinction of monological and dialogical speech that Shotter talks about (1993, 2010).

Both forms of speech reveal different styles of thinking that Shotter explains as 'aboutness'-thinking (monological speech) and 'withness'-thinking (dialogical speech) (Shotter, 2010: 192). While in 'aboutness'-thinking we regard the other person as an object of our consciousness in representational terms, in 'withness'-thinking we come into contact, in touch, with the other person (ibid). He considers 'aboutness'-thinking as a means to understand and manipulate what we perceive which inhibits our capacity to deal with the

unfolding situation while we participate in it. For him this way of thinking is a violent act, where we tend to turn away from the situation at hand towards the representation we have formed about the situation in our mind. Notice how he emphasizes the image of an independent, thinking mind that forms mental images of the surrounding world in order to understand and eventually change it, which denies the physical and the social context in which it is embedded:

Indeed, it is a whole set of thinking that ignores the expressions of living bodies, and the fact that people's meanings and understandings are in their responsive expressions. (ibid: 192)

I can see what he means: this kind of thinking can easily be interpreted as a manipulative act towards others involved in the situation. But I want to suggest instead that my private thinking before the meeting was already of a social kind, in which I took the positions and opinions of the attendants into consideration when developing my argument (Mead, 1934/2015). I think that it is impossible to manipulate others without interacting with them, and when this happens the manipulation is always mutual, although not equal, as my narrative showed. The juxtaposition of 'aboutness'- and 'witness'-thinking strikes me as artificial when considering that individual thinking is always social through and through (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). But his elaboration on both styles also adds something important to my reflection.

Participating in communicative interaction is more than 'doing' an intervention, emphasizing a point and aiming for a decision. This suggests a rational, distanced position from the situation, and from the people involved, by which the consultant intends to act upon the situation instead of interacting from within the situation. The latter is an active engagement with the event as an unfolding, ongoing process of sense-making that exposes an embodied sense of the possibilities as an orientation towards how to get along with each other (Shaw, 2002; Shotter, 2010). Reflecting on this, I realize that feeling and thinking diverge here for me. Cognitively, I hold on to the ideology of the consultant as facilitator or helper, while knowing on an embodied level that participating in the ongoing interactions with others is an immersion in the situation that doesn't allow for a position outside of it. Even if I want to take the position, or role, of the impartial observer, this is still taking place within the interactive process that is going on. And so, there can't be any place or position outside communicative

interaction. If this is true, then starting to pay attention to what is happening within it, as well as my contribution to it, becomes increasingly important.

### **Becoming aware of complexities of feelings**

I propose that in many business situations, feelings are an underrated element of the interactions that are going on, especially when compared with thinking. As I showed in Project 2, and in opposition to what we normally think, we orient ourselves in our surroundings in a mainly bodily fashion that is unmediated by language and thought, in which we tend to respond to what happens around us in an immediate and spontaneous manner. I concluded that feelings do matter; in fact, they tell us a lot about the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and about ourselves.

I want to suggest that we use our feelings all of the time during our interactions with each other, but we do so in an involuntary, intuitive and unconscious way. Socially it is not easily talked about, nor accepted, as we tend to describe our feelings as subjective and non-scientific, and as such they are considered antithetical to the dominant managerialist discourse. But knowing how to go on or what to do as a next step to be taken is a feeling tendency (Burkitt, 2014: 55), often called intuition, that arises from our immersion in interactions with others, in which explicit knowledge is being exchanged and used as a rationalization afterwards for the choices we have made. It is evident that these feelings mediate our actions and interpretations of the situation (Dewey, 1922/2007; Elias, 1987; Gergen, 1994).

The metaphor that I used in the narrative, of a door being closed in my face, wasn't an image that came up during the meeting; it was a verbalization afterwards of what I experienced during it. It was an embodied feeling of increasing tension that inhibited my normal feeling-sense of being relaxed and open minded towards my environment. The body as a 'sounding board' (Burkitt, 2014: 66) doesn't express a specific internal psychological state, but reveals the relational pattern that is going on within the situation between people, which resembles power relating as the experience of feeling constraint by other people's gestures and responses. The managers' responses to my story didn't encourage me to continue, but that in itself wasn't a satisfactory explanation for why I didn't persist in my attempt to have this, in my eyes, necessary conversation.

Meaning-making is an ongoing conversation of gestures in which my response to their gesture would have altered the situation. But our responses do not only come from others' gestures, they also depend on the specific context, past experiences, personal interests and how we anticipate the chances of a likely outcome (Burkitt, 2014: 55). We bring our values with us and this will also influence the situation. Values are individually felt, voluntary compulsions (Stacey and Griffin, 2008: 13) to choose or do something. After having brought my worries to the table, not wanting to rouse the situation, and just having received a compliment for prior work and knowing that the project would continue within a couple of months made me rest my case for that moment. Beside these contingent factors, elaborating further on the emotional, embodied experience does reveal other aspects that go on while interacting with others.

### **Dissecting the emotion's lived body**

Denzin emphasizes the embodiment of our daily, lived experiences as a self-referencing process in which the emotion's body is central as the point of reference for our lived emotional experience (Denzin, 1985). It makes up our presence in the world and makes us recognizable for ourselves and for others, and this happens mostly unconsciously (ibid; Vygotsky in Shotter, 2010). Denzin distinguishes four elements of the emotion's lived body (Denzin, 1985: 227):

- The physical body with its sensible feelings of sensations;
- The lived-phenomenological body with its feelings of the lived body;
- The enacted body for others, with its intentional value-feelings;
- The enacted body for itself, with its moral feelings of self.

The physical body contains sensible feelings that are felt in the body, but not deliberately produced by the individual. They ratify for the individual the emotionality that is felt and become part of the experience of self. When these feelings are opened up for others by means of language, they become abstractions for oneself and for others. Lived feelings, the next element, are experiences of events, accompanied by feelings, sensed by the whole body as a prediction for what is coming. Examples are experience of feelings such as sorrow and happiness. These are the feelings that give meaning to life's events and as such they become

communicative. The third category are feelings about feelings, or interpreted emotions. They refer to former lived feelings to which meaning is attached when looking back on them. They have become abstracted feelings, as structures, that function as orientations to specific situations so one knows how to behave appropriately. When these interpretive structures have become internalized by the individual and are recognized as self-feelings that make up his selfhood as an object of emotional consciousness, they have become part of the fourth category, which is the moral self (Denzin, 1985).

I find Denzin's explanation of the emotional lived body insightful in that it helps me to understand the complexes of feelings that one can experience, as I did in the narrative, and that can result in a confusing experience. I can distinguish all four elements in my narrative. For example, becoming tense when the situation changed was a sensed feeling that, registered in the body, I only became aware of after the meeting. My feelings of worry about the situation, combined with the happy feelings of a successfully finished project are both examples of felt emotions on the totality of the lived body. My feelings of shame and embarrassment were an example of intentional value-feelings that resulted from my inference of the client's interpretations of my motive for the issue that I raised, which led to the feeling of insincerity. Finally, Denzin's fourth category, that of the moral self, was triggered by realizing that what I wanted to discuss was important to me because of my relationship with the members of the core team. I felt an obligation towards them to convince senior management of the necessity to continue the project. The obligation was not only related to my collaboration with them, but also with regard to the development of the organization in general, which was the central topic of the governance policy.

Although my moral feelings, together with intentional value-feelings, motivated me to bring the incidents into the conversation, sensible feelings and those of the lived body started to dominate while interacting with senior management. The latter are part of the communicative act that is taking place, and that are enabled and constrained by its rules, while the former are feelings of a more private kind that reveal how the person is feeling about himself while participating in a social encounter with others:

The self of the moral person is the self that has dignity, self-respect, self-responsibility and an inner sense of moral worth ... moral self-consciousness or value-awareness is at the core of the person at this deep level. (Denzin, 1985: 232–233)

What is valuable about this notion of the moral self is that it explains the feeling of sameness and steadiness that accompanies my experience of who I am (Denzin, 1985: 232). Although he explains self as a constant process that is going on, as other authors such as Mead (1934/2015) and Elias (1991) do, it is the reflection of self upon itself that creates the feeling experience of a stable and steady self with moral values at its core. Honneth adds to this notion the concept of social recognition (Honneth, 1995: 25), which emphasizes that in order to develop personal integrity one has to be taken into account by others. He distinguishes three levels of recognition: being loved in one's individuality and experiencing inner freedom to articulate one's needs; being permitted to participate in social life as a legal person for the purpose of attaining one's life-goals as an act of self-realization; and finally, being recognized for one's particular capabilities and contribution towards the fulfilment of collectively shared goals (ibid). From his assertion, I conclude that the moral self is always a social self.

Feelings are the expressions of these moral values that act as identifications of who one is in the world, and as such feelings can be experienced so strongly because they resemble with what and whom we identify. Denzin criticizes the presumed sociological triviality of moral codes and their presumed superficiality:

Many sociological descriptions of the self are inherently debunking. They foster a view of self as being totally socially constructed. The self is viewed as a precarious entity fashioned through social discourse. There is no face behind its various masks. So too, morals are seen relativistically and ritualistically. They are reduced to roles and performances and the institutions wherein they take place. (ibid: 233)

He emphasizes the importance of the subject's emotional experience as being part of his lived experience, which comprises passion, feeling and engagement with the world. The moral values that the individual has attached himself to are of deep concern to him and allow him to position himself steadily in the world, without suggesting the idea that his identity is fixed forever. What is considered as 'mine' gives the term 'I' its emotional charge and this reflects a particular position in conversations (Cooley in Burkitt, 2014: 110). While 'I' may express itself in a neutral way, what I consider 'mine' has power attached to it, because it gives the self-power or having agency, that is, the possibility to act (Burkitt, 2014: 110). For me, these are valuable notions, because the image I hold of being an impartial facilitator or consultant is that I can't bring myself fully into the situation other than from this particular role. The

idealized image I hold of myself as a collaborative consultant creates conflict in my ongoing interactions with participants, and with myself, when I do have an opinion about matters that are being discussed or when I feel being addressed somehow by one of the participants in ways that I want to respond to, but simultaneously feel inhibited from doing so, because of the implicit norms that are attached to my role, either by others or myself.

This is the kind of immersion that Stacey and Mowles (2016) talk about as the involvement or engagement with a situation that one experiences when things matter to us (Mowles, 2015) and when we throw ourselves into it, or intend to do so. This is a fundamentally different description to that of a functionalist one, where the consultant keeps his distance, acts strategically and rationally, and tries to stay away from the messiness of normal, day-to-day organizational life. The way I am writing about the relationship is about the complete experience of it, with its combination of thoughts, feelings, emotions, actions and movements, that create meaning from within the situation that one finds oneself in as ‘feelings of tendency’ (Shotter, 2010: 86; Burkitt, 2014: 55) that direct our next actions as anticipations of a preferred outcome. As I showed, these feelings can be experienced as utterly confusing, contradictory to and conflicting with each other, indicating the paradoxical character of the situation, which reveals unknowing as an aspect.

### **Experiencing the situation as paradoxical**

I experienced the meeting as paradoxical, that is consisting of ‘contradictory, mutually exclusive, self-referencing ideas which help define each other but negate each other both at the same time’ (Mowles, 2015: 13; Huy et al., 2016). Whittle writes about typical paradoxical situations that consultants find themselves in as ‘contradictory interpretive repertoires, or accounts as discourses’ (Whittle, 2006: 424). For example, she regards as paradoxes the idea that consultants can act as advocates and advisers, or be both involved and independent at the same time. She then proposes, as Huy et al. (2016) does for managers, that the consultant has these roles available and by this implies that the complex situation can be handled and paradox can be embraced. I propose instead that a characteristic of a paradoxical situation is that it can’t be solved, let alone that one can choose a strategy as a way out of it. I also disagree with some of her illustrations of paradoxes, which I think are not paradoxical at all.



For example, a consultant acting as advocate and adviser fulfils two separate roles that are not self-referential and are not mutually exclusive.

What did I experience as paradoxical? I mentioned already feeling welcome and not welcome and, related to this, feeling included and excluded from the discussion and the group. For me, it was an alienating experience with a strong visceral sense that took place unconsciously, but which expressed itself on the body by tension and feeling myself becoming cautious. It is an experience of disorientation in which it becomes hard to know what to do in a given situation. Assessing such a situation is not so much a psychological act, as an embodied habit that relies on accumulated past experiences (Dewey in Burkitt, 2014). The paradox revealed the non-habitual character of the situation for me, not in such a way that I've never come across a similar confusing situation, but emphasizing the uniqueness of the situation with these people at that particular moment at that exact location. My habitual reaction to it was, especially towards the accompanying uncomfortable feelings, that I let the situation pass to ask the question why these incidents hadn't been discussed further, which would have created the opportunity to turn towards the complexity of the paradox.

The situation revealed another paradox to me. Part of the conversation was functional, mentioning my assignment, the formal and informal objectives, and the quality and outcomes of it. This functionalist orientation is about goals, means, ends and actions, and excludes other aspects such as subjective experiences and values. The former implies a position outside of the given situation, with the organization regarded as a system on which managers and consultants are supposed to act. The paradox of the situation is that, at the same time as we discuss the project, we are an inherent part of it, both influencing it by our conversation and being influenced by it at the same time. Without us knowing it, we are involved and detached at the same time. Being a part of the unfolding process, we cannot deny our complete experience of it as the mix of thoughts, feelings, intentions, judgments and emotions that tell us how we relate ourselves to ourselves, towards others and towards the object of our discussion. We're being functional and non-functional at the same time, and this contributes to complex feelings about the situation. The resulting tension as I experienced it is about what to say and not say in order to stay within this functionalist discourse, playing safe, or to step beyond it and reveal other aspects of the meeting as my subjective, lived experience. I realize that the decisions I've made happened mostly in a habitual, non-voluntary way, and they were more determined by the ongoing interaction process, in which we were enabling and

constraining each other, than by deliberate and rational interventions based upon what I should do. Becoming more reflexive, and more detached-involved, in these situations may create the possibility of giving an alternative response.

This reveals another paradox, that of being dependent and independent at the same time. Autonomy and independence are highly regarded aspects of employees these days, in which it is assumed that they take care of their tasks and responsibilities, and do so in an entrepreneurial way by means of self-disciplinary action (Rose, 1990; Catlaw and Marshall, 2015):

This self must be capable of independently gathering necessary information in order to identify and manage one's personal and professional risk, and to adapt to constantly changing "market" (that is, social) conditions; responsibility for much of which was previously assumed by the state under the regime of social welfarist government ... one must make oneself into an entrepreneur *of oneself*. (Catlaw and Marshall, 2015: 14–15)

This post-modernist, or neoliberalist, notion of the independent employee implies the absence of interdependencies with colleagues and of authority with superiors. The modern employee now is his own authority and, based upon clear goals and an overriding mission and vision statement, knows how to maximize his contribution towards the organization and its clients. Within this entrepreneurial discourse he doesn't only know how to produce a successful performance, but also to self-actualize himself by means of his contributions. His independence is supported by elaborate performance management systems that provide him the proper and timely feedback about how well he performs, which gives him the ultimate control over his own destiny. Managers and leaders are no longer authority figures, but serve as coaches and guides for the personal and professional progress of employees (ibid).

The reason I elaborate on this image of the independent employee is because I think it has become so prevalent in our general view of employees that we take it completely for granted. It serves as the background for the way we judge superior–subordinate, as well as client–consultant, relationships. As an independent, external consultant it is hardly possible to believe other than that I perform according to the expectations of my client, which are implied in the formal and psychological contract that I enter into, but for which a large part consists of implicit rules that I 'know' come with the acceptance of the assignment. For example, to

comply with the client's interests and objectives, never to embarrass him in front of others, and to contribute to his success, to name but a few. As I mentioned in Project 2, such a contract can easily turn into a collusive relationship with the client in which differences, contradictions and conflicts are denied, suppressed or negated. As I mentioned in the former paradox, this will contribute to denying parts of the self that interfere with the collusive contract, and as a result will inhibit full engagement of the consultant with the client.

I propose that holding such an independent position is impossible to maintain, as the narrative clearly shows. The paradox that I experienced during the meeting was that I acted as an independent consultant by introducing the incidents and expressing my worries, and was approached by the client as such when one manager asked what I thought about the project so far, being independent, distant and objective. My response immediately took the likely responses of the managers into consideration, together with my own intentions, goals and values. There was no way that I experienced my response, nor the responses of the managers to my story of the incidents, as being independent from the others involved in the situation, and even of those who were absent, such as the members of the core team. This is in accordance with the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), that states that people are highly dependent upon each other in their ongoing conversational gestures, where the social act of gesture and response creates meaning as well as power relating in the sense of enabling and constraining each other's actions to give order and stability to the situation while simultaneously allowing for novelty to emerge out of the interactions (*ibid*).

According to Norbert Elias, mutual dependence constitutes human life and not individual autonomy (Elias, 1991). My relationship with the client is never solitary, but part of different figurations of people, object and topics that together enable and constrain my thoughts and actions. What Elias means by figuration is patterns of relating that people create with each other, as in a game. They aren't static configurations, but ongoing processes of alternating power balances between people out of which patterns of relating emerge (Elias, 1978: 131). Dalal speaks of invisible ties that connect people with each other, in which they fulfil a function for each other, and these ties constrain them in their freedom and choices to act (Dalal, 1998). What I find noteworthy in this notion of figuration is that it helps me to detach myself from my preoccupations with myself and my agenda, and to start noticing the patterns of relating and the themes that emerge out of them, that have been going on, and are going on,

that reconstruct the past, and make up future possibilities (Stacey, 2003) of which no one has unilateral control. When entering an organization, I become a part of these different existing figurations of which I might have no knowledge, but to which I will relate, in one way or another, and that will enable and constrain my possibilities to act and think. With this notion in mind it becomes hard to continue the idea of consulting as relational work, in which the consultant can choose his interventions freely and expect that they will work out as intended. Instead, he will have to become much more sensitive to his intentional acts, maybe still called interventions, and whether or not they are suitable, given the specific situation he finds himself in, and towards the desired and concrete effects of his actions.

I realized that I hadn't been fully aware of this mutual dependency during the meeting. It was mainly my worries that I wanted to share, not fully considering the possibility that the senior managers might have alternative perspectives on the project. Taking a dualistic position, I hadn't prepared myself for a dialectical exploration of the project and the incidents which might have led to a fruitful exchange of different perspectives and opinions. Instead, the discussion fizzled out like a damp squib. With this awareness in mind, I probably would have paid more attention to the responses of the managers that were not fully participating. For example, Sue hadn't really participated in the conversation, other than expressing her satisfaction with the results. Retrospectively, I had expected more support from her than I got when I mentioned the incidents and argued for the necessity to continue. John hadn't said much either, besides his comment that he would look into the incident. I realized afterwards that by mentioning the incidents I might have put him in an awkward position, because the participants in the training that I had talked about were his employees. Surprisingly also, it was David who had done most of the talking during the meeting; he was the only manager who hadn't participated in the development process. This contributed to the situation in which I didn't know how to proceed, or whether or not I should pursue my attempt to convince them, or let it go.

Reflecting on the paradoxical character of the situation, I realize that by starting to pay attention to what is actually happening during the interactions that are going on, my comprehension of it might increase, and probably I will be able to cope more skilfully with the situation at hand. This doesn't mean, however, that I will somehow be more effective in attaining my goals, but I will probably relate better to the complexity of the situation at hand. According to the theory of complex response processes of relating, relating oneself in a

mature way towards paradoxical situations means enduring the complexity of the situation and not collapsing it into simplified solutions. This also implies an attitude of not-knowing what will happen during conversations, which makes surprise an inherent and inevitable aspect of interactions between people (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). However, my narrative shows that this isn't self-evident and can be hard to do because of the uncomfortable emotions that come with it.

### **Coping with the situation skillfully**

Drawing a conclusion from the narrative, I realize that I tend to cling to a functional orientation of the consultant–client relationship. I think that is because I know it so well: it feels very familiar to me and I know that it is a safe place from which to proceed, because most of my clients follow the same orientation. At the same time, the ambivalent feelings that I experienced, which contributed to the complexity of the situation, together with the paradoxical character, made it clear that such an orientation is of an ideological nature that can never match the variety of perspectives and interactions that are going on. I realize that sticking to such an ideology is an act of power relating, by which the conversation is directed in a specific way and made safe, but is also utterly dissatisfying for me, as it excludes fundamental aspects of what it means to involve oneself in interaction with others. This includes bringing in one's feelings and emotions, or at least being aware of them, and trying to endure the paradoxical character of the situation, although this might result in uncomfortable, or even highly anxious, feelings that make it tempting to collapse the tension into a simplistic solution and bring it to a premature end. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) points to the complexity of these seemingly normal, everyday interactions people have with each other.

The narrative raises an ethical question for me: what does it mean to have done a job well? By what standard does one measure its completion? Because such a statement will always be made from a particular point of view, which makes it fundamentally political and partial. Maybe that explains the complicated feelings that I experienced when receiving the compliment, because it was given from the standpoint of the client and, more specifically, with regard to the objective of wanting to 'discipline' some of the middle managers. For me, having done the job well meant having participated in a meaningful process with others that

produced intended results which contributed not only for a larger organizational purpose, but which also felt utterly satisfying on a personal level. This makes the achievement that was reached for me ethical:

*Eudaimonia* ... is defined as the enjoyment and fulfilment one experiences when doing something presumed to be of consequence. The consequence is important to the extent that it is aligned with one's personal understanding of *telos* ... in industrial culture, success defined by *Eudaimonia* has been outstripped by success defined as a function of measurable achievement and productivity – a moral imperative of getting ahead. (Barker, 2002: 1100–1101)

From a functionalist point of view the meeting turned out well, but that doesn't mean that the outcome was effective or that it was the right outcome. Our habitual responses towards particular situations are connected to our feelings of 'me', that is, how others see us, and these feelings are emotional, embodied and interactionally created (Burkitt, 2014). I suggest that when we find ourselves stuck in a situation, such as the one that I described, it is because our anticipatory expectations of others' responses haven't been clearly expressed and our feelings of self and 'me', of identity, have come under threat. This is what I experienced, expressed as the complex of feelings that reflected personally held values that were not being met, which led to an unfruitful outcome of the meeting. These feelings revealed the power relating that was going on which was not aimed at attaining a specific outcome or result, but directed at inhibiting the relationship that restricted me in expressing my identity fully.

I present a second narrative that will expand on the notions of what is going on while collaborating with the client. In this case, it is about the follow-up meeting with the middle managers, which took place in January, two months later.

### **Attending the follow-up meeting in January**

It was five minutes before two o'clock, and one-by-one the attending managers were entering the boardroom to discuss how to continue with the newly developed governance policy. I felt nervous and tense, because I hadn't seen these people together in this setting before and the preparations for this meeting hadn't run smoothly. Originally, three months before the complete group of team managers had been invited, and I had been asked to facilitate the

meeting. At the beginning of January, with the meeting planned for the 23<sup>rd</sup>, I had sent John and Harriet an email with the question of how and when to prepare for the meeting. I received an email from Harriet, in which she stated that John wanted to focus the meeting on the topic of role obscurity. For me, this came as a surprise, as we had invited the managers to come and talk about the continuation of the governance policy, and not to take a single part out of it to solve this ‘problem’. In my reply email I objected to this change and said that the attending team managers might well be disappointed and resist the agenda change. I offered an alternative that contained the idea of starting with the original question and then narrowing it down to the focus topics chosen by the attendees. Both Harriet and John agreed with my suggestion, but a week later John said he didn’t want to invite the large group of team managers, only a selected group. He saw no need to invite such a large group with such a wide agenda. So, three days before the meeting John sent an email to the original invitees stating that only a small group of people would attend. For me, it revealed a tendency on the part of senior management to concentrate on short-term emergencies, postponing strategic matters for the future and not discussing them with middle management.

John welcomed everybody and explained his reason for having postponed the larger meeting. He admitted, and sort of apologized, that not much had happened in the moment of the decision-making process four months ago and the present. He was interested in knowing what the managers’ thoughts were about the process to this point, and what they saw as the most important priority for this year with regard to the governance policy. Then he looked at Harriet and me and asked us to explain what we had in mind for the next few hours.

Harriet and I had prepared the meeting by developing three questions for them. We had decided to split up the group in two subgroups of senior and middle managers. Our reason for this decision was to create an opportunity for them to discuss their mutual dependence in realizing the governance policy. An assumption also lay underneath our motivation, that neither middle nor senior managers had acted upon the decisions made five months before, and we wondered if they had been waiting for an initiative coming from the other group. Harriet and I were simply curious about what they were thinking of each other. The questions we asked them were:

1. Which topic(s) will leverage the governance policy towards its execution?
2. What do you expect from the other group of managers?
3. How can you help them in their efforts?

The group split up, and for thirty minutes they discussed the three questions we had given them.

The group of middle managers was the first to present their answers. The groups sat opposite each other around the table. Larry, one of the middle managers, presented the outcomes. He spoke with a quiet voice, most the time looking down at his papers; he looked timid and small to me, but at the same time his message was clear. While Larry was presenting, the senior managers were already responding verbally and non-verbally to his presentation in an enthusiastic manner. When Larry finished, I asked if there were any questions, at which David, one of the senior managers, commented that the groups could have been working in the same room, for the presentations looked almost identical. They also had put the topic of 'role obscurity' central to the execution of the governance policy. And after this remark he took off. David presented the senior managers' case with a sense of drama. He spoke loudly, almost triumphantly, and with expressive arm gestures. After he had answered the questions, he told the middle managers that they had not just answered the questions, but strengthened their argument with a showcase, the Energy Savings Project.

This project had gone wrong despite clear agreements and responsibilities agreed upon at the start of it. David was responsible for it and while talking stated in a rather emotional tone: 'We had settled everything perfectly, and then nothing happened. If you middle managers manage your teams I expect that people will speak up. I thought ... this project is so important, that it will be properly managed. Especially, when you tell me (here, he referred to one of the middle managers) that we're going to finish this project on time I feel reassured. But what mechanism is going on here when eight months later, at the end of the year, I hear that absolutely nothing has happened?'

It was Larry who reacted to his questions, and it seemed to me that David's criticism was aimed at him. He answered calmly and said: 'It would have helped me if we had made the agreement together. It seems that every time a project manager is assigned, you think that responsibilities are clear and settled. That if clear appointments have been made, the project will run smoothly.' At which another team manager, Conny, sighed, visibly annoyed, and responded: 'I'm experiencing mental fatigue and want to unhook from this discussion.' And



she did. Her physical and verbal response expressed clear disappointment with what had just happened, and it seemed to me that this wasn't the first time this had happened.

The group went quiet for a while; for a moment I didn't know what to do. Unexpectedly, David's presentation had turned the shared exploration into a kind of tribunal. I felt anxious and tense, because I sensed that what had happened during the Energy Savings Project was relevant for this process, but I didn't know exactly what the connection was. There was a pattern of relating going on that I was unfamiliar with. I also knew that I didn't want to explore the Energy Savings Project any further, as this might turn the attention completely away from the governance policy process and amplify the conflict between Larry and David. If this happened, and we ended the meeting without clear agreements, I would be held responsible. What contributed to my anxiety was the short length of time we had left, while we were in the middle of an important discussion. In a split second, and without much thinking, I followed up on Conny's comment and asked if what she had mentioned was a cause for the lack of progress. I asked the group what their thoughts were about the delay, as I had heard several assumptions in the conversation that might explain their criticisms towards each other. I started to mention some of the criticisms I had heard during the discussion and people started adding to them.

As people were speaking I walked to the flipchart and started writing. I sensed this was becoming interesting as the discussion was shifting from work towards the dynamic of this group. But while I was writing and talking, I noticed that some of the senior managers were becoming impatient. Soon they interrupted me and asked if we could come to some final agreements because we were running out of time. Clearly, they hadn't joined the conversation, or had become preoccupied with the closure of the meeting. I knew that I didn't have the time left to continue the discussion and decided to use the spare time for agreeing upon next steps to be taken. I asked the group what their thoughts were and one of the senior managers proposed the start of a pilot by using a project that was already running to become a home for the governance policy. It was a pre-existing idea that had been discussed with me before, but there was no time left to discuss it, as people were already leaving the room. John said that we would meet again at short notice to continue the discussion. Then the meeting ended.

## **Inclusion and exclusion as an act of power relating**

The topic of role obscurity that both groups of managers saw as their major priority for 2017 fitted well within an instrumentalist and functional orientation. It seemed to me that it was a safe choice for them that would have kept them out of difficult discussions, if David hadn't mentioned the Energy Saving project. The ensuing consensus implied the underscoring of managerialist beliefs, while emphasizing the primary task. Upon closer scrutiny of the two presentations, which I did after the meeting, it became clear to me that actually they headed in two contradictory directions. The middle managers pleaded to be given autonomy by senior management in order to become engaged and energized again, and to create stability in the hectic situation they found themselves in. Complementary to that, senior management had expressed its desire to be a reliable partner for its clients/owners, and therefore asked the middle managers to undertake their responsibilities by complying with the decisions that senior management had made and execute the tasks that had been delegated to them.

The triumphant presentation of the Energy Saving project by David was meant to be a supportive argument of their claim for obedience, as I saw it. To me it was an expression of power relating by which they excluded the middle managers' story, and their embedded needs and interests, from the dialogue. David's accusation regarding Larry's conduct changed the quality of the dialogue from an exploratory into an antagonistic one, or at least changed the nature of the exploration. This happened not only through the content of his message, but also by his tone and performance. According to Scott, power shows itself in the use of language and in the suppression of feelings (Scott, 1990). Larry presented and responded in a controlled manner, while David did so in a more assertive and outgoing way. He allowed himself to express himself more freely, while Larry seemed to be on guard, trying to protect himself. What the narrative shows is that power relating reveals itself in the form as well as in the content of the communication, and that they can't be uncoupled. According to Burke, it is in the use of words, and not only in the content, that people reveal their motives and interests. The form of the message is determined by its content, at the same time, and content is determined by its form (Burke, 1954). David's act didn't only influence the meeting by the content that he added, but also by the way he performed his act. Out of it emerged power relating that constrained the discussion that was going on and the free flow of interactions that had been going on.

For me, the act of power relating revealed the motive of obedience on the part of the middle managers to conform to the demands of senior management. What the middle managers asked for would only be allowed within the framework of values and goals that had been set by senior management (Wilmott, 2013), and this can be seen as a constraining act towards the interests of middle management. The, I imagine, unconscious choice of senior management to constrain the possibilities of the middle managers impacted the conversation in a negative way and excluded the exploration of enabling possibilities.

Exploration of the underlying theme of conformity and obedience, and the corresponding lack of communication about the delegation of tasks and responsibilities, didn't happen and I think I missed a chance there. The reason for the exclusion of these, and other, themes is that they arouse feelings of anxiety and threaten the status quo, which trigger other themes in order to deal with those anxieties (Stacey, 2012). For example, I reacted to the discussion, when it became accusatory and defensive, by diverting attention away from the conflict towards the underlying assumptions that may have caused the difference in opinions. Retrospectively, I reacted in a habitual way by turning my attention towards trying to find an explanation for the pattern of relating that became visible during the meeting, and this action diverted me and the others away from the anxious situation in which I, and I presume the others also, didn't know what to do. Sustaining my professional identity and preventing that the situation from going 'out of control' is what motivated me to turn towards a familiar situation. It was a defensive act from my side, happening mostly unconsciously, that turned my attention, and the group's, away from the conflictual aspects of the discussion going on.

The mechanism of power relating is a jointly created dynamic that can't be reduced to the actions of a single person, but which is the result of the participation of all people involved. There is no one to blame here, as it emerges out of the interplay of the manifold intentions of the individual attendees that no one person can comprehend, or control. The inclusion and exclusion that are taking place, of themes and persons, happen unconsciously and habitually, all of the time. It is our trained incapacity, that is, our habitual reactions based upon former training and experience, that determine our reactions to the situation (Burke, 1954: 7). What lies outside our knowledge and experience creates uncertainty, and as a result anxious feelings. One way of dealing with our anxieties is to escape to our private conversations or role plays, by which we try to solve the discrepancy that we experience by means of fantasy (Stacey, 2003). Either by finding a satisfactory explanation for what is taking place, or by

complementing the situation with knowledge that makes the situation fitting. The result may be that we are out of synch with the situation at hand, resulting in misunderstandings that may even cause a breakdown in the process of communicative interaction (Stacey, 2012).

### **Power relating as the interplay between similarities and differences**

In order to avoid such a breakdown, usually I try to diminish the amount of anxiety that people experience when attending a meeting. Coming from a background of social constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry, I ‘know’ how to create a safe environment for people by means of formulating specific kinds of questions, designing tasks that will emphasize similarities among people, and by emphasizing enabling discussions while downsizing constraining ones. The recent history of this project, together with the clumsy preparation of this particular meeting, hadn’t created the usual self-confidence in me, with clear expectations about the likely outcome of the meeting. As a result, I felt nervous and tense at the start. Looking at the other faces in the room, I saw that I was not the only one. By giving both groups their assignment, I knew that the ball had started rolling, which released my initial feelings of anxiety and brought back my self-confidence. When the middle managers came back in and both groups presented the outcomes, the similarities in their answers surprised most of us. I remember one of the managers exclaiming her surprise at this fact, which was confirmed by the others. The tension felt in the room turned into relief through the shared experience of mutual recognition, and I felt my own tension disappear. The experience created a sense of ‘us’ in the room, if only for a short while. The relief that I sensed in the expression of sensed similarities hid an underlying concern about the differences that were being felt at the same time, and observed in the presentations that reflected different interpretations about how the topic should be handled, as well as the mutual relationship. Despite, or because of, the fact that I had split the group up in the two hierarchical subgroups, underlying tensions surfaced during the meeting, because they were already present.

Experiencing similarities creates feelings of mutual connection among people and contributes to feelings of safety and security in the relationship, an absence of struggle with others, and finding a common interest or effort that stimulates people to do the same things others are doing. Mead (1934/2015: 289–298) talks about this kind of experience as a religious experience, an experience of oneness, in which people adopt the attitude of everybody

belonging to the same group. People identify with each other, and this creates the experience of letting go of the attitude of control that we always take with us, because of the responsibilities we face in our daily lives. For a short while, there is no longer a 'me' that controls 'I' (Neitz and Spickard, 1990). Authors talk about the 'really real' (ibid: 16) of this experience that is shared with each other before being made meaningful, and to which no goal or end is attached. This is what I think also typifies a joint or collaborative experience, that is, the absence of difference, constraint or conflict that contributes to the forming of a 'we'-identity. Establishing a common end, as happens in team work, might thus contribute to feelings of oneness (Mead, 1934/2015), but Mowles warns us that this might as easily turn into a kind of defensive behavior that directs our attention deliberately away from difference and conflict (Mowles, 2015).

I see this often when facilitating an Appreciative Inquiry meeting, always first emphasizing similarities before starting to explore differences, with the underlying assumption that differences can be constructed when safety conditions are created and in such a way that people will get along with each other, despite their differences. I realize that applying such a technique as an intervention excludes certain kinds of narratives and experiences that do not suit the appreciative process. It is also highly likely that a power differential is maintained by those who have chosen to affect change by means of Appreciative Inquiry and those who undergo it. More fundamentally, part of peoples' lived subjective experience is denied when contradictions and feelings of anger, resentment and frustration are not allowed to surface. These represent important values that construct their identities, individually as well as collectively, and reflect power relating going on in the interactions with each other. This is exactly what I reflected upon when experiencing the particular feelings in the narrative, one that I didn't consider appropriate to express. I realize that as an OD-consultant applying Appreciative Inquiry, I may be complicit in maintaining the existing power differential, which is ironical given the fact that the fundamental aim of Appreciative Inquiry is to increase equality and democracy within organizations (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

The conflict between David and Larry, and the consequent reaction of Conny, revealed clear differences in perceptions of the Energy Savings Project. What surprised me was the strong and visible disciplining attempt by David towards Larry, which caused feelings in me and others that ranged from discomfort to feelings of shame, embarrassment and, I can imagine, even humiliation. Such an attempt fits well with the image of the employee, that I mentioned

earlier, as an independent and autonomous professional prepared to discipline himself in executing the goals, objectives, rules and regulations of the organization as explicated by his superiors. The nature of the relationship that is being established between the employee and the organization is one of personal commitment, or engagement, by which personal and organizational identities become linked:

The subtle politics of the performance-performativity nexus lie in the message that it is organizations which now rely to a large extent upon performing subjects, rather than performing subjects who rely upon organizations. (Costea et al., 2008: 668)

I think that it is precisely this reversal that lies at the heart of the conflict between middle and senior managers. While the former group asks to be supported by its organization and management for doing a good job, the latter demands compliance and obedience with regard to the mission, vision, goals, values and regulations of the organization. Returning to the paradoxical character of the situation in the first narrative, the second one also resembles paradox that creates opportunities for exploration. The existence of both similarities and differences illustrates the complexity of the situation of what seems to be an ordinary meeting. But according to Mowles (2015), these situations are characterized by complexity and uncertainty where people start to feel uncomfortable, or even anxious, because of the lack of clarity about how to proceed. In response to this uncertainty, many people collapse the complexity by making a choice for one or the other. The contradictory character of the situation seems to imply that a choice between the two must be made, while in fact both aspects are mutually dependent and exist within the situation (ibid). It is a strategy to simplify the situation in order to regain certainty and control over it again. But the neglect of one of the aspects of the paradox makes it impossible to skillfully cope with the situation; that is, to skillfully handle the situation in a way that does justice to the reality of the situation. According to Dalal (1998), making a premature choice is an act of power relating in which the interests of one group of people are prioritized over the interests of another group. This turns the decision into an ethical act that benefits one party over the other. I hadn't realized this at the time, which might have generated an opportunity for exploring the apparent differences between the groups of managers that were explicated by their presentations.

## **The act of holding one accountable**

What surprised me in David's accusation towards Larry was the lack of self-reflection on his own partaking in and responsibility for the project. I wonder what we're actually doing when we say that someone is responsible for a project or a task and will be held accountable for his conduct and performance. Notions of responsibility and accountability have become so self-evident that we hardly talk about their functionality in our everyday interactions with each other. But I propose that the use of these concepts, developed under the regime of New Public Management, have considerable ethical and relational consequences, as I will try to show.

The delegation of the assignment for a new governance policy by senior management was motivated by their desire to increase mutual collaboration between members of the core team and to share responsibilities, which implied a distribution of responsibilities and accountabilities among them. Therefore, it struck me as odd when David held Larry personally accountable for the mismanagement of the Energy Savings Project. Through that act he exercised his formal authority, asking for an explanation and for obedience, which reveals the nature of accountability as a credit-/blame-game (Anderson, 2009). Making Larry responsible for the final outcomes, David evaded discussion about his own partaking and responsibility, thereby closing off the opportunity for shared exploration of the situation. The latter was the kind of accountability that I had tried to attain in the governance policy project, in which Larry also had participated. Maybe, it was an unconscious displacement by David of his own sense of mismanagement that stimulated him to act in the way he did.

The self-evident, non-reflexive, account about David surfaced the underlying structure of a principal-agent relationship. In this relationship, it is assumed that the principal (David) has the right, based on his position, to demand justification for the actions of the agent (Larry). This is assumed to be morally superior to the position of the agent, and gives him the opportunity to praise or blame the agent on the basis of his performance (Anderson, 2009). This individually motivated type of agency and accountability subdivides the project into separate pieces of activities for which individuals will be held accountable. Results are attributed to specific people, who will be held morally responsible when they have the authority to choose alternative modes of action in order to accomplish set goals. As a consequence, managers can praise and blame their employees, and this constitutes the notion of temporary accountability (*ibid*). Hence, research has proven that delegation of certain kind

of decisions contribute to managers, as principal, evading their responsibilities (Hill, 2015), and this undermines their accountability as a deliberate or unconscious strategy to avoid blame.

This type of instrumental accountability, as a discourse of praise and blame, is part of the managerialist discourse, and was introduced in the public sector, together with the concept of New Public Management, in the nineties. Its underlying assumption is that more accountability contributes to better performance. But, paradoxically, it can also oppose its own purpose by inhibiting organizational performance, thus stimulating perverse actions and impeding accounting (Anderson, 2009). That is because this type of accountability creates ‘governable persons’ (Vosselman, 2013: 2), represses ethical and moral considerations and reinforces dehumanizing aspects (Lindkvist et al., 2003):

A floating responsibility may arise, whereby everyone has procedural accountabilities but no one has responsibility for wider consequences. (Bauman in Lindkvist, 1994: 8)

What I find interesting is that by quoting Bauman, Lindkvist creates a distinction between the concept of accountability and responsibility. In general, both concepts are considered more or less the same (Bovens, 2007) in which accountability is defined as an ‘ambiguous and contested concept’ (Mulgan in Byrkjeflot et. al, 2014: 1). But Lindkvist links accountability to managerialist discourse with its instrumentality and focus on external controls, while describing responsibility as a moral obligation towards others for the wider consequences of one’s actions (Lindkvist, 2003). Bauman does something similar under the heading of ‘responsibility’. Moral responsibility takes the Other into account and is ‘unconditional and in principle infinite’ (Bauman, 1994: 42). Technical, or instrumental, responsibility is objective, neutral and rational, and abolishes moral responsibility. It is connected to what Bauman calls ‘business ethics’, with its emphasis on ‘ends justifying the means’ that makes all moral sense subservient to it (ibid).

This explanation helps me to reflect on my own participation in the project. Senior management held me, rightly, accountable for the results of the governance policy project. But I also held them responsible, as a moral obligation towards myself, the members of the core team and the other employees, to follow up, and when they failed to do so this felt like a breach of my contract with them and with the others. Being accountable towards senior



management, I simultaneously felt myself responsible towards the members of the core team. For me, this meant that I allowed them to hold me accountable for what I had done, based on the relationship that we had formed in working together. I experienced my accountability as a moral obligation towards them, which contributed to my feelings of disappointment when the project was stalled. This brings me to a significantly different experience of both concepts, by which accountability is felt as a unilateral, dictated obligation that reveals a power differential between the accountable person and the one who is accounted to. In contrast, I experience responsibility as a voluntary act that I take upon myself in relation to others, in which I am the one who is willing to be held accountable for my conduct and for the results of it. The latter moves the nature of the relationship from one of a clear power differential towards one that tries to diminish it, but that can give great cause for anxiety.

Accountability demands employees negate their personal values and feelings, and subjugate these to organizational policies issued by their superiors. But despite this subjugation to organizational rules and regulations, they are held morally responsible for their actions and outcomes on an individual basis (Anderson, 2009). Because society puts so much emphasis on our individual right to express free will, we don't consider the possibility that this right might contradict the bureaucratic structure that makes the individual subservient to it. When these paradoxes are not recognized, acknowledged and explored, they unconsciously create behavioral patterns of caution, reductionism and risk-avoidance, which diminishes the incentives to explore these often-complex situations and produce simplified solutions. This mechanism perpetuates dysfunctional organizational behaviors, marginalizes cooperative relationships and decreases government transparency (ibid). I think it also diminished the chance to explore what happened during that particular meeting. Actually, it drove out reflexivity, substantive reasoning and demanding explanations for the arguments that the groups brought to the table (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Which, I think, is necessary for exercising responsibility.

## **Final reflections**

When a client asks a consultant to come and help him, things have already happened and the client has somehow already made up his mind about the problem, its cause and the desired solution. Within that train of managerialist thought the consultant fulfills a specific function,

rather than simply performing an action (Elias, 1978). He fulfills a function for his client and this emphasizes the temporal-historical character of the consultant–client relationship.

The solution implied, in this case the production of a new governance policy, is already firmly embedded in managerialist thought, which generally goes unnoticed by the people involved. To that the consultant adds his own ideological concept(s), in my case that of collaboration, or co-creation. Together, these ideologies construct a particular context that has significant implications for the development of the consultant–client relationship, as well as the assignment. I have come to realize that there is no ‘fresh’ start of a new relationship between a client and the consultant; it is an ongoing process of events, of people’s thoughts and actions, of which the hiring of the consultant is a single step taken in a continuous chain of events. This makes the consultant–client relationship, and every single assignment, fundamentally ethical.

The ideological choices that consultants and clients make, of intending to be collaborative or solution focused, have consequences for the people they work for and with. When the consultant adopts a specific consulting style or method, which is always based on ideology, this will have moral implications that can’t be abolished by saying that the concepts chosen are inherently ‘good’, and by implying that the corresponding intentions are ‘good’ as well. Dalal warns us that we tend to take our ideologies as self-evident and good in themselves, but forget that they foreground specific values, contribute to opposition, and by doing so exclude specific groups of people (Dalal, 1998). As such, ideologies help sustain existing power differentials and, when unaware of these implications, make consultants complicit in their client’s endeavors.

It is very tempting for the consultant to follow the functional route of his client for several reasons. Colluding with the managerialist doctrine that is dominant nowadays in many organizations, the consultant, as ‘outsider’ or passer-by, becomes a part of the ‘established’ group fairly quickly. It is a safe strategy as long as he delivers to expectations, and contributes to his clients’ agenda. When he fulfills his contractual obligations, he expresses responsibility for the future prosperity of the clients’ organization. But I want to propose that this functionalist orientation, which is pursued by both client and consultant, is a partial perspective on the consultant–client relationship, and a very narrow one. What is actually taking place goes beyond the ideologies of managerialism and collaboration, and has to be

extended by a perspective of ethics and moral responsibility. This is true for every consultant and my narratives in this project show this clearly.

This can be quite a problematic endeavor; as Zygmunt Bauman indicates, our interpretations of, and feelings about, responsibility these days have considerably changed from an ethical duty or obligation towards others, towards a primary concern for ourselves (Bauman, 2007). This shift shows up in our working relationships, with and within organizations, as a business and professional ethics that emphasizes loyalty towards the organization's purpose and goals that diminishes the responsibilities and obligations of people towards each other and towards their individual values (Bauman, 1994). Organizations tend to erase, by means of managerialist discourse, these mutual dependencies by emphasizing individual responsibility and displacing social solidarity with technical monitoring and surveillance. Although we negate or deny these interdependencies, trying to cover them over, they constitute our very relationships and interactions with each other on a fundamental level. Accepting this mutual dependence brings with it the deliberate choice of taking up moral responsibility towards each other, that is, becoming responsible for one other beyond contractual obligations (Levinas in Bauman, 1994).

This brings me to the uncomfortable feelings and anxieties that I've experienced when listening to my thoughts and feelings that were going on during interactions with others or afterwards. Reflecting on them feels threatening, especially when deciding to bring the results into the open. This act can not only contribute to the corrosion of existing power differentials and the cohesion and solidarity within the group (Elias, 1956), but might also result in the exclusion of me as an interlocutor for the senior and/or the middle managers, or even in the termination of the contract. It is this fear of exclusion that is relevant for consultants and which is a significant element of the consultant–client relationship.

But the client isn't free from this fear of exclusion either. One reason for the management team desiring to produce the new governance policy might have been to strengthen its privileged position as the strategists of the organization. Emphasizing this position, then, strengthens internal cohesion and solidarity, expands specific norms and convictions and, through that, further helps to discipline the employees (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Instead, the production of the new policy contributed to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety by some of the managers, especially when the assignment was delegated to the core team. The exclusion felt, and loss of control, might explain their act of retaliation towards the middle managers,

through which they emphasized their superior position as senior managers. This also would explain why the management team hadn't followed up on its own decision the previous year to execute the governance policy, because this would have seriously altered its relationship with the middle managers.

Despite my feelings of anxiety, I did share my writings with Sue, the CEO of Environment Protect and shared with her some of my reflections. I decided to do so for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Sue was absent in the period of the event that I wrote about in the second narrative. She wanted to discuss with me what had happened in order to understand the situation when she returned. My reflection of that period helped her to reconnect to the development process in a better way. Secondly, I realized that my reflections contained personal opinions and convictions that mattered to me, which expressed moral concerns towards other (groups of) people that I didn't want to withhold from them. And thirdly, it helped me to become more detached-involved, or involved-detached (Mowles, 2015), to my own opinions and convictions by making them subject to scrutiny by others. This act is anxiety-provoking when it threatens personal or professional identity, and excluding others from one's own private thoughts helps protect one's identity (Joas, 1998). By revealing my reflections and sharing them with the client, I contributed to my sense of being a morally responsible person instead of acting as a goal-oriented, functional consultant.

Sue was curious and wanted to know about my experience of the project during the months that she had been absent and what I thought about the development so far. I told her frankly that I wasn't very positive about it and explained my reasons. She asked questions about the narratives and I provided her more, details so that things became clearer for her. She was very inquisitive and I noticed during our conversation a strong sense of determination in her. It was a relief for me to see her show ownership for the project, something that I had missed during the previous few months. It rekindled my hope about a next phase to come for the project.

I realize that being heard, not only expressing what people expect you to say, but talking about what really matters to you, can sometimes be an act of courage. There is a risk involved that one won't be heard and may even be excluded, but not speaking up will also have consequences for both the individual and the organization. The individual might lose his self-respect and self-dignity, become detached from the organization or might even suffer physically or mentally. The organization that doesn't tolerate deviances in opinions and is not interested in the

experiences of its employees will probably have difficulties in motivating them and might even lose them, as happened with Larry who has in the meantime left the organization.

In my next project, I want to further explore what it means to take care of yourself in an organization as an expression of subjective values and interests, and to speak up about what needs to be said or done. Underlying this question is the apparent paradox of employees who are supposed to operate in a highly autonomous and authentic manner, liberated from the hierarchical control by management, but who find it increasingly difficult to speak up, let alone to confront management with alternative facts and ideas. For me, as a consultant, this raises the question of what it means to speak up and become political instead of being mainly facilitative towards clients.

## **Project 4 – Collaboration as a politics of affect**

### **Collaborating in a habitual way**

As I found out in Project 3, the ideology of collaboration can lead to the uncritical attitude that whatever a relationship is aimed at accomplishing is considered good or necessary for the organization and its members. This ideological habit, firmly embedded within managerialist ideology (Mosonyi and Gond, 2016), turns attention away from, and conceals, unwanted parts of reality. My efforts to turn abstract purposes and goals into concrete results inevitably produced conflicts, inconveniences, emotions, uncertainties and struggles. I contend that, in contrast to theories of collaborative ideology, conflict, ambiguity and uncertainty are inevitable aspects of our daily interactions with each other. Although I believe that many people are aware of this discrepancy, it is not often openly talked about and, publicly, the image is perpetuated of the organization as a harmonious, collaborative and cooperative place that works toward a commonly valued purpose. During informal gatherings, however, such as coffee-corner gossip, the contradictory experiences of employees are expressed, but often in a covert manner. It seems to me that this ideology rejects particular experiences of employees as unwanted and undesired, leading to their exclusion.

In this project, I want to continue my exploration of our ways of habitually, often unreflectively and casually, interacting with each other in cooperative competition, by which we try to attain our ends and maintain our identities. I'm particularly interested in what we're generating when we're collaborating and how: we tend to be unaware of it, and I wonder why this is the case. I suggest that people tend to avoid the anxieties that come with exploring their interactions, or hold onto other kinds of anxiety, as a kind of avoidance due to the risks of engaging in actual experiences. I also want to suggest that feelings of anxiety, and resulting protective behaviors, emerge from the threats people experience to their identities, sense of self in relation to others, and the movements of these identities in response to the gestures of others.

I will start with describing an event in which I collaborated with a client in order to develop an implementation strategy for their new governance policy. The narrative expresses conflict about how the strategy should have been developed and escalated into heated discussions that revealed the existence of conflict and how it was covered up within the discussion. Power

relations are involved as the interactive dynamic by which people enable and constrain each other during these discussions (Elias, 1978), affecting each other in emotional ways that reflect their personal involvements and their identities being confirmed or denied. The narrative reveals collaboration as a process of struggle that can't realize its ideological values when put into practice.

In the project I explore the collaborative process as a complex and dynamic process that involves ongoing **power relations**. These give rise to different kinds of **resistance** by the people involved, contributing to **embodied experiences** of feelings, thoughts and emotions. This indicates that something is at stake for them, hence their **identities** are involved. I explore collaboration as a relational process that demands that one **give an account of oneself** and by doing that, or failing to do so, this process becomes an **ethical** one. The highlighted topics are those that I will discuss in this project.

I will write about Environment Protect. Several people in this organization are featured in the narrative:

- Sue: CEO of Environment Protect, chairperson of the management team, responsible for the new governance policy;
- John: Senior manager;
- David: Senior manager;
- Joanne: Secretary of the senior management team, partly responsible for the preparation of the conference;
- Liz: One of the team managers who, together with David, had prepared a paper on the account management function;
- Charley: Team manager.

When I talk about the ideology of collaboration, I'm referring to what is being said about it from the standpoint of the field of Organizational Development (OD). OD consultants in general, intend to establish a particular kind of relationship in which the client becomes an active participant in the creation and dissemination of knowledge by means of dialogical conversations and meetings that are mutually produced, shared and controlled by means of shared meaning-making (Cheung-Judge, 2011; Jones and Brazzel, 2006; Messervy, 2014). Collaboration is seen as the ongoing co-construction of the relationship between consultant

and client, out of which ongoing re-constructed outcomes emerge. Other main features are that the collaboration departs from an agreed-upon common goal, outcome or objective (Weisbord, 1992; Shuman, 2006), there is an engaged attitude by all participants involved, the shared intention of which is to bridge differences, openness of communication and information sharing and the development of mutual trust (Messervy, 2014, Schuman, 2006; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011). It is from this ideology that I will be exploring the consultant–client relationship.

## **Narrative 1 – Developing the governance policy**

### **Preparing for a conference**

Recently I chaired a two-day conference with managers of the company that I wrote about in Project 3: Environment Protect. It is a local governmental executive organization, responsible for the provision of licenses, surveillance, and maintenance with regard to environmental issues. They hired me in 2016 to help develop a new governance policy and this conference, held during the summer of 2017, aimed at making decisions about its execution.

A conference had been held two months earlier in which the senior management team developed several sketches of the new organization structure. One of the drawings raised an engaged discussion about the many escalations taking place about operational issues between the senior management team and the team managers. Whenever a case was considered complex or politically sensitive, team managers delegated it upwards. When a senior manager felt it necessary to interfere with an operational case, he would go and talk to the team manager or the professional in charge to direct it in the way (s)he wanted. The consequence of this behavior was that the management team spent a considerable amount of time with operational issues and team managers, answering questions or executing actions from above. During this conference, the senior management team had unanimously decided that the number of escalations had to be reduced.

During my preparations for the second conference, Joanne, the secretary of the senior management team, suggested spending some time on an actual escalation case. Her reason for doing that was to reflect on the patterns of interactions between the senior and team managers



that maintained the escalation mechanism. I liked her idea: despite the priority expressed during the first conference of solving the escalation problem, in between the two conferences no action had been undertaken. So we decided to put the topic on the agenda and reserved some time for it.

### **Facilitating the conference**

In July, we gathered for the second conference. The participants consisted of six senior managers, who together formed the senior management team; five out of seventeen team managers; the internal strategy advisor; the secretary of the senior management team; and me, the consultant. The team managers had been invited to give their support for the decisions that had to be made and improve on them where needed. Sue had asked me to chair the second conference, as the senior managers had appreciated my contribution during the first one, which I took as a compliment.

The morning program of the first day had been productive, but for me also rather long-winded. I looked forward introducing the escalation topic in the afternoon. When we started after lunch, I invited the group to choose an escalation case to explore together. I explained my reasons for putting this topic on the agenda, thus referring to the former conference. During my introduction, I noticed some commotion in the group: people started to fidget their chairs and I noticed body postures changing. After ending my introduction, I asked the group what they thought of it.

David, one of the senior managers, started talking first. He sat right next to me and, while I was speaking, I began to sense resistance although I could not see his face or body. Before he started talking, he stood up: I knew in that moment that he would not approve the suggestion that I had made. Actually, I didn't want him to start, because I knew from previous experiences that he could have a big impact on the group by the manner in which he expressed his opinions. I had mixed feelings about him. On the one hand I liked him, as a nice and amiable person. On the other, I found that he often acted on behalf of his own interests, stating his opinions about things strongly, sometimes to a point where he would exert a lot of force behind his words. But then he would end his monologue with a friendly smile and invite others by asking them 'And what do you think about it?' I admired this rhetorical quality of his, while at the same time resenting it because of the constraints it placed on me.

David said he didn't want to waste time on this issue, because the group had one more topic to talk about that afternoon, which he felt was really important to discuss, and we were already running behind schedule. I asked what the others were thinking and, after a few seconds of silence (it was as if people were weighing what to say), some of them answered rather hesitantly, not as outspoken as David, that the issue should be skipped, and the meeting should move on. It was Sue who gave the final push when she said it was wise to go on to the next topic, although she didn't sound very convincing to me. I didn't give up immediately and asserted once more my motivation for the issue, but without success. No one spoke in favor of my suggestion, not even Joanne. It was as if nobody dared to speak up, or found it important enough to make a stand. So we moved on to the next topic, which was about the design of the account management function.

### **A tumultuous discussion**

David had prepared this topic with Liz, one of his employees, which had resulted in a detailed document that the participants were already familiar with. But instead of discussing the document as a proposal to be agreed upon, people started talking about details, discussing clients, real-time cases and situations, about what had happened and what should be done. For the next hour, a cacophony of stories followed that, for me as an outsider, was incomprehensible and difficult to follow. People didn't listen to each other and every story was countered with another story and another one and another one. More than once, I tried to intervene, but to no avail. Whenever I tried to bring the discussion back on track, somebody would interrupt me and add another story on top of the others. People were so focused on each other that I felt shut out from the interactions taking place. Some of them had turned their faces and bodies away from me toward others. It felt as if I had literally moved to the periphery of the group.

As a result, I wasn't able to facilitate the discussion towards final conclusions. People who sat silently watching what was happening started to look at me, signaling me with their eyes to bring an end to it. I tried to interrupt the discussion again but failed in this attempt as well. At that moment, I didn't know what to do and realized I had lost grip of the situation, which contributed to a growing feeling of anxiety. I noticed my self-esteem had taken a dive, as well as my energy. I wondered what was going on and how to regain control, especially because I saw that we had only ten minutes left, with a discussion that kept on going. Before I had decided what to do John, one of the senior managers, suddenly raised his voice and said it was

time to end the day and go for a beer. The discussion came to an end. Everybody fled from the table toward the terrace, or left to go home. His authority had exerted a greater influence on the group than mine had.

### **Contemplating what happened**

I collected the flip-charts and decided to go home to think over the program for the next day, because I had no clue how to continue. But first I also took a drink and went outside to join the others on the terrace. I noticed an active discussion going on, especially between Sue and David, with others listening and sometimes contributing. I tried to catch up with them, but because I didn't know the case I found little to contribute. I did however notice the intensity of the discussion, with people fiercely defending their opinions, views and positions. Their voices got louder as people defended their arguments or attacked those of others. The atmosphere felt hostile to me, and wasn't the kind that I had imagined having while enjoying a glass of beer in the sun, sitting on a roof top in the center of Amsterdam. Because I felt tired and had developed a headache, I wished everybody a pleasant evening and went home.

### **Knowing how to run a conference**

When looking back on this event, I realized that unconsciously I hold quite strict images of what a good conference should look like, how it should proceed and my role in it. It is aimed at attaining prescribed and agreed-upon goals, with participants participating fully towards desired ends. I have referred to this collaborative ideology, which resembles systems thinking (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), in my former projects, as well as the notion of a functional consultant–client relationship to enable intended change to be realized. I'm not alone in holding this ideology. Skovgaard Smith (2008) noticed that popular consultants' literature from authors like Edgar Schein and David Maister, as well as the critical consultants' literature with authors such as Alvesson, Fincham, Clark and Salaman (Skovgaard Smith, 2008; Clark and Salaman, 1996/1998; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Fincham, Mohe and Seidl, 2013) share the same thought, although for different reasons: that consultants can, and should, define and manage the client relationship in order to create value. Dialogic OD also emphasizes the helping relationship with the client, but from a social constructionist viewpoint aimed at joint meaning-making and creating generative, transformative outcomes (Bushe and Marshak, 2015).

I argue that this view positions the consultant as a designer and somebody who works on instead from within groups, making others subservient to the set agenda of the client. I find this prescribed position unsatisfying and mechanical, revealing a systems-thinking view aimed at aligning the parts towards an overarching whole that contains an inherent purpose (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). My experience is very different and shows that the consultant becomes part of existing organizational figurations (Elias, 1978), being the patterns of relating created by players (ibid: 130), the moment he enters an organization and starts collaborating with people from the client's organization. These dynamic networks enable and constrain both the consultant and client in their relationship with each other. As such, there is no possibility that either the consultant, or the client, is able to realize a collaborative relationship unilaterally and free from existing power relations. Elias argues that power is a structural characteristic of relationships between people with power differentials emerging out of people's interactions in a constant evolving way (ibid:74). This doesn't fit the ideological image of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship between consultant and client.

### **The impossibility of upholding collaborative intent**

There are several reasons why it is tempting for both client and consultant to pursue a collaborative relationship. Services offered by management consultants often reflect the problems, concerns and issues that client organizations are dealing with and offer solutions for them (Kipping and Engwall, 2002). This implies that they share a vision regarding the problem and the solution to be implemented. The concept of collaboration, or co-creation, is promoted as a joint endeavor to resolve issues and implies a relationship of mutual dependence in which consultant and client need each other in order to succeed (Bushe and Marshak, 2015). Many managers and consultants come from the same business schools and share similar styles of thinking, business models and analytic tools that reflect strategic choice theory, a design orientation and a systems' view on organizations (Sturdy et al., 2015). They find themselves conversing from the same discourses, which makes it easier to understand each other's language and actions.

My narrative clearly shows that, despite the mutual collaborative intent, this advocated pursuit is, in reality, a contested concept. Not only did Sue not graduate from a business

school, she is a biologist; she also didn't consider our relationship as a mutually beneficial one, at least from my point of view. By not showing up at the preparatory meeting she expressed lack of consideration toward me and Joanne. And David's protest to my proposal wasn't beneficial for me either. Both examples express an underlying assumption that my contribution was at the service of their managerial agenda and not necessarily collaborative, let alone mutually beneficial. But using the concept does serve a purpose for them, and me, which is to abandon conflict and difference from the scene. In reality, because of our personal ways of habitually collaborating with each other, this creates the paradox of creating collaboration and competition at the same time, giving rise to struggle, conflict and ambiguity, as my narrative showed. If these are inevitable aspects of collaboration, then why do I keep on pursuing such an ideology?

### **Habitually pursuing collaborative ideology**

I believe the reason for making choices based on ideological values is that they happen in a habitual, unreflective and embodied way. I was so accustomed to my way of facilitating the discussion, helping the group to reach for a consensual decision, that I hadn't considered any alternative to, or the consequences of, my way of working. When ideology is so firmly ingrained in our disposition for a particular way of experiencing, perceiving, thinking and acting, we expect specific accomplishments and achievements to come out of it (such as having a productive conference) that are moral in themselves (Dewey, 1916/2007). They have become habit in the acquired disposition to certain modes of response as tendencies to act (ibid; Burkitt, 2014). These responses take shape as practical choices, based on personal biographies and the embedded social and cultural meanings in which they are made, expressing themselves as personal preferences, likes and dislikes that display our vital interests (ibid):

Habit readies us for action and is the effective 'will' behind our actions but once interacting, bodily habit intelligently and sensitively follows and responds to the unfolding patterns of relations of which it is part. (Burkitt, 2014: 117)

As long as everything turns out the way we are accustomed to, we might not notice the ways we are collaborating with each other, nor of the consequences of it. Only when we are stopped by the responses of others is an opportunity for reflection offered. In the narrative, David

blocked me in my habitual flow, which was accompanied by uncomfortable feelings and emotions that made me become more argumentative toward him. He caused varying reactions within the group that, together with my reaction, contributed to an ambiguous situation of which the outcome was uncertain, although not completely unpredictable because we can imagine likely scenarios based on what we have previously experienced, one of which might approximate what we see actually happening. David was also a senior manager and, because of his position, had a significant effect on the outcome. It is often the dominant people who initiate the conversation and control its direction (Scott, 1990), maneuvering other participants into the role of passive recipients.

Both David's reputation for getting his way (he's a former politician) and the shared history of the group influenced the discussion. My invitation triggered the possibility of an alternative to their habitual pattern of discussing topics, thus allowing for a novel discussion, but it was this that David prevented. Instead of being collaborative and having an open discussion, I found myself negotiating and in a competitive and defensive mode, which contributed to an emotional, embodied 'knowing' of disapproval toward David that directed my next response. Negotiating our interests is a means of organizational politics (Vigoda, 2003) and something we do all the time. It illuminates the fact that we only ever have partial control over the unfolding of a conversation, which is at odds with our commonly accepted way of thinking that we can control discussions toward desired ends. It made me realize that collaboration emerges out of our consensual-conflictual interactions with each other, and that every time differs in form, shape and outcome.

### **Bodies that affect each other**

The emotions and feelings that I experienced were functional and helped me to orient myself during the discussion going on, or else indicated that I had become disoriented (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014). Emotions and feelings create an opportunity to reflect upon situations that we find ourselves in and can generate a better 'response-ability' to what is actually happening (Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Shotter, 2016). But it might just as easily stifle us in our behaviors because of the uncomfortable feelings it creates. Understanding the nature of ruptures of habits can help us to become less anxious and stimulate reflection on what is going on, even when our anxious feelings remain.

Experiencing emotions and feelings indicate that we are affected by others, the particular situation, or both. They reflect our capacity to respond and influence the situation at hand towards a more desired one (Massumi, 2015). This thought isn't new: people like Dewey (1895), Damasio (1994) and Burkitt (2014) attribute the same quality to feelings and emotions as tendencies to act in particular ways. Joanne's dissatisfaction with the unproductive pattern of the management team expressed her desire to stop talking about ideas and instead explore what managers were doing. The participants who looked at me and asked me with their eyes to stop the unfruitful discussion is another example of the link between affect and action.

These examples illustrate an embodied perspective on experience as a constant coping with life by which people acquire the necessary skills to successfully find their way through daily life (ibid; Stacey, 2003; Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014). This is more than a mental and discursive coping with the world; it emphasizes a visceral attaching to and detaching from things and objects that contributes to feelings of belonging and separation (Stacey, 2003). This description resonates with my participation in the discussions, in which I was fully immersed in the interactions going on around me, even when I felt myself being excluded from them. Embodiment doesn't imply an impression of external stimuli on the body, but a body that is taken up by the event taking place, as a kite being caught up in the wind; the experience becomes 'being the event' (Ingold, 2011). It is what Shotter (2010) calls acting from within the situation, a 'witness-thinking', that can be transformative of us and of the event taking place. This view is opposite to the commonly held view of the body as a perceiver of external stimuli that are detected, selected and interpreted by means of innate cultural representations that are an inherent part of the mind (Ingold, 2000). This represents the Cartesian split between body and mind and emphasizes a cognitive view of our experience of embodiment which I find incorrect and incomplete.

It seemed as if David's rejection of the escalation case had blocked a flow of movement, or energy, that affected people's bodies and contributed to feelings of resistance that needed to be released sooner or later. The French psychoanalyst, psychiatrist and occupational health physician Christophe Dejours argues that sublimation of the libidinal drive, that is sexual energy, is accomplished by means of work in order to keep people mentally and physically happy (Dashtipour and Vidaillet, 2016). In contrast to Freud, he doesn't think that affecting

the body, the blocking of movement or energy, is caused by intra-psychological mechanisms, such as repression (Wetherell, 2012), but by the social or physical resistances employees meet when trying to accomplish their tasks (Dashtipour and Vidaillet, 2016). Affected bodies are part of discursive processes of meaning-making and acts of selection and construction:

...We are all constantly negotiating and managing affects, our relations with others, habits, emotional repertoires and emerging situations. This negotiation and self-management, however, is social psychological in the fullest sense, infused with culturally specific techniques for self-regulation as distinct from the private, internal, psychic machine Freud proposed. (Wetherell, 2012: 135)

Dejours takes an ethical and aesthetic perspective on work by the effect of ‘real work’ on the bodies of employees, where ‘real’ means the resistance employees meet when they try to accomplish their tasks. In order to overcome that resistance, they have to ‘give’ themselves to the task and complete it by engaging in effective cooperation with co-workers. By cooperating, not only is the work performed, but also a common collective formed that develops the rules and agreements on how the ‘real work’ is done. ‘Peer’ recognition is derived from this work collective and, besides fulfilling the primary task, is mandatory for meaningful work (Dashtipour and Vidaillet, 2016). This notion of collaboration as an embodied endeavor acknowledges the conflict and resistance that are part of the collective in which the ‘real work’ is done. I now relate more to this conception of collaboration than the ideological one that I started with.

### **Collaboration that reveals patterns of power-relating**

David had curbed attention towards abstract managerial discussions and taken away the opportunity to explore opportunities for eliminating obstructions in the ‘real work’. Instead, he stuck to the more familiar, but impersonal, discourse of problems, solutions and actions. This affected the bodies of participants, contributing to feelings and emotions that were expressed later on. Denying the existence of other discourses and stories is a means of control and an expression of power-relating (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Conversations are constrained by emphasizing particular practices, people and relations and avoiding others (Clegg, 2001) and this also reveals an act of power. David rejected the opportunity of including deviating stories from the participants that might have exposed existing power relations and contributed



to the possible solution of the underlying conflict. I suspect this wasn't the first time it happened and the counter-reaction that I witnessed later on likely reflected a recurring pattern within the relationship between the senior managers and the team managers.

Foucault's concept of power, which emphasizes the embeddedness of people's actions within structures of discipline, can shed a complementary light on what happened. Training, the use of rules, manifestos and regulations, surveillance and the buildup of group history all contribute to the disciplining of conversational practices that in a rather unconscious way constrain people in their interactions, spontaneity towards and expressions with each other (Foucault, 1977). The disciplinary effect of David's reaction can explain the participants' initial, and habitual, consent as well as their strong reactions later on, revealing resistance to the decision that was made. Likely, considering confronting David upfront as being too risky, this led to an alternative strategy, pushing the strong feelings into the private spaces of those being dominated (Scott, 1990). But it delayed their expression, didn't eliminate it, and made the outcome of the decision unpredictable and ambiguous. This came in the form of the turbulent discussion about the account management function, in which power and resistance intermingled in a dynamic way:

Resistance is a manifestation of deep-seated struggles that spring forth from collective, communicative conflicts around certain issues ... [Struggle is] a process of ongoing, multiple, and unpredictable calls (power) and responses (resistance) in which power and resistance are often indistinguishable. (Fleming and Spicer, 2008: 5)

Strong emotions and feelings revealing resistance are not only an indication that our habitual behaviors have been interrupted, but also that identities have come into play. I hadn't expected identity to become a part of collaboration, as I presumed that people enter with already established identities or stable selves. But my reflection reveals a different story.

### **The emergence of identity**

I was affected by the actions of others, and this indicated that something of personal value was at stake for me. Becoming attached to specific values, ideas, objects and/or other people means that we identify with them and they become a part of us, thus contributing to a stable sense of who we are. Identities can protect us from existential, social and psychological

anxieties and fears (Knights and Clarke, 2013) when their continuity into the future is secured (Griffin, 2002). Paradoxically, trying to maintain a stable identity by demarcating who we are separates ourselves from the ones we depend upon, thus contributing to the uncertain feelings that we are trying to circumvent. By creating a self-identity we simultaneously create an ‘other’ with qualities that we don’t identify with, which reflects our unwanted self that we oppose (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012):

As self-conscious human beings we are *both* separate from, but also interdependent with others in the world. This separation and interdependence is a key source of ambiguity. (Collison, 2003: 532)

This inherent ambiguity, and corresponding insecurity and uncertainty, implies that identity isn’t the stable and enduring self that we think it is, although often experienced as such. I prefer to describe it as a dynamic and ongoing negotiation process between self, others, institutions and objects (Ybema et al., 2009: 303) in which we all engage (Bauman, 2001: 129) as an ongoing interactional accomplishment (Ybema et al., 2009: 301; Cerulo, 1997: 387) that is inherently ambiguous (Collinson, 2003: 534). I define identity as the stable and coherent narrative, or story, that we tell ourselves and others about who we are, or want to be, which reflexively derives from our participation in competing discourses and different events (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 627; Brown and Coupland, 2015: 4; Gill, 2015a/b: 308; Brown, 2014: 2). This interpretation of identity emphasizes our ongoing efforts to maintain a stable sense of self as well as our social identities which make up an important part of organizational life that we are often unaware of, let alone talk about or reflect upon:

Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives. (Watson, 2008:129)

I hadn’t considered the thought that adopting collaborative ideology would serve the function of attaining a stable sense of self and simply assumed that it would contribute to better results. Paradoxically, by demarcating my identity as collaborative, it unconsciously collided with those of others and, as a result, contributed to the detrimental development of the discussion. While some might have perceived me as collaborative, others might just as well have experienced me as competitive, argumentative or even arrogant. It is even likely that their

perception of me shifted during the conversation, and this makes the constancy and stability of a collaborative identity dubious.

The shifting of our multiple identities happens in a habitual and unreflective way (Dewey, 1922/2007; Musson and Duberley, 2007) in which we keep our options open by applying several, sometimes contradictory, strategies that keep them intact (Ybema and Horvers, 2017). It increases our sense of control over complex situations and reduces feelings of anxiety, but we never know if we'll succeed, and this perpetuates our striving for a stable identity. Actions that result from these felt anxieties and insecurities can stimulate people to become very creative and productive in the constitution of multiple identities (Collinson, 2003). In one single social situation people may be compliant and resistant, cooperative and competitive, friendly and hostile, engaged and detached, which others may perceive as incoherent behavior, but which is perfectly explainable from the point of view of the individual in a particular context.

Expressing contradictory behavior as a polyphony of voices, identities and discourses (Bakhtin, 1984; Shotter, 2010) is inevitable in complex social situations, but it contains a risk. People can comply with the situation they resist, and collude with the people they detest, when on the one hand they criticize what they're participating in, while on the other complying with the set strategy and playing along with it (Ybema and Horvers, 2017). The reluctance of the team managers at the beginning of the conference regarding attendance revealed their possible complicity that expressed itself by showing resistant behavior, doubt and by behaving in a non-participative way. Such behaviors, when incorrectly read by senior management, might evoke counter-behaviors such as increasing control over the change initiative, unconsciously increasing the existing resistance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Retrospectively, I can see how my identity shifted during the unfolding of the discussion. When my self-esteem took a dive, I no longer identified myself with the confident facilitator but with a different role from my past. Later on, when I joined the others on the terrace and became a spectator and listener, I revealed another part of my identity or of another 'self'. This turns collaboration from an ideology into a dynamic process and turns it into an interplay of shifting identities in order to maintain stability in a sea of uncertainty and stable instability.

## **Identities under threat**

My insistence on discussing the escalation case likely contributed to feelings of insecurity within the group, and David, because having this conversation would probably have made their differences in goals and interests more visible. The content-driven agenda kept conflicts and insecurities at bay, and my proposal likely threatened this unity. It would have illuminated their separate identities and probably contributed to the expression of conflict that lay waiting underneath this discussion. I suspect that several of the participants had hoped for this conflict to be expressed and, consciously or unconsciously, expected me to take the role of conductor in order to make that happen. Probably others had hoped for the opposite, or even both, to happen.

The concealed conflict reveals feelings of misrecognition for not being able to express fully what really matters or to contribute in meaningful ways (Knights and Clarke, 2013). Despite the accompanying uncomfortable feelings and protective behaviors, conflict as the intermingling of power, identity and emotions holds a positive potential for change, renewal and novelty (Stacey and Mowles, 2016) that can contribute to the re-orientation of existing hierarchies of identities and can lead to the transformation of every one of them (Foucault, 2008/2010; Ybema et al., 2009). I contend that for collaboration to be generative it needs to contain elements of conflict, struggle and competition and cannot do without. However, this isn't a guarantee that novelty will come about. It might just as easily escalate and turn into a stalemate, as I experienced at the end of that first day.

This is why I reject the notion, especially that proposed by social constructionist theories such as those of Gergen (1994), that people's identities are pliable and that conflicts can be solved, because they are all discursively constituted. This postmodern idea has been enthusiastically adopted by proponents of the positive psychology movement and incorporated into derived concepts such as talent management, empowerment and organizational change. I argue that this plasticity isn't as infinite as social constructionist theory would lead us to believe, and soon meets the resistance of those whose identities are negatively affected. This is not only due to the fears and anxieties that people experience, which drive them to maintain their identities, but also the anticipated negative consequences with regard to their future positions that motivate them to resist the changes as promoted by employers. Also, a change in the

social identity of employees will inevitably change their self-identity and that is often resisted too (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

### **Difficulties in staying neutral and detached**

I had noticed my own reactions toward David's attempt to alter the agenda and, although I went along with the group decision being made, I felt disappointed, as I thought the group had missed an opportunity. The ensuing discussion, however, became more personal as I felt offended by some of the participants for not listening to me to and ignoring my attempts to bring the discussion back to what we were supposed to be talking about, at least from my point of view. I wondered why I hadn't been able to stay relatively detached from what happened, and instead became personally involved. This is a logical question from the standpoint of a facilitator who, coming from an OD-tradition and used to working in a systemic way, is accustomed to maintaining a neutral position as a condition for helping clients with their process. Instead, my experience was that I had become part of the client's process and no longer facilitated from a neutral and objective position, also realizing that in fact I never had.

When reflecting upon the event, I became personally invested not so much because the proposal was rejected, but by the way the decision was made. It hadn't been the open and frank discussion that I preferred to have and, in correspondence with the democratic principles of OD, despite my invitation to do so. Therefore, the decision wasn't unanimous and concealed the disagreement that existed. The event became a moment of ethical disturbance for me (Dale and Latham, 2014) that contested my values and probably those of others. David didn't consider these alternative values, nor the consequences of denying them, and this made the decision for me ethical. Seizing the opportunity to reflect on the decision being made might have diminished feelings of being excluded, but this didn't happen due to the tense atmosphere. It would have revealed the variety of perceptions, stories and personal preferences about the invitation that might have altered the decision that was made, or have led to another discussion afterwards (Thompson and Willmott, 2015). I wonder why I wasn't more argumentative, holding my ground instead of going along with the majority, inviting others to respond or probing into what was happening. Maybe it was my reluctance to interfere too much, trying to maintain the role of neutral facilitator, while at the same time

having a strong opinion and preference for a particular decision. It reveals the existence of intra-personal conflict as the result of holding on to the ideology of collaboration and choosing what mattered most in the situation at hand. Rejecting my personal preference for the sake of collaborative ideology generated mixed emotions within me about my participation and revealed an ethical dilemma about what I considered 'good' for me and the situation.

Concluding the first part of my project, I cannot sustain the notion of collaboration as a static ideology, but instead have come to view it as an emergent aspect of complex social interactions that is directed toward maintaining existing power relations and identities. I will continue my narrative by describing what happened the next morning.

## **Narrative 2 – Reflecting on a confusing first day**

When I entered the conference room the next morning, Joanne approached me and said that the discussion last night on the terrace had become unpleasant, with people accusing each other. She smiled at me and said they had discussed a specific escalation case, the issue they had refused to talk about the previous day. A little later several others approached me and told me about the debate on the terrace or expressed sympathy with my situation the day before and sort of apologized for what had happened. I expected an interesting conversation to come up for the next hour.

I opened the meeting, feeling self-assured again, welcomed everybody and said that I wanted to reflect on what had happened the previous day. I shared my experience of having felt myself becoming increasingly uncomfortable, not feeling listened to anymore and ignored. Also, that my attempts to regain control over the discussion hadn't been very successful and I wondered out loud if the team managers had had similar experiences with the senior managers in their daily work, that is of them not attending enough. I said I thought that the discussions we had had yesterday were covering over issues of real concern. Postponing them meant that nobody had to take full responsibility for them, but also that the decisions they were making during this conference would not lead to the real changes they wanted and the organization might need. The lack of having a meaningful discussion now would likely contribute to

insufficient commitment later on to the agreements that had to be made at the end of the conference.

I summed up what I thought were (some of) the real issues that concerned them: loss of grip by teams on their workload, senior management interfering in operations, loss of integrity due to functional integration and applied pressure on teams to increase production. I turned towards the team managers to ask them if they recognized these issues. It was a deliberate move on my part, as I wanted to remind them of their expectations as they had expressed them the other day. I asked them if by taking steps toward solutions for these issues today, would it make the conference valuable to them? I invited everybody to respond to my reflections and then I stopped.

The group stayed quiet for a while and then Sue was the first one to reply to my story: ‘We’re not afraid saying things to each other and find it difficult to let things pass, especially when the discussion, such as the one that we’re having here, is important. Maybe that’s why we find it so hard to reach consensus. But maybe it’s not only about the content and also about the way we react to each other that makes a difference.’ John replied to her last comment that one thing they did was to start making corrective remarks toward each other.

This raised another discussion about the difficulty the organization seemed to have to finish things, as one of the team managers explained: “We’re very solutions-driven but never finish the last twenty percent of what we do. We’re just not making it.” The discussion continued about the reasons for this behavior such, as the lack of arguments for or against a decision being made, the lack of clarity about who would be responsible for it, the difficulty for managers to take charge of discussions and to complete them in a satisfactory way. A couple of comments were of a more personal and reflective nature. One team manager said: ‘Well, it’s easy, isn’t it? I stay free and don’t have to commit myself to anything.’ Somebody replied: ‘Yes, but you also lose something.’

Charley, one of the team managers, brought up another topic when he raised the question: ‘Why have I been asked to attend this conference? I don’t know. Am I invited to collude with your decisions in order to validate them afterwards toward my colleagues?’ An uneasy silence followed. I held my breath, thinking and wondering about the content and nature of the invitation the team managers had received. Was it communicated as an instruction or an

invitation, was it formally sent by Sue or loosely mentioned by the senior managers? I didn't know because I hadn't seen it, but I realized that it could explain their indifferent, remote attitude at the beginning of the conference. Sue replied his question by saying: 'No Charley, that wasn't the reason. We've said to each other (the senior managers) that we don't see everything, and you guys see so much more about what is happening within the organization that we need you in order to reach a decision. And we've been selective and have carefully looked at the right amount of diversity at this table, being able to really test the decisions that we want to make. The consequence of it is that you become part of the decisions that we make here.' I saw that Sue's answer satisfied Charley and asked him if he wanted to add something. He said he was fine with it and thanked Sue for her reply.

The discussion slowly turned toward the topic of the conference, when somebody asked to the group: 'So, are we going to commit ourselves, are we able to reach consensus here and do we contrast our arguments for and against the decisions we have to make?' The questions kept hanging in the air and because of that, and the time pressure, I suggested that the group come back to these questions at the end of the day, and for now to keep a couple of learning lessons at the top of our minds. I asked the group about it and they answered with suggestions, such as listening more to each other, asking questions when things were unclear and checking up on agreements. Then I turned the group's attention to the agenda for the rest of the day.

### **Inviting a truthful discussion**

The reason I felt reassured when I started the second day was that I knew what I wanted to say, regardless of the consequences it would have for me. Sharing my experience of the previous day with them was important for me because it highlighted our working together and my participation in it. Collaboration isn't just about realizing results, it demands mutual recognition for people's participation and contribution, and space for their needs and values to be met, or negotiated upon, in order to continue. Not fulfilling these relational conditions may lead to termination of the relationship, and I knew that I had reached that point with my client. I thought recognition to be an important topic for the group too, as I imagined similar things going on for them, realizing that their hierarchical relationship created a different perception of willingness and choice in discussing these matters.



The conference illuminates the assumption that collaboration, teamwork and co-creation are subservient to the primary task, or purpose, of the organization, rendering other values less important (Knights and Willmott, 1999). This prioritization is often taken for granted and turns our daily cooperating with each other into an efficiency issue that is only paid attention to when it stops working. It turns the concept of collaboration into a technology, instead of being the faculty by which people achieve results, that affects collaborative efforts to a great extent. It diminishes the quality of our working lives and leads to interactional behavior that is factual, cautious and protective, and with little personal confidence. But collaboration isn't solely a functional endeavor. How we see ourselves and others, and what kinds of results we bring forth depend upon the quality of our collaboration and influences it. It provides people with an opportunity to recognize each other, which is a positive act of affirmation (Honneth, 1995) for who they are, what they bring to the relationship, and for their contributions. By the act of mutual recognition, people's identities are shaped, simultaneously constituting an integrated 'we', and a differentiated 'I' identity that gives meaning to what they are doing and trying to accomplish. It was the absence of this ethical aspect of recognition that had bothered me the previous day, which I wanted to import into the discussion.

Of all the responses I got, it was Charley, one of the team managers, who revealed something of his thoughts and feelings shed light on his experience of the conference. He made himself vulnerable when he mentioned his perception of the conference as an attempt to co-opt him into the decisions that had to be made, which concealed conflict between the two groups of managers, and revealed his loyalty toward the team managers who didn't attend the conference. He saw the collaborative effort of the conference as an attempt to extract his opinions and knowledge for the matter under discussion by seducing him into a participative work method, and potentially turning the conference into a coercive event in order to reach a joint solution. It is no surprise, then, that the team managers behaved cautiously throughout the conference.

Although I saw the team managers and staff behaving more cautiously than the senior managers, they weren't reluctant to express their opinions. It seemed as if they weren't used to expressing themselves in a personal, reflective manner and, instead, relied on factual conversations that were natural and habitual for them and related to their technical background. Being a business engineer myself, I can easily identify with this kind of discussion, which is devoid of subjective, confessional or speculative talk and full of facts,

action-oriented language and normative expressions about what is the case and what needs to be done. Through this kind of talk, people separate the situation under discussion from the relationship they have with it and from the mental contents and the knowledge that they are exchanging with each other, suggesting that an objective and distant attitude is beneficial or sufficient for solving the problem. Its consequence, however, is that people stop appraising situations (Dewey, 1916/2007) and become unreflective about their own involvement and the meaning the event or topic has for them.

Foucault talks about this kind of knowledge as a knowledge-as-truth, when people make truth claims about what needs to be done, not making a reference toward themselves (Foucault, 2001/2005). Truth and what people think become separated and, with it, their ‘lived experience’ of the interactions taking place moves to the periphery of the focal topic of their conversations (Stacey, 2012). For me, it is the aspect of lived experience that is important, because it reveals how we actually experience the relationship and the situation, instead of how it ‘should’ be experienced. Expressing one’s personal experience can give rise to anxious feelings, especially when power differentials are at play, and technical, instrumental and objective conversations then serve as a defense mechanism that avoids expressing the individual’s experience of the relationship. The consequence of not expressing them might create feelings of alienation from a sense of self and/or diminishing self-worth by not giving an account of oneself and taking responsibility for the emerging situation, which might be immoral. I will return to this topic later in my project.

### **Narrating lived experience as a process of meaning-making**

When I told my story of how I had experienced the discussions during the previous day, I departed from the mere contents. I introduced another story, that of my personal experience, in order to motivate others to express theirs. These might reveal something of their experiences of each other and their relationship and add something of importance and variety to the discussion. I believe that sharing stories of one’s own experience can raise ethical awareness of what kinds of relationship we’re constituting, and about consequences for those who are participating. To me, this is important as it expresses our responsibility towards each other and for what we create together in the form of shared meaning, decisions and actions as well as for each other’s wellbeing and participation. Taking collaboration seriously implies

that we start to account for what we're doing and how we're relating to each other, which raises an ethical awareness about how we're collaborating and what is coming of that.

Taking our own experience seriously means that we become aware of how our bodies are affected by others, that is our thoughts and feelings, and how we habitually react to the impressions being made on the body. Because it is through personal experience that we understand the world, which is reflected in the body, and these bodily sensations are our experience (Dewey, 1895) and not simply the expression of it. It turns meaning-making into an embodied process that is expressed by means of language, mostly stories, and bodily and facial expressions. We compare our stories with the ones that are collective and shared, and this intermingling and contestation of individual and collective stories contributes to shared meaning-making. This happens intuitively: we feel whether or not our actions are appropriate in the particularity of the situations we find ourselves in (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). This means that our negotiations are not just about what we cognitively agree and disagree, but also about how we relate to each other in an embodied manner. This implies that how we relate to each other, or how we collaborate, influences the meaning-making process and its outcome, and the other way around.

What I experienced as a chaotic discussion and a meaningful reflection were, seen from this perspective, both ingredients that contributed to shared meaning, neither one of them good or bad, effective or ineffective in themselves. It is not only the content of the stories that counts but also how we participate and come across, as being plausible and coherent, together with our reliability and status as storytellers (ibid). Creating a shared story means participating in the discussion irrespective of its outcome, in which the credibility and reliability of all participants are tested and (re-)created. It is through this process of negotiating that shared meaning, as a form of practical judgment (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014), emerges, which is knowing how to take appropriate action and if we want to be, or are, included in that and can continue the relationship (ibid: 381).

My narration of both events, at the time, was embedded within the situation of the conference, evolving with it and emerging out of it, reflecting my changing intentions and directing my actions. My private story of the discussion during day one as being chaotic was complemented by the stories and actions of the other participants, which reflected the existence of differences in experiences by the participants. I think this was caused by the

different ends we pursued, about preferred ways of relating and how we interpreted what was going on, offset against what we thought that we should be doing. I found it difficult to end the conversation and reach for closure with a coherent story that would pull the varying stories together, and in which I didn't succeed. The way John, the senior manager, stopped the multiple conversations that were going on by saying that it was time to go for a beer ended the event, but not the discussion.

I believe that the stories that were being told during the conference took place against the background of a dominant one, that of managerialism. It surfaced in David's response that expressed the existence of a competing ideology. I think it wasn't just the strength of his argument that tilted the situation over to his side, but also the embeddedness of it within managerialist discourse. I think that both my invitations (exploring the escalation case and inviting a reflective dialogue) were unconsciously experienced as a threat to this discourse and reacted upon in an embodied, habitual way. Accepting my invitation implied a breach with this discourse and, quite likely, might have been felt as an act of disloyalty toward the managers' habitual functional way of talking and their sense of self- and professional identities. I don't know whether or not they did experience my invitation as a threat, possibly endangering their future prospects within the organization. Hence, showing loyalty and obedience are in perfect accord with managerialist discourse, and these values might have contributed to negative emotions amongst participants that contributed to the intensity of the ensuing discussions.

### **Exploring resistant behavior**

The ideology of collaboration leaves little room for resistance. When the latter is observed in a change process, it is generally regarded as unwanted, or as a phenomenon that has to be transformed into an enabling force for the intended change (Ybema et al., 2016; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). The revelations during the reflective conversation, as well as the many individual conversations I had in between the sessions, revealed pockets of resistance. Scott talks about the existence of a hidden transcript that contains stories that are being told behind the scenes, out of sight from dominant groups or individuals, which serve as a counter-ideology from the dominant one (Scott, 1990), in this case managerialist discourse. He calls the latter the public transcript that contains stories that people openly talk about, like the ones

we had during the conference. The existence of a concealed story was affirmed by the revelations of the people who approached me at the beginning of day two, which I labelled as informative gossip. Other signs were the confessional talk I had with Joanne and the discussion on the terrace the first night. It is likely that the personal stories that I had preferred to hear can be considered part of the hidden transcript too.

I had witnessed subtle and explicit acts of resistance taking place in different places and at distinct moments. People choose their moments of confidence well, but concealed acts of resistance will leak into the public transcript (Scott, 1990) and sometimes, and unexpectedly, be performed frontstage (Ybema and Horvers, 2017), that is, become public. The confrontational discussion on the terrace was an example of a hidden transcript that unexpectedly turned it into a public one. The gossip at the beginning of day two had a backstage character, although what people told me was already part of the public transcript. I wonder if the reflections by the participants on day two were or were not already part of the public discussion and really revealed something from the hidden one.

I experienced resistance myself during both events, too, which motivated me to take a stance the next morning. Expressing where my resistance came from helped me to experience my participation in another, for me more coherent, way. The fact that I had decided upon this action was the result of my experience on the first day and of being affected by it. It wasn't solely a rational decision derived from my role of neutral consultant who thought it beneficial for the group to have a reflective and open discussion. It emerged out of what had happened the day before, my reflections afterwards, and what I considered to be an appropriate thing to do. My invitation could have been perceived as seductive, manipulating the participants into an unsafe confessional discussion with each other, but I did believe it could be beneficial for them and the rest of the conference. Reflecting on it helped me to see my own resistance, and that of others in a different light, namely as behavior that could enrich discussions where people become more present and visible. When it emerges from the interaction process going on, it can be an indication of themes surfacing. Allowing for them may enhance the quality of the group process, but might just as easily have the opposite effect. The outcome of one's helpful intention can only become obvious in hindsight.

## **Stimulating openness as a coercive act**

Inviting the others in this kind of reflective dialogue made me consider the ethics of it, knowing that stories were kept hidden and served a purpose. Promoting openness as part of collaborative ideology may unconsciously contribute to the concealment of the hidden transcript when a breach of the silent contract is considered too dangerous. This created a dilemma for me, not knowing in advance what amount of openness was good enough and searching for a good enough stretch of their usual way of talking. Personally, I preferred to open the reflective conversation earlier in the process, but I sensed a limit to what I thought the group was willing to handle and didn't proceed further. My hesitation reveals an ethical question about what it means to pursue a helping role, when it isn't possible to know in advance what the effects of my questioning will be. For the external consultant, there may be considerable room to apply pressure in order to open things up, being accommodated by clients and as a temporary visitor, but this doesn't solve the underlying dilemma and can easily turn into a coercive act. The realization of an intention to be of help can only be determined in hindsight and even then, the question 'beneficial for whom?' will probably lead to a fragmented response. A more realistic position for the consultant might be to see himself as a participant where the limits to what he can, and will, do will be an outcome of the interaction process instead of an input to it.

## **Giving an account of myself**

What I wanted to express could be important for the group and the conference but was of particular importance for me. Professionals run the risk of making themselves invisible for the sake of recognition of the client's needs, resulting in the misrecognition of themselves in the relationship. Many ethical descriptions focus on the inclusion of the other, but not that taking oneself into account might be considered unethical too. Especially when one feels compromised in the situations that I describe in this paper. Moral questions often arise in these ambiguous situations where taken-for-granted discourses collide with those of others', revealing contradicting sets of moral values and rules (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). The consultant can't remain outside of these situations, pretending to maintain a neutral position; he necessarily participates in them, if only by being present and preferably by making his own moral values explicit.

Expressing myself in order to open up another kind of discussion without a final end in mind is what Foucault calls *parrhesia* (Foucault, 1983; 1999). It is a kind of truth-speaking that is open and frank, and which contains an element of risk. You make yourself vulnerable in the face of a (more) powerful audience and thereby risk the denial of the story being told, one's identity, and/or termination of the relationship. The main point of *parrhesia* is that somebody gives an account of him- or herself and by doing that tries to change the relationship he or she has with him or herself and others, enabling social reconstruction. The story someone tells is not about introducing more knowledge that is claimed to be true, but to change its nature by deviating from the status quo, turning away from the normalized standards and contents of the usual conversations (Foucault, 2008/2010; Catlaw et al., 2014).

Speaking up demands courage because of its uncertain outcome, but it makes collaboration ethical in the sense that we take responsibility for our relationships with others by reflecting on them and telling others about our experience. It is an embodied process in which our emotions and feelings alert us to re-orient ourselves in relationships that contradict our ideas, values, norms or sense of self. We need to speak up in order to differentiate ourselves from others and their ideas and values, which becomes a condition for the continuation of the relationship. I argue that collaboration consists of both acts of collusion and collision, representing two sides of the medallion of identity formation, and of belonging and separation, and it is the latter – collision – that emphasizes the *parrhesian* aspect.

Practising *parrhesia* is an act of breaching what is considered appropriate and normal, as is the opening up of the hidden transcript, and both acts can endanger one's position within the group, resulting in exclusion. Taking 'lived experience' seriously can be seen in this same light, which is the reason it might cause anxiety when put into practice. Taking seriously what matters to us doesn't mean that we accept ourselves the way we are (Frankfurt, 2004), but acknowledges how we want to be in the future (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014), and I would add to that what we want to relate to. By that definition, *parrhesia* contains the opportunity for personal transformation by changing our relationships with ourselves, others and the world around us. This might create a 'critical opening' (Butler, 2005: 24) in the ongoing conversations, interrupting the existing power differential, leading to the exploration of new topics, contributions and conversations. Giving an account of oneself turns collaboration into a political practice that contradicts the neutral position of the OD-practitioner and reflects its

indeterminate nature. This alters the notion of responsibility for our participation to a great extent.

From an OD-perspective, the consultant-facilitator is considered to be responsible for developing a dialogic and democratic process that implicitly contributes to high participation and corresponding outcomes. But knowing collaboration as an indeterminate practice shifts the responsibility from its contents and form toward an ethical responsibility for and toward the other. This responsibility reflects the mutual, although unequal, dependence we experience in constituting our relationship, even if we execute our autonomy by speaking up in the face of the dominant other. Collaboration then raises the challenge of mutual recognition in the presence of differences in power, interests and histories, which makes collaboration an ethical practice.

However, Stacey warns us not to take it up as a new ideology, as it might easily turn into an unethical practice when we express everything that comes into our minds in a mindless way (Stacey, 2012).

The topic of parrhesia resonated with me strongly and had surfaced already in my earlier projects, as these made me aware of my tendency to be of assistance to the people and groups that I facilitate and, in doing that, making myself, or a part of myself, invisible. During my research, I started experimenting with expressing what I considered to be important for the process in which I participated instead of withholding it because I didn't consider it appropriate with my professional role. Could it be that many professionals share a similar kind of self-restrictive behavior that contradicts their personal experience of who they are, and which gradually over the years leads to an alienating sense of self because they have become impersonal professionals, and forgotten their relatedness with others? To me, this is why I think that the concept of collaboration is important and worthwhile to reflect upon, to give it meaning and relevance in another way than just being an ideology.



## **Concluding remarks**

### **Collaboration as entanglement**

I started this paper with the question of why we keep on doing what we're doing, not paying attention enough to what is going on, or taking responsibility for our complicity in what we bring forth. My ongoing investigation into processes of collaboration with clients reveals an intricate entanglement of ideology, identity formation, power relations, resistance and affective, embodied experience that makes collaboration a complex, ambiguous and uncertain relational practice that is fundamentally ethical. This entanglement exemplifies the mutual dependence we experience when we collaborate with each other, which is overshadowed by the dominant idea of professionals who act as autonomous individuals, contributing to collaboration by bringing ready-made knowledge in order to attain clear-cut ends using standardized methods as means. I have departed from this idealized description, making clear that collaboration as a practice is something very different. In the concluding remarks I will summarize the main points of my project and emphasize my direction in thinking.

### **Collaboration as an antagonistic-cooperative practice**

This project moved my thinking about collaboration beyond its ideological character that emphasizes maintaining a specific power differential and attaining a particular kind of relationship. The latter aims at affecting others such that they move into a specific kind of relating and behaving, that is of being open, considerate, reflective and ethical toward each other, contributing to mutual recognition, inclusion of differences and better outcomes for all. But the moment people put collaborative ideology to work, it turns into a practice in which they affect each other in an embodied, psycho-physical manner, thereby creating acceptance and/or resistance for what they're doing in the form of reactions that they either welcome or reject. Experiencing resistance is not commonly associated with collaboration.

This affective practice is of a simultaneously cooperative and competitive nature, which makes it political too. When people have become skilled and mature in their encounters with others, they 'forget' this characteristic by surrounding themselves with those people who they experience as joyful, meaningful, healthy and harmonious (Stacey, 2005; Dashitipour and Vidaillet, 2016; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014). This preference diverts attention away from the politics of collaboration, characterized by struggle, uncertainty and ambiguity, and from

people and situations that contribute to uncomfortable, even anxious feelings, as my narratives showed. On the one hand, such feelings can motivate people to a high degree of activity and creativity but, on the other, make them complicit to forms of subconscious, dysfunctional collusion in order to reduce anxiety (Adler and Harzing, 2009) or to avoid the fear of failure. This complicity can result in the corrosive processes that people reject, but nevertheless co-produce, and contribute to experiencing feelings of alienation, loss of self-respect or shame by excluding parts of their identity that they value. For me, this reframes these negative emotions and feelings into potentially valuable, although uncomfortable, ones that make people aware of something important happening in their dealings with situations and others that they might neglect when they strive for unproblematic and harmonious relationships.

The embodied aspects of collaboration emphasize feelings and emotions that are mostly neglected in people's business endeavors with others. They make resistance, struggle and conflict an inherent part of the concept of collaboration, and an indispensable asset for creating meaning and becoming visible in their interactions with others. I experienced that, in particular, these aspects propel us into action, intensify our participation, making our position and interests more visible and clear. This antagonistic-cooperative nature of collaboration is underexposed and diminishes its generative capacity, that is its capacity for change and novelty, when only its idealized side is emphasized.

The static and prescriptive side also diverts attention away from the painful experience of not being able to fulfil our ideals (Griffin, 2002). The struggles and discomforts people experience so often illustrate their dependence upon others, especially those situations in which they don't get what they want or expect to receive. I believe that these experiences of defeat, of loss of face, explain why it is so hard to turn attention towards the realities of collaboration and away from the imaginary ideals that mediate the discrepancy of people's social and political realities (Thompson and Willmott, 2015; Hoedemaekers, 2017). Actually experiencing the constraints of a power differential, or of being dependent upon another, can be painful and humiliating, and contribute to feelings of anxiety, shame and alienation (Thompson and Willmott, 2015). They remind people of the fact that their freedom is restricted and always subject to the political contestation of 'the polyphony of discourses' (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Shotter, 2010), by which others set clear limits on the amount of difference and diversity that is allowed for. This reality contradicts the contemporary and

popular ideal of being autonomous and independent individuals, which easily contributes to anxious feelings when people's experience is otherwise. Hence collaboration always contains the threat of exclusion of one's identity and/or ideas. I hadn't been aware of this close connection between collaboration and identity before I started exploring the narratives in this project.

I argue that the dynamic, stable-fragile character of people's identities, or of the process of identity formation, constitutes the collaboration process to a great extent and enhances the struggles and negotiations that are going on. These are not only about the ends and means that people pursue but, maybe even more, about the sustenance of their individual and social identities that are either recognized and included or rejected and denied. With the latter comes the risk of being excluded from the group that people belong to. Out of our collaborative endeavors with others emerges meaning as the intermingled combination of material and immaterial outcomes, power relations and recognition of identities. These elements are hard to separate, let alone being able to exclude one of them, from the collaborative relationship. They can all be downplayed, favoring one or another of the elements. The implication is that people are always involved, and this makes ethics an inherent part of the concept of collaboration and something worth reflecting upon.

### **Collaboration as an ethical, embodied practice**

Coming to a conclusion, I argue that we can't uphold the concept of collaboration as prescriptive, abstract and idealized behavior for the consultant–client relationship any longer, or as a 'best' way to operate, in order to attain a certain outcome or quality of that relationship. Instead, collaboration emerges out of people's interactions with others, characterized by an antagonistic-cooperative nature in which identities and ideologies are maintained and altered simultaneously. When people emphasize idealized notions of collaboration, they prioritize its values above those that are different and coerce others with deviant values into conformity. Paradoxically, in striving for collaboration, people have to become antagonistic towards difference, emphasizing conformity and obedience to the collaborative ideology. By allowing for the difference and diversity that already exists, and the ensuing adversity and contestation that comes with it, they admit that collaboration is a political process upon which they are able to reflect. This brings ethics to the fore.

Collaboration as an ethical practice means developing awareness of the mutual formation of relational patterns and their consequences with regard to the inclusion and exclusion of people's identities and ideas. The antagonistic-cooperative nature leads to the simultaneous emergence of recognition-misrecognition, and it is this indeterminacy that contributes to feelings of anxiety and the experience of struggle. Enduring these anxieties and internalizing the struggles offer opportunities for self-transformation by incorporating the ethical requests of others (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Collaboration can enhance people's capacity to endure these anxieties and struggles, allowing for the inclusion of differences but without forgetting to give an account of who they are as a demand for recognition. By speaking up, people take themselves and others seriously, making collaboration a moral and antagonistic practice that allows for the simultaneous continuation and transformation of patterns of relating.

Accepting collaboration as an ethical practice creates the opportunity for reflection. An ethical stance makes people aware of what they are doing by creating opportunities for reflection upon their mutual intentions, outcomes, experiences and participations. Reflexivity is ethical as well as political and can't prevent differences from arising, nor can it guarantee desired outcomes. It can, however, expand understanding of the ways people interact as intricate processes of identity formation, ideology and power-relating by which they try to get their needs for recognition and participation met. Becoming aware, in an affective and embodied way, may enhance people's understanding of what is actually going on when they are collaborating and what this means to them, and to diminish their emphasis on autonomy.

# Synopsis

## Overview of the projects

The synopsis comprises a reflection on the four projects making up this research, in a way summarizing them, by illuminating the ways my thinking shifted during these three years. Moreover, the research is extended by a critical appraisal of my findings that is based on the knowledge gained throughout these years, culminating in the main arguments of my thesis.

Writing the synopsis was a fascinating experience that stimulated me to reflect on the projects and the themes that emerged from them. On some occasions, this led to the opening up of new territories that attracted my attention, hence the expansion of the already extensive literature research I had done. I realized that by starting to write the synopsis, I also had made a start in closing down the research, and so I had to make decisions about what to focus on, what to let go of and what to set aside for another time. It created ambivalent feelings, which I wrote about in one of my projects, that also marked the experience of writing this synopsis.

I have summarized every project, while simultaneously reflecting upon the themes that the project raised and the questions it evoked, hence continuing my explorations and deepening them. While the first project is an autobiographical account of my occupational background, the other three projects contain reflections upon ‘disturbing’ working experiences that puzzled and perplexed me at the time and became the material for my research. There is a clear line running through the projects, of collaboration within the context of the consultant–client relationship, and that expands into different directions in each project, illuminating a variety of aspects. These aspects emerged out of my research spontaneously without any deliberate intent, which created a kind of research that developed in accordance with my own curiosity. That made it a very interesting journey into my own experience of collaboration.

I end the synopsis with an explanation of my main arguments which comprise the contribution to practice. But first, I will start with a methodological overview explaining the way I conducted the research.

## **A summary of the four projects**

### **Project 1 – A consultant’s journey**

In project one I have given an account of my development as a professional consultant over more than thirty years. I describe how I started as a junior consultant working for the Dutch Ministry of Defense and end the occupational biography with my current status of working as an independent change consultant. I reflect upon memorable events that have shaped me and stimulated me to reflect upon who I was at the time and how my thinking, feeling and acting evolved throughout the years.

When re-reading my first project it strikes me how oppressive and paradoxical the consulting business is. What attracted me to it more than thirty years ago was the variety, creativity and freedom the business offered me, when compared to the imagined dullness of a regular job. But the disciplining forces that I experienced in my formative years were quite severe, although I didn’t experience them as such at the time. The attractiveness of the profession hides the shadow side of the professionalization process taking place, that is, being socialized into the professional discourse of consulting. It seems to me that professionalization is a euphemism for a process of social disciplining that, although voluntarily undertaken, removes unwanted aspects from the profession and is therefore likely to contribute to experiences of dehumanization by the professional. I discovered that the consultancy business as a practice is uncompromising in this endeavor.

The narratives illustrate that my consulting life was in fact filled with the ordinary politics of daily struggles, skirmishes and conflicts that happened without much deliberate intention. Politics reveal differences in opinions, interests, viewpoints and histories that exist in matters that haven’t yet been settled, which people are engaged in and which need to be discussed in order to be resolved (Mowles, 2011). In reality, people use all kinds of influencing tactics in order to realize personal and organizational objectives (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006; Jackall, 2010). What is characteristic of organizational politics is the presence of antagonism, or agonism, emphasizing that others, and their ideas and interests, have to be defeated (Mouffe, 2013) or critically opposed and interrogated. Often there is no rational way to solve the conflict, so alternative tactics are used (ibid):

Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’.  
(Mouffe, 1999: 755)

Organizational politics contradict the idealization of business and consulting life, which are geared towards continuous development and improvement, by pretending that people are working in unison towards a shared purpose. In reality, people constrain each other (Elias, 1939/2000), often without being aware of it though sometimes deliberately, and this mutual constraining is accompanied by emotions, feelings and thoughts that reflect how we relate towards ourselves, others and situations.

Both feelings and emotions are social and reflect the particular situation people find themselves in, providing meaning and relevance (Burkitt, 2014; Hacker, 2018). They are often hard to separate but, while all emotions are feelings, not all feelings are emotions (Burkitt, 2014). It is often the actual social situation where the expression of feeling reveals an attached emotion that is negotiated within the relationship and affects it. The outcome of that negotiation determines whether we talk about a feeling or a particular emotion (ibid). In the text, I will use them interchangeably.

I realized that emotions and feelings weren’t irrational, non-work related or inconvenient, but an inherent part of work and actually valuable, although often uncomfortable. They bring human experience to the fore, illuminating the moral and ethical aspects of our interactions, which is what we consider ‘good’ for us in concrete situations (Dewey, 1891; Mead, 1934/2015), especially where these are compromised. Although project one gives an account of the consulting business as inherently political, I write about politics as an undesired aspect that I wanted to get rid of by ignoring it, considering it a hindrance for professional consulting. My research changed that opinion considerably; thus I no longer resist politics and have come to see them as a valuable part of consulting work.

Distancing oneself as a business consultant or manager (Sturdy et al., 2015) from these daily politics serves the purpose of keeping messiness at bay and the situation under control by keeping it rational and objective. I hadn’t considered denying my personal involvement in negotiations with clients and colleagues as a ‘safe’ strategy, nor the ethical considerations. By staying detached, I could absolve myself from responsibility for what happened by blaming

circumstances or others for their negligence or political behavior. But taking the attitude of the ‘neutral’ consultant was inherently political, because I was already involved in the situations that I described. I realized that it is impossible to stand outside of our interactions with others, that we already and always participate, and so are responsible for the consequences that we, voluntarily and involuntarily, help to create.

Taking a professional distance was enhanced by my natural inclination to avoid conflict, struggle and opposition, which I experienced as unpleasant, unwanted and dysfunctional in my role as consultant. Adopting the OD ideology didn’t help me in accepting this unwanted part of reality; instead, it made me avoid it even more. OD as a theory implies that conflict and contestation can be re-designed and overcome by increasing knowledge about human behavior and development. But my narratives in project one showed otherwise and the discrepancy between my ideological role and experience started to bother me. They were accompanied with feelings of insincerity and fakeness that demotivated me in my work, which was one of the reasons for participating in the DMan program. I wanted to find out what I was actually doing when facilitating clients.

Project 1 made me realize that the image of the professional, autonomous individual who is able to exert his free will upon others in order to perpetuate growth and progress is strong and appealing. It is sustained by the dominance of managerialist discourse that assumes that organizational futures can be created and attained in a controlled and predictable way. I realize that this way of thinking is firmly ingrained in me, in an embodied, habitual and unreflective manner that influences the way in which I perform my role of consultant, trainer and facilitator. It can’t simply be exchanged for a new perspective, since unlearning habits and adopting new ones takes time. Also, my narratives show that I do become immersed in situations, not being able to stay detached, objective and neutral, as my narratives regarding the Ministry of Defence illustrate. Instead, I coped with the situations that I describe as best I could. Hence, the outcomes of my participation revealed the discrepancy between claiming abstinence from politics while in reality practising it in an active way.

In the last part of project one I describe my fascination with a social constructionist and relational way of consulting, in which my emphasis shifted towards what people were co-constructing. When re-reading it, I find it still individually oriented and aimed at attaining the same ends as I used to do, but now from a relational-constructionist perspective. The project



reflects my difficulty in letting go of this cybernetic kind of thinking, despite knowing that its rational causality (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) of independently setting goals is hard to maintain, when realizing that I am also part of the 'system' that I am supposed to redesign, revealing a paradoxical situation. Letting go of systemic thinking feels like corroding my image as the professional who acts intentionally and knows what he does, a need that, I believe, clients are seeking when they want to initiate change. Social constructionism enhances this need by suggesting that the future they aspire to can be realized by changing their conversations and interactions. What social constructionism deletes from this image is the daily politics within organizational life.

Part of the daily politics is the fluctuating power relations that emerge from the constant interactions and actions of the people involved, enabling and restricting their actions and behaviors (Elias, 1978). Consultants become part of these 'power figurations', as Elias calls these webs of power relations (ibid), the moment they enter an organization, which is an underexposed element of consulting work (Mowles, 2011). I used to associate power with getting things done, but started to see it in a different, more multifaceted, light during the project. Elias' notions of power and power figurations (Elias, 1978) helped me to become aware of the constant and shifting power dynamics within organizations. They are the inevitable consequence of the intermingling of people's ideals, intentions and actions that contribute to the constraints they experience when trying to bring them to fruition.

Ending my first project, I was left on one hand with an ideology that emphasized a conflict-free, egalitarian and cooperative relationship with clients (Hicks, 2010; Schein, 1998; Bushe and Marshak, 2015), while on the other experiencing the opposite, that is conflict and politics, in my daily interactions with them. These aspects became the topic of the research proposal that I wrote after having finished project one. My argument is that putting this ideology into practice will inevitably result in experiences of difference, struggle and tension when interacting with others. Struggle and strife are inherent aspects of consulting work which reveal that client organizations restrict consultants in their work more than they think they do. What I called the irrational aspects of consulting work, such as politics and emotions, are an inherent part of collaboration, although neglected or rejected most of the time. Reflecting upon these aspects and taking them into account offers an opportunity for coming to know better what is going on when we collaborate. That became the topic for my second project.

## **Project 2 – Collaborative strategy as power relating in the consultant–client relationship**

The central question of this project was what happens if consultants put the ideology of collaboration into practice? My first project had shown the discrepancy between what I thought consulting should be and my personal experiences of it in daily organizational life. I wondered why the discrepancy exists, how it is created and sustained and what its practical consequences are: these were some of the questions that I started my project with.

In project 2 I explored how the ideology of the collaborative relationship between consultant and client works in reality. My narrative describes the change effort of a mental health institution in the Netherlands that intended to put its clients, being addicts, in the lead with regard to their recovery and reintegration in society. In the first part I reflected on my introduction into the organization, while the second part described two preparatory meetings that I facilitated, in which a group of employees were introduced to the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method and developed a program for a change conference that marked the start of the change process to come. The organization wanted to apply this positive change method to a complex cultural topic, the relationship between therapist and client. I had been asked to introduce the method to them and to facilitate a large-scale AI-conference.

The typical AI-facilitator is positive, cooperative and expresses a helping attitude towards the client. In the previous couple of years, I had noticed that this role was starting to bother me because it restricted me in my consulting work, not so much within myself, but with clients who expected me to behave as a ‘positive change agent’. I started to notice flaws in the branding done by them, when on some occasions during this project I was told that my remarks were not very appreciative. On other occasions, I noticed I was censoring myself when noticing things that bothered me, such as the unexpected departure of the project manager. It clarified for me that ideology fulfils a function, and this is true also for collaboration.

In becoming the trusted partner of a client, the consultant can’t do things that are considered untrustworthy which eliminates, for example, political behavior. At the start of a project, (s)he doesn’t know what this behavior entails and so has to find out. This turns collaboration into an uncertain, ambiguous relationship that is contradictory to its ideological character. I felt

myself often in the peculiar situation of having to stay true to my clients' expectations of me, while not knowing what these expectations entailed, realizing that acting in a trustful way actually would not be very helpful for the client. On some occasions when I made remarks that I thought were helpful, the client hadn't experienced them as such, which probably decreased my trustworthiness in their eyes. A likely consequence of this ambiguous situation is that the consultant can easily become complicit in the relationship with the client.

Characteristic of a complicit relationship is that the consultant and/or the client are not sure enough about each other or the situation to call it a secure collaborative relationship (Silverstone, 2002). It is often the case when they don't know each other, as in this project where I was introduced to the CEO by one of his managers. In the project I use the psychoanalytic term 'collusion' as 'an unconscious agreement between the group's and the consultant's defenses with the indirect aim of avoiding discomfort' (Petriglieri and Wood, 2003: 336). Both definitions, complicity and collusion, reveal the uncertainty that is inherent in the relationship but which the partners find difficult to talk about. In the latter description, that is because of unconscious processes going on to reduce anxiety levels and to cover up the discomfort of the 'as-yet-unsettled' situation. It seems to me that fulfilling the role of trusted adviser for the client then becomes a euphemism for avoiding anxiety.

Collaboration as ideology fulfills the function of reducing feelings of uncertainty and anxiety and the possibility of conflict by restricting behavior. It has become a disciplining mechanism (Foucault, 1977) that expels its opposite, namely dissent and difference, and suppresses the inherent complexity and uncertainty of the relationship as well as the change endeavor. It contributes to social order (Dalal, 1998) and covers up the underlying power relation that is likely maintained. I realized during this project that collaboration fulfills a function, but simultaneously restrict consultants in their freedom to respond appropriately to situations, in particular in expressing critical, political and conflictual behavior.

I relate to the importance of people's individual and professional identities as important mediators between participating and regulating behaviors. If the consultant wants to participate (s)he must restrict him-/herself to the client's rules of the collaboration, or risk exclusion or becoming a scapegoat. To keep his/her identity intact (s)he will constrain him-/herself voluntarily and this will contribute to the 'collusion'. Re-reading that part, it seems as if identity work is a matter of cognitive-discursive negotiation, but I have come to believe that

this process is an embodied and emotional process that happens on an unconscious level as well; the enabling and restricting by others and circumstances are felt in the body, as I experienced when Harry told me that Diane was leaving the project. It is not so much that we try to keep our identities intact, as in keeping a coherent image of it, rather that we try to sustain our relationships in the future and as a consequence continue to be who we are. It becomes clear that identity, power and emotions are closely related.

The experience of accompanying emotions and feelings in the situations I describe became prevalent and motivated me to start exploring them. I discuss how they are an underexposed element of the relationship, separated from reason and considered less important or even disruptive. People tend to ignore or suppress their emotions and feelings, especially the negative ones such as anxiety, anger, disappointment, shame, embarrassment and guilt. They are socially less desirable, making people aware of power relations and signaling the likely social consequences when people do express them. Also, rationality in organizations is highly regarded, which lowers the importance of emotions and feelings.

I argue that emotions and feelings are highly relevant, offering people the opportunity to expand their awareness of what is actually going on in social situations, to become aware of their emotional tendencies and develop alternative responses to emotionally charged situations. Their performativity reveals that emotions and feelings are more social and less individual than people think. Acknowledging their importance made me become less reluctant to notice them during collaboration and to try to use them somehow, realizing that emotions and feelings are constituted within the social situation and reflect power relations as the enabling and constraining activities of others (Elias, 1978). They reflect what we care about in a particular situation and the feeling of being threatened by becoming separated from it or joyful by maintaining our attachment to it. This is an unusual interpretation of emotions and feelings, as they are usually considered to be of a private nature and therefore in general are omitted from social interactions. It was a good learning lesson for me to discover their social character.

In the first narrative, I describe my experience of facilitating an event in which I introduce Appreciative Inquiry and a second one in which the group develops a program for an upcoming conference. What strikes me when re-reading it are my habitual judgments about specific situations during the events, not recognizing them as personal interpretations driven

by unconscious assumptions about how things should be and how people should behave. In hindsight, my unreflective responses might have been perceived as odd or arrogant, prioritizing my point of view over those of others. But I realized that the same must have been going on for the other participants, too. Realizing that these processes happen habitually and unconsciously, that they produce patterns and effects that are beyond our individual making and can't be controlled or predicted by any one of us was a wakeup call for me in becoming more conscious about what I and others are doing when we're collaborating.

In order to better understand what was actually going on, I explored several psychoanalytical mechanisms, such as projection, transference and countertransference, and parallel process. It shed light on possible sources for the fantasies, anxieties and recurring patterns and themes that were part of our conversations. They helped me to become aware of the existence of unconscious processes and the possible effects on group behavior. What I had problems with, though, was the conceptual nature of these mechanisms, assuming particular causes for individual or group behaviors. It seemed as if I was adding something on top of the situation that wasn't there, and which wasn't particularly helpful. It created distance, pretending that I knew something about the client organization that it wasn't aware of, hence emphasizing my role as expert and contributing to the inequality of the relationship.

The idea that an underlying essence or pattern can be revealed by lowering defensive behaviors to unleash change contradicts my experience that it is often people who restrict me in expressing my thoughts or executing actions who contribute to the change process. Fantasizing about such covert mechanisms might turn attention away from our interactions with each other while trying to find explanations that are exogenous from us. However, I do think it useful to consider the unconscious processes which are going on, such as the unarticulated and unvalidated themes that are already part of people's interactions (Stacey, 2003), but that need to have attention paid to them.

The project has made it clear that the application of collaboration as an ideology raises fundamental questions about its feasibility and consequences for consulting work. It masks its opposing elements and abolishes power and politics from the relationship, or at least hides it from sight. This will restrict the participants' expressions of difference and dissent, hence undermining the collaboration. I argue that when collaboration is being used to create a collusive relationship, or when it turns into one, this will create a false 'we' identity that

masks conflict and isn't experienced as a cooperative orientation towards each other, where both parties restrict themselves to preserve a common good (Hatch and Schultz, 2004). This brings ethics to the fore, in particular with regard to the consequences of the collaborative relationship. This became the starting point for project 3, in which I went beyond a functional orientation of collaboration.

### **Project 3 – Going beyond an instrumental relationship and becoming responsible**

Project 2 had made it clear that applying the ideology of collaboration wasn't unproblematic and had come with consequences for me and others. It made me think about the inherent 'good' of collaboration, which became the topic for this third project. I explored two events that revealed ethical considerations in my collaboration with a client, being a local government executive organization. Recently, I had developed a new governance policy for them and heard that the CEO wanted to delay its execution. I worried that the delay might signal for employees that writing the document had been more important than executing the policy and so I took a chance to discuss my worries with senior management during an evaluation meeting about the project. There, I experienced ambivalent feelings: I was being complimented for my work but also feeling silenced when I expressed my concern.

I found myself fully participating in my interactions with the client and not considering myself acting as a neutral facilitator any longer. The emotions and feelings helped me in making sense of the situation, of the power relations going on, and to become aware of the constraints that senior management placed on me. These feelings and emotions expressed moral values I held that went beyond the mere fulfilment of occupational roles or of attaining results.

Deviating from this functional orientation and attending to a moral concern that bothered me, I realized that I had tried to negotiate the terms of the relationship and its content. Their refusal to discuss the matter further revealed the power relations going on. I felt myself not being recognized for sharing my concern with them although, rationally speaking, I knew it was their right to do so. When reflecting on the meeting, it became clear to me that whatever the outcome had been, my action would have affected the relationship anyway, for better or

worse, illustrating that ethics emerges from action and isn't pre-ordained (Griffin, 2002). The outcome affected my relationship as it slightly diminished my respect for them.

I wondered why that was the case, because the reaction of senior management had not been unfriendly. I noticed that what bothered me was not their rejection of the issue but their act of transforming it from a moral issue into a functional one. This reflected the politics of the situation, being the negotiation of the interpretation of the concern raised. The power differential became visible in the non-negotiability of the framing, and this was what had affected me. It illustrates that politics aren't absent from a collaborative relationship that evolves in a simultaneously predictable and unpredictable way with every problem encountered and every choice made. The narrative revealed the complex character of ordinary social situations that can turn into ambivalent ones where we have to choose and are unable to foresee the consequences, which illustrates the ethical character of these very common situations.

When senior management refused to continue the conversation about the concern that I had raised, it was my feelings that made me aware there was more going on than just the conversation we were having. The interaction made me realize that power relations mediate the expression of recognition (Honneth, 1995) and of identity. It wasn't so much the expression itself, as what the recognition was about and on whose terms it was given. I realized that recognition isn't simply given, nor taken, but emerges from the negotiations that are going on within the meaning-making process. It restricts or enables the expression of identity, and both reveal the power relations going on.

In the second part of the narrative, I explore the authority relationship between a senior manager and a team manager from the organization, reflecting on the power dynamics. I argue that the form of authority between the employer and employee is changing, while its hierarchical nature has stayed intact and is masked. Not in this case, in which the authority of the senior manager was overtly expressed.

During a meeting, the senior manager blamed the team manager for not taking responsibility for a failed project. The meeting, which had been animated until that moment, suddenly turned into a tribunal. It changed the atmosphere in the room considerably, increasing the

protective behaviors of the team managers and myself, diverting attention from the conflict towards safer topics.

I experienced the act of the senior manager as one of disciplining all attendees, spreading the fear that this might happen to them too. His behavior made it clear that we were being observed and assessed (Foucault, 1977) and that the outcome might have consequences for our status in the group, our influence and self-esteem. The message was that if you don't fulfil your role adequately, you risk losing face, status or even your job. It emphasized a clear power differential, which contributed considerably to feelings of anxiety from the imposed threat of social exclusion or public humiliation.

The incident revealed an important assumption underlying the relationship, embedding collaboration within wider frames of relationships and developments. One of these developments, and I argue a significant one, is the changing relationship with the employer, where employees are transformed into 'entrepreneurial subjects' (Catlaw and Marshall, 2018: 10) and managers have become their employees' coaches, which implies collaborating with them. Under this new 'contract' the employee must exercise his freedom and autonomy, while being supported by the manager-coach.

The new relationship reveals the assumption of a principal-agent 'contract' (Anderson, 2009) where the employees act autonomously on behalf of the manager's delegated responsibility, while being held accountable by him/her for the agreed upon outcomes. What had struck me about the incident was the lack of responsibility shown by the senior manager, while putting the blame solely on the shoulders of the team manager. It was the lack of information the team manager had received and the failure of their mutual communication that had contributed to the failed project, which showed the senior manager's complicity in the failing of the project.

I argue that the consultant-client relationship is affected by this same development that decreases the possibility for consultants to attend to the complexity and ambiguity of situations. They are pressured to conform to the client's managerialist agenda under the threat of losing influence or even the assignment. Despite appeals to personal engagement and entrepreneurship, these social and cultural developments turn employees as well as consultants into calculating and colluding contractors because of the increasing power



differential with the client. The collaboration turns into a collusive relationship that leaves the consultant little room to exercise his/her professional integrity, hence coercing him/her into becoming complicit with the client's efficiency-oriented agenda (Stivers, 2008).

The incident illustrated another aspect of collaboration, namely its precarious and contested character that can turn a situation quickly from a cooperative into a hostile affair. The senior manager could have continued the cooperative atmosphere but chose otherwise. Maybe he felt uncomfortable with it, or the situation didn't suit his agenda, leading him to turn the meeting from a cooperative into an antagonistic one. As a result, he distracted attention from the structural conflict that I was trying to get at, which was the tight control that the senior management team exerted on the team managers. By playing the blame game (Anderson, 2009) he secured the power differential and prevented the discussion from taking place. This precarious character turns collaboration into a simultaneously cooperative and competitive affair that reflects the political dimension of the process going on. I concluded that instead of facilitating or designing the politics out of the meeting, it is what collaboration is ultimately about.

The experiences that I reflect upon make it clear that collaboration as an ideology reduced the complexity of the actual situations, hence was consequential and raised questions such as whether the behavior of the senior manager could have been interpreted as collaborative as well. or if inquiry into the conflict could have been considered a collaborative act. Answering these questions affirmatively would have altered the meeting. In that sense, these questions are ethical as well as political because they emphasize a difference in repertoire without being sure what the consequences of this alternative will be. I argue that the consultant should ask him-/herself these kinds of questions when participating in his/her clients' practice, hence actively looking for an opening in the habitual patterns of the client's power relations and communicative interactions.

If the consultant isn't able or allowed to explore the situation and add clarity, (s)he will likely contribute to current power relations and communicative patterns. Being mutually dependent means that the consultant and client will affect each other in such a way that a change will occur as an acknowledgement of that relationship. If not, the consultant will either collude with the client or become too detached to be effective. How the interdependence unfolds will become apparent during the collaboration, for example in the handling of differences and

ethical considerations. I argue that it is important for consultants and clients in becoming reflexive (for an explanation see the Methodology section) about the collaboration, in particular the experienced quality of relating and participation and the mutually felt recognition. If these aspects are neglected or experienced as poor, it is likely that people and the work will suffer, now or in the future. It will affect the experience of collaborating that raises the question of whether or not it can still be called a collaboration. Reflection upon the collaboration might then become conditional upon the sustainability of the joint practice and its consequences. Taking up this challenge by giving an account of oneself became the issue in my final project.

#### **Project 4 – Collaboration as a politics of affect**

In this project, I continued with two narratives from the local government executive organization that I wrote about in project 3. Both are about a two-day conference which I facilitated that took place half a year after the events I described in project 3. I wanted to continue my exploration about what we say we do when we are collaborating with each other, challenging the notion of the consultant as a neutral OD facilitator. I was curious about the habitual and unreflective ways of collaborating and the ways in which people deal with them as an embodied experience. This became the starting point for my exploration.

In the first narrative I explored a discussion that took place during the conference and my reaction to it. During day one, an agenda topic was rejected, and this small, insignificant incident led to a heated discussion that followed the rejection. I lost control of the discussion and described my corresponding feelings and attempts to regain control. The unexpectedly chaotic discussion highlighted an underlying assumption in many conferences and meetings, namely that they have to happen in a particular and predictable way with a set agenda, a routine participation by the attendants and a predictable outcome. Collaboration serves a function: to remove difference, contestation and antagonism from the scene, or make them subservient to the agenda's purpose.

Bourdieu (1978) mentions the non-intentionality of our ways of coping with these normal, everyday activities, which he calls *habitus*, that express our preferences and disapprovals of how meetings should be run. There is a normative element attached to it, which triggers reactions and emotions when breached. *Habitus* as a disposition, however, can't guarantee a

predictable process as people's differences in ideologies and interests easily collide and, despite their similarities, people express themselves in unique ways.

I triggered the incident by proposing the alteration of something on the agenda, which one of the senior managers, David, rejected. That annoyed me. Later, I realized that collaboration can't simply imply compliance with a set program and must offer the opportunity for including difference. Dewey (1922/2007) and Burkitt suggest (2014) that non-conscious habit is closely related to reflection, because when others interrupt us this creates an opportunity to become aware of habitual tendencies and ideologies. Instead of interpreting David's rejection as a constraint, my annoyance could have led to reflection about what was happening, thereby generating a conversation other than the one we had had.

The annoyance revealed emotions and feelings that reflected their embeddedness within the social situation and the power relations I experienced as a constraint within our interactions with each other. I was affected by David's rejection of an exploration of the significance of my proposal because it didn't take place and made me feel that my initiative went unrecognized. Power relations direct attention towards some topics and away from others, and as such are normative towards what is to be recognized and what is not (McQueen, 2015). My disappointment was due to the discussion about the proposal, which I found unsatisfactory, more than its outcome. This I hadn't realized at the time.

The emotions and feelings I experienced refer to embodied experience. In general, our bodies tend to prefer joyful and uplifting relationships that minimize tensions (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014). This explains why collaboration is such an attractive practice for many, as it emphasizes harmony while deflecting conflict and struggle. What is also true is that our bodies will resist other bodies as part of the alternating process of attraction and repulsion (Stacey, 2005). When people resist the resistance they experience in their interactions with others, they deny an important part of their experience by moving away from the unhappy realities of collaboration that consist of struggle, conflict, ambiguity and/or uncertainty. When ignored or rejected, this will move a common aspect of human life into the background of people's experience and consciousness.

I noticed how difficult it was to hold onto the collaborative ideology when the circumstances affected me so much that it became impossible to continue my idealized behavior any longer

without losing touch with the situation. I would not only have lost touch with the ongoing conversation but risked becoming alienated from my own experience. I experienced resistance, so I acted in order to become more visible within the event. This indicates that identity was involved and turns it into an interesting and vital issue for exploring collaboration from a different angle than I had thought.

I hadn't considered my identity as a relevant aspect for exploring collaboration, considering it to be stable and whole. But I felt it had been threatened during the heated discussion, professionally as well as personally. This illustrates the contestation of identity while interacting with others, emphasizing its stable-unstable character. Collaboration sustains identity as a stable sense of self, framing interaction as an exchange between unchanging subjects (Brinkmann, 2013). I argue that, in order to sustain a stable sense of self, people apply all kinds of strategies to maintain the experience of coherence, for example by clinging to ideologies such as collaboration and managerialism, or by building cohesive networks around these ideologies. Paradoxically, these strategies contribute to the collisions that people try to avoid, hence contributing to the movement of habitus and identity. As a result, they experience their relationships and identities as being stable and fragile at the same time. I have come to believe that the coherence sought is more in the continuation of patterns of relationship, out of which identity emerges, than in maintaining a strict coherence in identity itself, although I realize that the two are closely connected and constitute each other.

The reason I wanted to reflect on the meeting the following day was to initiate a discussion around how the managers thought about their responsibilities towards each other. Not feeling recognized for my contribution the previous day revealed power relations, that is feeling constrained by another's actions, and a pattern that denied the reciprocity and interdependence of the relationship. Under the guise of having a collaborative conference, I noticed that topics were obscured, along with the responsibility for those choices and their consequences. Not attending to them, or their concerns, emphasized the power differential between the senior managers and the team managers, maintaining the status quo. It was these aspects, felt in the body, that created an opportunity to start exploring the collaboration and the themes that were not being addressed.

I experienced the ensuing conversation as constructive, with people responding to my story and questions by reflecting upon their experience of the discussion the previous day. Looking

more closely later on, however, I realized their replies had been safe, not touching upon their relationships with each other, and me, or the topics that I had mentioned. I had interpreted the reflection meeting as a learning session, contributing to the safety of the situation by depending on the voluntary contributions of the participants, because from an OD perspective, participation is voluntary, with all contributions welcomed and all stories considered to be equally valid and true. I hadn't insisted on a more thorough exploration of the situation, realizing that power relations were being maintained within a learning context (Vince, 2010).

This experience revealed to me the restrictive tendencies that the methods applied, such as Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology, have on consulting practices and their outcomes. Acting according to the rules of these OD practices leads to excluding elements that are considered dysfunctional or undesirable. Over the years, this omission contributed to personal experiences of alienation, ineffectiveness and lack of motivation, contributing to a 'false' self. Withholding unwanted aspects from my interactions with the client hadn't so much diminished my participation as it had limited the development of conversations, the relationship and my experience of them.

I will finish writing about the project with a reflection about the inevitability of experiencing discomfort, pain and struggle when our habitual intentions and actions are disturbed and we have to re-orient ourselves. As Elias mentions (2007), the more we become involved the harder it is to stay detached and observe what our possibilities in the given situation are. This raises the question how to endure our discomforts, not becoming defensive or retreating into fantasies, and to continue experiencing what is actually going on in our interactions with others, thereby realizing that it is probably our personal and role-identities that have come under threat the most. I argue for an alternation between engagement and detachment, both encompassing participation but with a different attitude, that is, being involved-detached, towards the situation one is involved in.

My notions of collaboration shifted considerably during this project, no longer being the ideological and functional concept that OD regards it to be. Instead, it became a way of looking at my interactions as an ethical, embodied practice that illuminates mutual recognition and reciprocity as specific aspects of the relationship. They emphasize interdependencies in constituting self and identity and make collaboration an ethical practice. Reciprocity can be seen as a political act to counterbalance the 'management of uncertainty' of powerful people

that try to shift the burden towards those on the receiving end, thereby limiting their freedom to act voluntarily (Marris, 1996: 88–91). How these aspects are played out in reality is a matter of power relations that are negotiated within our interactions with each other.

The experience of collaboration and meaning emerge out of the social act of ongoing gestures and responses, being the complex interweaving of the actions of people out of which meaning emerges (Stacey, 2003: 60). I suggest that collaboration is, foremost, an embodied experience of our interactions with each other that expresses its reciprocal and interdependent character. When these aspects are recognized and taken into account, we may experience the relationship as trustful and co-operative. When they are denied or rejected, which is felt in the body too, we may experience feelings of insecurity or vulnerability, or we might describe the relationship as non-collaborative, antagonistic or even hostile. Although collaboration as experienced in reality affirms the latter aspect, ideology tends to negate it and this might invite reflection upon the collaborative experience.

Both reciprocity and mutual recognition are enacted in daily collaborations and made visible, though we cannot be sure if and how they will emerge because they are embedded within socially and culturally constituted norms that try to enforce specific identities, behaviors and ways of thinking (McQueen, 2015). This reflects the political character of collaboration, revealing its cooperative and competitive nature, which implies struggle in people's efforts to attain reciprocity and mutual recognition. I argue that this political dimension allows for the opportunity to change patterns in relationships and, in fact, illuminates the creative dimension that is inherent in any collaboration. I suggest that we can 'feel' these qualities occurring in our interactions as embodied experiences, emerging as opportunities for changes in power relations, identities and ideologies.

These feelings demonstrate that the interests people negotiate are mutual, although unequal, and the distinctions they make between personal and organizational interests are artificial. Collaboration is a political, ethical and embodied engagement with others out of which the nature and form of the relationship emerges. Acting collaboratively means striving for a reciprocal relationship based on mutual recognition, which implies accepting difference as inherent in the relationship.

By insisting on qualities of reciprocity, mutual dependence and recognition, I recognize the danger of making a claim for a similar kind of ideology with different content. But I argue this is not the case, because what I have been illuminating by means of my narratives is their groundedness in the lived experience of people's collaborations with each other. As such they are meant as evaluative instead of prescriptive elements of their relationships.

# Key arguments

## Introduction

In the following paragraphs I will expand on four arguments regarding collaboration. First, the ideology of collaboration is performative, assuming an unproblematic application, thus contributing to a reduction of people's experiences by avoiding contradictory aspects. These aspects are expelled from ideological descriptions, rendering their legitimacy less likely, and contributing to constraining the image that people have from their personal experience.

Second, the ideology of collaboration evolves in concordance with neoliberalism and managerialism, and must be understood from its entanglements with these discourses. Part of this argument is that the implications of collaboration can't be fully comprehended, let alone anticipated, if the concept is considered without this context and applied as 'good' in itself.

Third, collaboration constitutes a 'politics of affect' that illuminates its cooperative-antagonistic structure, hence contributing to an interpretation of this concept as a stable-unstable social practice. When collaboration is operationalized, people will affect others by their actions, and be affected in return as simultaneous acts of differentiation and integration, leading to a social practice that is stable and unstable at the same time, always open for alteration.

Fourth, collaboration is an evaluative concept that offers consultants and clients the opportunity to better understand what they are doing, to take their experience seriously. This argument contradicts the idea that collaboration can be executed according to principles of 'idealized design' (Ackoff et al., 2006), because it will be experienced subjectively and retrospectively, leaving it open for dissent and difference. Reflecting upon people's subjective 'lived embodied experience' creates the opportunity to develop collaborative practices that aspire to contain difference and dissent in more constructive ways, while keeping its stable-unstable nature in mind.

Next, I will expand on each of these arguments.



## Argument I.

### **The ideology of collaboration is performative, assuming its unproblematic application, contributing to a reduction of people's experiences by masking contradictory aspects**

Several scholars (Nikolova and Devinney, 2012; Skovgaard Smith, 2008; Hicks, 2010; Kourti, 2013; Elmholdt, 2016; Messervy, 2014) have written extensively about the consultant–client relationship, emphasizing its collaborative nature. They point to the fact that tensions, differences and inequalities are not absent, but that cooperative aspects have to prevail in order to make the relationship ‘work’. Collaborative ideology radiates an optimistic view of consulting that promises progress and improvement, and a trusting relationship between consultant and client, hence legitimizing the performative aspects that are considered inherent in the collaborative relationship (Elmholdt, 2016), while rejecting others. This concept of collaboration resonates well with the principles of organizational development that I discussed in Project 1. The implication of these assumptions is that things are already settled and non-negotiable, emphasizing the asymmetry of the collaborative relationship, demanding agreement upon implicit aspects of the collaboration.

Collaboration as an ideology emphasizes cooperative aspects such as reciprocity, equality, mutual dependency and the willingness to take responsibility for the relationship (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche, 2011; Bushe and Marshak, 2015). It is presumed that if both the consultant and client enact these aspects that an effective working relationship will prevail, contributing to the right outcomes of intended change. An active role is assigned to the consultant, who possesses the knowledge and skills to bring about the preferred relationship, contradicting its collaborative nature that positions the client as a passive participant (Skovgaard Smith, 2008). This suggests that the consultant has to put in ‘emotional labor’ (Hochschild, 1983: 147), meaning attuning him-/herself to those who are already ‘in the room’, and this hints at the political dimension of collaborative effort (Ahmed, 2014).

Most consulting literature suggests that the consultant–client relationship can, or should, be designed in this way, with the consultant being complicit in the endeavor by fulfilling a processual role. In contrast to the expert consultant, the process consultant *is* effective when he or she establishes the proper relationship for the task to be accomplished. I argue that this implies just another kind of expertise that helps to properly engineer the consultant–client

relationship, while leaving its underlying rational causality of an ‘if...then’ kind of thinking intact. I recognize from my own experience that when the client asks me to facilitate a change process, s(he) expects that my ‘expert advice’ is included in the facilitation. Also, Hicks (2010) illustrates that by becoming an active participant within the consultant–client relationship, no longer maintaining a detached position as expert consultant, he was able to reconstruct the relationship and the ‘problem’, and became more effective. Taking a processual attitude, then, must be regarded as simply a better ‘tool’ to accomplish the job to be done, but it doesn’t change the dominant way of thinking for the consultant, that is, systemic thinking.

This kind of thinking is reflected in the theory of social constructionism (Kourti, 2013), a perspective which holds that reality is fundamentally determined by people’s ideas, their negotiations about it and is constituted by means of symbolic processes (Brinkmann, 2012; Hicks, 2010; Gergen, 1994). An imagined future is considered primary to individual experiences of current reality, relationship primary to dualistic subject-object thinking, and change primary to stability. The theory suggests that people act as intentional agents in order to make their social constructs of the future come true (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). They seem to be fully formed, consisting of an inner core, or world, from which thinking, acting and emoting comes, whether or not influenced by their surroundings. The autonomous human being has become central in constituting and interpreting (social) reality by means of negotiating shared meaning making and the events that are a part of it (Dewey, 1922/2007; Stacey and Mowles, 2016), reaching for a temporary consensus until the next negotiation.

This perspective denies a realist interpretation of reality (Brinkman, 2012) in which the world resists what people are trying to accomplish despite their best efforts and intentions. The objective world is pushing back at them, which creates an opportunity to reconsider their relationship to the things that resist them, finding new knowledge and ways to cope in the future (Dewey, 1922/2007). In this view, people don’t construct ideas about the world, but experience it in an immediate way because they are an inherent part of it. Any distinctions they make between individual and world are artificial, as they are mutually dependent on one another and mutually constitute each other (ibid). Several of my narratives in the projects 2, 3 and 4 illustrate this point. The ideology’s main function is to keep people away from reality as struggle, hence maintaining optimistic images of it (Zizek, 2008).

Research shows that people are affected by the events that they are a part of that don't make them reconsider their identities or mental schemes about the world in a rational way, but that nevertheless alter them in unforeseen ways. The resistance they encounter has to be dealt with in a material way, which reflects an image of reality that goes beyond cognition, reason and discourse. The fact that many intentions aren't realized might stimulate people to take a closer look at what that resistance is about in order to learn about it. Accepting resistance as a part of reality offers people the opportunity to de-center themselves and become aware of their relationship with the 'whole' event, instead of approaching it from their own particular point of view.

People who hold on to the idea that people act upon the world from an external position, as if they are separate from their surroundings, reject the experience that they are a part of the reality they're trying to shape, the events that are taking place within it and resist admitting that they are, on an ongoing basis, influenced, shaped and constituted by it. The consequences of this reversal in thinking is, I believe, quite severe in several ways.

First, people consider time and context to be less important and aren't really interested in how events have unfolded, because what matters to them are their current concerns and how to bring them under their control. Second, they don't have to take responsibility for the situation they have contributed to, but can restrict themselves to taking the right action that the situation demands of them in order to get the problem solved. Third, they don't consider the thought that events affect them over time in more and less significant ways, their identities and behaviors being shaped by them, and that they act differently in different situations.

The consequence of these assumptions is that people have lost the idea that they are interdependent human beings affected by their surroundings which they are trying to control most of the time. Instead, the result is an actionable ethics in which people see themselves primarily as acting upon the world in order to bring about change, progress and improvement. Hence, the relationship with their surroundings becomes reified, collaboration instrumentalized and normalized, uncertainty rejected, anxiety reduced, and stability is maintained.

Instead of trying to bring things under their control, people can generate new knowledge and ways to cope with them by means of inquiry, experimentation and reflection. Through these

activities, they can come to realize that the resistance they experience, their (re-)actions and they themselves are part of the same event (Dewey in Brinkmann, 2013). Any distinctions they make between individual and world, object and subject, or between the different kind of spaces they create as independent entities, are artificial, as both are mutually dependent on and constituted by one another. Neither the scholars that I started this argument with nor the discipline of social constructionism, take this transactional, temporal view of Dewey (ibid) into account, but see interaction as processes of exchanging meanings in order to reach for contemporary agreements on reality.

My research shows that the consultant is affected by the event that he or she constitutes at the same time, and vice versa. The neglect of people to see themselves participating in events diminishes their ability to improve a situation, omitting their share in creating it and their responsibility for the consequences. Instead of asking what is happening, they restrict the ongoing change by negotiating its preferred manifestation. This reveals their complicity and mutual dependency, hence the power relations, which are uncomfortable parts of experience that contradict the ideal of the autonomous human being. When the manager exercises his autonomy at the expense of his employees, their autonomy and freedom are reduced.

The ideology of collaboration leads to the paradoxical situation that by spreading within organizations, driving out difference and dissent, it creates the struggle and strife that the ideology tries to prevent. When people interact with each other and try to exclude difference and dissent, they are undermining the very reason for collaborating. That is, differences attract people to expand their restricted practices and capacities and create opportunities for novelty and change. By maintaining stability, it is this novelty and change, paradoxically, that the ideology of collaboration rejects.

## **Argument II.**

**The ideology of collaboration evolves in concordance with neoliberalism and managerialism and must be understood from its entanglements with these discourses**

Collaboration as ideology isn't a static or universal concept but derives its specific meanings and functions from local situations, and its embeddedness within wider social, cultural,

political and economic contingencies. It is applied as a strategy intending to establish harmonious relationships between the consultant and client, contributing to a sense of predictability and control aimed at designing efficient processes that generate predictable outcomes. This function positions collaboration within managerialist discourse by sharing similar values (Klikauer, 2013, Costea et al., 2008) between practices of management and consulting:

The *post*-bureaucratic manager is portrayed like a consultant, as a partner and catalyst of organizational change and/or an expert dispensing advice through project-based working ... inspiration, expert advice ... and proactive instigation of change. (Hales and Tengblad in Sturdy et al., 2016: 185)

Sturdy's research shows that consultants and managers share the same kinds of thinking, with managerialist discourse being central to that. Managerialism is the systematic approach, used by managers and consultants, to solve problems in standardized ways. It is grounded in the belief that organizations are more or less alike and that performance can be optimized by applying generic management models and skills. Managers and consultants see themselves in the right position, owning the exclusive knowledge and skills to make this belief come true (Klikauer, 2013). Three aspects that make up managerialism are emphasized: a) the application of performance management and audit-techniques, b) surveillance technologies and c) the production of employees as proper working subjects (Costea et al., 2008: 662). Together, they provide a governance structure that has become the dominant discourse, the 'regime of truth' (Crane et al., 2008: 302), in organizations, implying universal status and an a-historical existence.

Governance directs the conduct of people by means of techniques, discourses and programs that mobilize people's capacities (Marshall, 2016). It isn't aimed at restricting and controlling people, as is often thought, but at making a particular kind of behavior 'normal' (Betta, 2015: 2) and accepted. I argue that collaboration is such a 'normalizing' practice within managerialist discourse, that it makes its ancillary behaviors appear legitimate, self-evident and habitual:

The disciplinary power of the ordering, the categorization and ritualization of daily activities – the regime of truth – rewards conformity and penalizes resistance in order to impose and enforce norms of behavior ... What is 'right' in such contexts is what is 'normal'. (Crane et al., 2008: 302)

The growing dominance of managerialist discourse within government and non-profit organizations called New Public Management (Diefenbach, 2009) hasn't come about by chance and reflects the wider trend of growing neoliberalism, or neo-bureaucracy, within organizations (Sturdy et al., 2015). The core of this trend is characterized by downward delegation of tasks and responsibilities, delayering of management, enhancement of central control by means of performance management systems and ICT, network-based structures and advice-based interactions and facilitations (Diefenbach, 2009; Sturdy et al., 2016). Collaboration has become firmly established within this discourse and the norm within many organizations; people who deviate from it run the risk of being excluded or denigrated. Although it seems that power is decentralized and people are empowered, now positioned as autonomous, entrepreneurial and unique professionals, in reality the opposite is the case (Diefenbach, 2009). They have become governable persons, but with the difference that they now govern themselves, supported by their managers (Catlaw and Marshall, 2018), and their identities have become part of the governance structure.

In the neoliberalist society, market relations prevail, and employees act as consumers exercising their freedom of choice in pursuing their needs, aspirations and desires (Rose, 1990). They have become the metaphor for human relations (Catlaw and Marshall, 2018), implying that employees are the entrepreneurs of their own careers, and work has become the vehicle for attaining self-actualization and happiness (Rose, 1990). Work and life are entangled with each other, which makes personal and organizational interests hard to separate. Underlying the employee's contract is the assumption that personal growth and development, realizing one's full potential, is fully reconcilable with organizational objectives and is mutually enhancing.

The employers' task is to support its employees, creating the right conditions and getting out of the way, so that employees have no excuses left but to exercise their autonomy and craftsmanship and to fulfill their unique potentials (Rose, 1990). This alters the authority relationship between manager and employee significantly, becoming more cordial, intimate and confessional (Ekman, 2013). The therapeuticization of the working relationship (Rose, 1990; Beech, 2017; Costea et al., 2008) is reflected in the ubiquitous 'helping' relationship between the consultant and the client (Schein, 1998/2013) and I argue that this new work ethos, replacing the one of duty, commitment and compliance, results in a labor relationship

that is based upon partnership and collaboration, spilling over in the consultant–client relationship.

I see this development reflected within my consulting practice. For example, currently I facilitate a school organization that has recently introduced a large-scale development program aimed at increasing the autonomy of the schools, the school leaders and the teachers. At the same time head office is increasing its supportive function towards the schools with staff members and managers acting as coaches.

Neoliberalism and managerialism create images of a unified organization with a well-aligned workforce and ‘collaboration’ being the right label for a working relationship that is mutually empowering of each other’s aspirations and objectives. But my research shows a reality that is characterized by differences, misunderstandings, politics and power relations, too, in which things are swept under the carpet such as the diminishing role of the therapists in the second narrative of Project 2. Denying and neglecting these aspects, banishing them to water cooler conversations, creates risks to which several scholars have directed our attention.

If employers make employees believe that their limitless potential is to be pursued, imposing pressure on them for continuous improvement and self-actualization, they will likely contribute to the increase in burnout and exhaustion (Han, 2015). Mistakes and failures don’t fit employees’ idealized self-images and will probably be avoided. Hence, they will not realize their potential, shaping their selves towards becoming mature human beings, but instead detach themselves from these situations (Sennet, 2008; Ekman, 2013).

Employees will remain firmly centered on their selves, tending towards narcissism (Ekman, 2013). But it is in breakdown moments that opportunities are created to be de-centered from who they are, even if temporarily, and reflect on their habits in order to transform and grow as moral human beings (Dewey, 1922/2007). Managers contribute to this tendency by avoiding the responsibility of confronting employees with unhappy realities and having uncomfortable, confrontational conversations with them. Ekman (2013) shows the tendency of both manager and employee to recognize each other’s need for affirmation, avoiding unpleasant experiences within their relationship, hence contributing to narcissistic behavior. I see many managers wrestling with their dual role of acting as manager and coach towards their employees, with the same for the employees.

Organizations that promote autonomy and independency in their employees' attitudes and behaviors run the risk of attaining the opposite. This is enhanced by performance management systems with dynamic standards that evolve due to the performances of the 'best of class' (Catlaw and Jordan, 2009). Employees become dependent upon others' recognition of them, contributing to competition and unstable identities. The fundamental principle of neoliberal governance emphasizes people's self-governing responsibilities that undermine their relational interdependence, paradoxically contributing to destabilizing selves, 'fragile' identities (Catlaw, 2014a: 13) and insecure bonds.

The sustenance of disciplinary power is masked, as well as its violent effect on people, by assuming an intersubjectivity of equality while there is none. The philosopher Žižek refers to the symbolic violence that is inherent in the use of language and the pretense of a dialogical space. He points to the inherent asymmetry of relationships, emphasizing there is always somebody who can stop the dialogue (Žižek, 2008). The corresponding threat is the possibility of temporary or permanent exclusion from the organization that serves as the substitute for actual punishment. This is also true for the external consultant. Despite his reputation, charisma or expertise the client is always in the position to terminate the contract which emphasizes the asymmetry of the relationship.

The effect of this constant threat is that people are prone to colluding with what is being said, or implied, and stop the exploration of each other's opinions and requests, because in the face of potential violence there exists little need for shared understanding (Graeber, 2015). The power differential is reflected in the interpretive labor of the entrepreneurial subject, or the consultant, for (s)he must actively find out what is required of him/her. She/he has to imagine what the employer, or client, wants in order to anticipate his/her actions, while the dominant party can, and mostly does, stay ignorant of the other party's motives and interests (Graeber, 2015; Scott, 1990). I illustrate this tendency in my projects 2 and 3 when I silenced myself in those moments which I experienced as risky or ambiguous.

The experience of violence is the consequence of covering over undesired feelings, attitudes and behaviors that don't fit the organization's self-image (Vince and Mazen, 2014). People consider what they do as inherently 'good' and it is this assumption that contributes to the existence of systemic, or structural, violence in organizations (Žižek, 2008). These structures



allow for the conduct of people to violate their own rights, but which goes unnoticed by them. They fail to admit that it causes them distress, deny that they have anything to do with it and say it doesn't affect them. But it does, and this is the price they pay for looking away from uncomfortable feelings and emotions regarding these ideologies.

These are important messages in the positioning of collaboration within the broader scope of managerialism and neoliberalism. Moulding employees into actualizing and entrepreneurial subjectivities might restrict expression of their 'lived experiences' of organizational life, hence contradicting the freedom afforded and illustrating the sustenance of a power differential. The employer/client evades taking his responsibility for the joint constitution of the relationship and its negative consequences but which is experienced by the employee/consultant, masking or rejecting it for varying reasons. I argue that collaboration within the consultant–client relationship doesn't stand apart from these developments, and it may suffer similar consequences that consultants should be aware of and be able to deal with.

However, I want to oppose the seeming inevitability of these trends that tend to turn people into 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977), a critique that Foucault has been often confronted with. Several writers from a post-structuralist or post-foundationalist position (Bevir in Marshall, 2016; Catlaw, 2014b; Catlaw and Marshall, 2018; Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 2016; Stacey, 2012) argue that it is in the many local situations where people make concrete choices and take up concrete responsibilities that these discourses are affirmed, altered or denied. In his last lectures, Foucault (2008/2010) adopted a similar stance and argued for a critical attitude against the disciplinary powers of governmentality, stimulating people to actively start participating in counter-conduct and in taking care of themselves. I will return to this issue in argument four.

### **Argument III.**

**Collaboration constitutes a 'politics of affect' that illuminates its cooperative-antagonistic structure, hence contributing to a stable-unstable practice**

Practically speaking, collaboration is a custom or a social habit (Dewey, 1922/2007) that is part of the social and cultural backgrounds in which people have grown up. It is unconscious,

taken as self-evident, performed in effortless ways and embodied and enacted in a corporeal sense. Habit reflects who people are, what they value, hence engaging them in what they do. Collaboration can be regarded as a social object (Mead, 1934/2015) around which people organize their activities, knowing what is expected of them and what to expect from others. This ‘tendency to act’ (Stacey, 2012: 163) is simultaneously of a generalizing and particularizing kind, meaning that the general concept of collaboration must be made particular in every concrete situation, while this particularization is acting back on the general concept, hence continuing and altering it at the same time. To collaborate means to be willing to subordinate oneself to the customs of the collaborative practice, becoming complicit in a way that voluntarily restrict people’s activities. It implies refraining from opposing elements such as competition, striving, contestation, conflict and difference. This contrasts the commonly held picture that people, as autonomous individuals, are free to choose how they want to participate when in fact their freedom is restricted by their personal histories and social and cultural embeddedness.

I argue that the consultant and client start from this implicit contract that is different on every assignment, unconscious and often is not talked about. Their participation is voluntary and holds a future reward in the offing. They enter with differences because of the unique histories of customs, relationships, events, individual habits and preferences, expectations and obligations that they bring to the relationship. Both will start collaborating from their embodied memories of preferred experiences that they’ll try to re-create (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014), as well as from the power differential that is inherent in any relationship (Zizek, 2008). This makes collaboration an aesthetic practice and the consultant and client will have to reconcile their differences in order to reach common ground. As a consequence, struggle and strife will inevitably emerge, but their expression, or lack thereof, will depend on the particular situation. Attaining a collaborative relationship implies including its opposing elements, hence likely undermining collaborative intent from an ideological point of view.

Although the common features of collaboration as a population-wide pattern are widely shared, they have to be particularized every time to make them work in local situations (Mead, 1934/2015). In these particularizations, patterns are enacted, sustained and altered at the same time, leading to the dynamic evolution of the population-wide pattern of collaboration that can’t be controlled by any one individual. Particularization demands the simultaneous centering of individual interests and perspectives, foregrounding difference and

demanding space for others' 'otherness'. This introduces uncertainty, struggle and strife into the relationship, characterizing collaboration as co-operatively antagonistic:

The intertwining of human and non-human materialities means that we are both in a position of radical alterity from others – that there is a *particularity of differences* within our entanglements – and at the same time it is that very inter-corporeality that allows the possibility for recognition of, response to and responsibility for the other. (Dale and Latham, 2014: 170)

People act upon the world from different perspectives, not by observing and moulding it to their particular view, but by experiencing it and responding to it in habitual ways, revealing their entanglement with the world. As they proceed, vistas come into view, or disappear, that they act upon in anticipation of their preferred futures. This process is dynamic and ongoing. The world acts back on them, and it is this continuous mutual responding out of which identity, reality and meaning emerge. People's actions in the world change it, as the world changes them, generating new events to which they have to relate to again, etcetera. From their constant involvements in events, patterns emerge that create stability but also hold opportunity for novelty and change.

I argue that when people collaborate, they position themselves in relation to others, objects, events and concepts in order to attain, sustain or enhance legitimacy, position, status and identity and perform actions in accordance with their habits (Dewey, 1922/2007). Emotions and feelings reflect the successes and failures of their positioning efforts in response to the enabling and constraining actions of others. The emotion arises as a kind of corporeal knowing of the relational situation:

The emotion is, *psychologically, the adjustment or tension of habit and ideal*, and the organic changes in the body are the literal working out, in concrete terms, of the struggle of adjustment. (Dewey, 1895: 30; in Brinkmann, 2012: 102)

Feelings and emotions connect people's experiences intimately to matters of recognition, inclusion and legitimacy, and turn collaboration into a politics of affect. This entails that difference and dissent are mandatory for collaboration to happen, because without them collusion will likely characterize the alternative that rejects, avoids or reduces the struggle to adjust and the ensuing tension. I argue that cooperation and antagonism constitute collaboration in order to complete the struggle for adjustment. Both are acts for recognition

and legitimacy that together reflect people's mutual dependence on others and the reciprocity of the relationship.

This aspect is illustrated in Project 4 when I facilitated the conference. I literally lost my position and felt excluded by the group when people turned their attention away from me and towards each other. I suddenly found myself at the periphery of the discussion that was going on, which affected me emotionally. I believe this didn't happen deliberately but was the result of their need to maintain their identities, positions and legitimacy towards each other.

As long as organizations deny the existence of dissent, difference and politics, there will be no way to explore these activities in organizational contexts, let alone bear the fruits of its creative potential. I argue that when these aspects are acknowledged, they can be more fully incorporated and their impact on collaboration understood than when concealed and banished from public discourse. Managerialist discourse expects that differences can be reconciled under a common purpose, but it forgets that it is itself constituted on the basis of hegemony, hence propagating its self-evident nature, and is thus political (Mouffe, 2013;2014).

Difference and dissent illustrate the processes of adjustment that are taking place, constituting collaboration instead of being absent from it.

When people are affected, being moved within a concrete situation, their habitual ways of reacting are disturbed (Dewey, 1922/2007), if only for a short period. The disturbance reflects their involvement in the situation and entanglements with others, objects and/or ideas, with an emotional intensity that can significantly restrict their range of response (Elias, 1987/2007). These moments of ethical disturbance (Dale and Latham, 2014: 171) offer people the opportunity to make an alternative choice to their habitual ones when confronted with the otherness of the other. The confrontation will touch upon their need for attachment and/or separation (Stacey, 2003), although the consequences of their choices remain unknown. Every choice made will impact the entanglement, or power figuration, for the future in foreseeable and unforeseeable ways, and this is what makes it ethical. I argue that the choice being made *is* the process of adjustment and that it happens in an embodied way, is largely unconscious, and may end with people becoming cognizant of their choices retrospectively.

It is in these moments of ethical disturbance or breakdown that people can become aware of their effect on others by means of experiencing emotions that reflect the intersection of social

relationships they are part of. Emotions and feelings reveal collisions of simultaneous demands that jeopardize the identities that they will try to maintain. Collaboration is an ongoing activity of identity work (Burkitt, 2014) and emotions and feelings are the reflection of it, revealing whether or not people are successful in their attempts. In fact, feelings are never absent, as people are continually making sense of ongoing emotional communication. Maintaining a steady cooperative relationship is more difficult than people think, because of the ambivalence of the feelings and emotions they experience and of the existence of personal biographies that makes the occurrence of emotions hard to predict (ibid).

It is in people's embodied experience, their thoughts, feelings, emotions and the actions of their interactions with others as a physical-psychosocial participation, that they become aware of what transpires between them. These physical-psychosocial interactions will generate resistance in participating bodies that become part of the collaboration. The more people stick to their a priori definitions and aims of the collaboration, the less likely they will be aware of what is happening within these embodied interactions. This will probably increase the discrepancy between their collaborative intentions and their outcomes, hence risking becoming alienated from their own experience and that of others.

When people are in the midst of a situation that they experience as disturbing, they are not primarily looking for a coherent narrative, or trying to make sense in a solely discursive way, but trying to regulate the arousal of their bodies. Although these processes are not separate, the bodily process is often neglected. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) places the body at the center in activities of sense making in going beyond the discursive aspects of embodied interactions (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). The recent debates on the affective turn (Wetherell, 2012/2014/2015; Burkitt, 2014; Gherardi, 2017a/b, Zembylas, 2014) also emphasize the ways that bodies affect each other and are affected in multifaceted ways.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating sees human interactions as iterative processes of cooperation and competition that produce ongoing processes of interaction and nothing beyond that (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). Involved in it are activities of communicative interactions, power relations, ideology and identity that evoke and provoke other bodies and bring forth patterns of relating out of which discursive themes in the form of narratives and stories emerge (ibid). The theory states that bodies need other bodies on a

physical level in order to regulate the release of neurochemicals, i.e. endorphins and hormones, that respectively arouse and calm the body:

... The human body cannot accomplish this chemical regulation in isolation from other bodies and that attachment behavior triggers opioid release while separation behavior triggers norepinephrine release. (Stacey, 2005: 161)

Emphasizing the embodied sense-making process as an attempt to reach for a coherent narrative ignores the unconscious bodily processes that are going on simultaneously in order to calm the body, or arouse it, to reduce anxiety levels. These affectations are ongoing and unconscious and do not comply to notions of coherence, closure and legitimacy. They do, however, affect discursive sense making, and are affected by it, and are predictable and unpredictable at the same time. The more bodies are entangled, the more unpredictable people's reactions become and the more their roles and identities become multifaceted, temporal and embodied (Dale and Latham, 2014). Becoming sensitive to what bodies are doing can contribute to a fuller description of the experience of collaboration, leading to a different experience of it.

I propose that out of people's interactions with each other narratives will emerge that are not solely theirs but to which they will relate anyway. The situation of which they are a part brings forth the ongoing narration, and both will change with every gesture and response of the participants involved. They will impact the social figuration and the entanglements of people out of which narrative, coherence, legitimacy and identity emerge. Or not. Whatever the outcome, people will find a way to relate to it afterwards and this will add coherence to the changes that have occurred. But it isn't ours, or not ours alone. This reflects a de-centering of the subject.

The consequences for the consultant–client relationship, and for the concept of collaboration in general, are that they are less stable than people think, uncertain in their continuous constitution and re-constitution. The same is true for the legitimacy, mutual inclusion and recognition of both the consultant and client. I argue that the stability of their relationship is both stable and fragile, because of their personal investments in the collaboration and because they are apt to being affected emotionally, as my research shows. This offers an opportunity for reflection upon the quality of the relationship and the ways the consultant and client affect that quality, which brings ethics to the fore.

## **Argument IV.**

### **Collaboration is an evaluative concept that offers consultants and clients the opportunity to reflect upon the quality of their relationship, based on ‘lived embodied experience’**

What does collaboration, constituting the consultant–client relationship, need to make it work and when do we know that ‘it’ works? The previous arguments give an image of collaboration as a relationship of collusion that is restricted and moulded by the wider developments of neoliberalism and managerialist discourse. It is positioned as a politics of affect, emphasizing its ambiguous and emotional character and including the opposite of cooperation, that is antagonism. The overall impression of the relationship given is one that is restricted and dominated by power relations and conflict, hence undesirable and something that needs to be transformed towards the positive.

These highlighted aspects reveal that part of the consultant’s ‘lived embodied experience’ of collaborating with clients is not discussed, appreciated or taken into account by either him/her or the client. I argue that collaboration within the consultant–client relationship can gain strength and enhance its quality when ‘lived embodied experience’ is recognized and taken into account. In this final argument, I will return to Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power and John Dewey’s concept of habit, used previously, providing opportunities for a richer application of collaboration. I will discuss the ethics of it within the confines of the consultant–client relationship, emphasizing the moral aspects of a collaborative practice.

In reaction to his earlier work on power, revealing the disciplinary mechanisms of institutions as the ‘normalization of normalization’ (Raffnsøe et al., 2017: 7), Foucault continued his work and shifted attention towards an ‘ethics of micro-emancipation within organizations’ (ibid: 15) and the ‘active self-formation’ by individuals (ibid: 18). This shift marked a change in his perspective on subjectivity and processes of subjectification from an institutionalized towards an individualized one (ibid). The mutual constituency of power and freedom emphasizes the freedom that people must exercise, according to Foucault, in order to prevent them from becoming the passive recipients of disciplinary power, the metaphorically depicted ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977).

He developed practical ‘technologies of the self’ (Crane et al., 2008) for stimulating people to resist behaving in compliant and obedient ways when faced with restricting discourses, such as the managerialist one within organizations. He wanted to educate and stimulate them to re-constitute their selves by regarding their lives as a ‘work of art’ (Munro, 2014: 1128).

Examples of these technologies are ‘care for the self’, ‘ethical askesis’ and ‘parrhessia’, with the latter being the form of fearless speech that I discussed in project 4. ‘Counter-conduct’ is his expression for the ethical and political behaviors of people to resist disciplinary power as forms of contestation, which constitutes the process of self-governing (ibid: 1130).

His plea for an individual to become responsible for his/her own complicity in the sustenance of power relations is important, because it makes people aware of their participation in it. Practising these ‘technologies of self’ contributes to the creation of critical openings (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984; Butler, 2005) that can counteract the dominant discourses, hence can be regarded as critical practices (Messner et al., 2008; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). Foucault’s concept of self-governing (Foucault, 1984) can contribute significantly to the neoliberalist concept of the entrepreneurial subject when it allows for counter-conduct in response to managerialist discourse. It seems to me that the way self-governance is taken up by the neoliberalist and managerialist discourses disregards this aspect entirely.

I argue that there is merit in these practices for consultants. First, they offer an opportunity for reflection on how consultants exercise their freedom and how they can enhance it. A ‘critical opening’ is to take responsibility for the effects of the assignment on others instead of taking its effectivity for granted (Stivers, 2008). Another is to start practising these ‘technologies of self’, such as speaking truthfully (Burkitt, 2008), deep listening (Stivers, 1994; Rigg, 2017; Tamboukou, 2012), direct action and using pleasure (Munro, 2014). Second, by expressing one’s ‘lived embodied experience’, differences are made explicit and mutual dependence and reciprocity enacted. Applying these practices to the consultant–client relationship will increase attention to the power-affect-identity aspects of the relationship, hence foregrounding its experienced quality. However, this in itself is insufficient for sound ethical practice because, I argue, the foundation of these practices is flawed. I will turn to Douglas Griffin’s conception of ethics and explain why this is the case and finally arrive at an ethical description of collaboration that completes my argument.



What is problematic in Foucault's personal ethics is its lack of the relational dimension that shifts the constitution of realities, relationships and identities from an individual accomplishment towards a collective one. The latter foregrounds people's dependency upon others to exercise their freedom and construct reality that will restrict their capacity to produce the unencumbered 'enlightened' subjectivity that Foucault refers to. It demands an extraordinary capacity for individuals to detach themselves from a power-immersed situation, become the spectator of his/her own event, analyze it correctly and chose a successful course of action. This overestimates people's cognitive capacities while underestimating the social and cultural embeddedness of their actions. Cases of whistleblowing illustrate the enormous difficulty of resisting the dominant discourse, hence severely restraining people's freedom and destroying their future perspective within organizations (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013).

This shouldn't withhold anyone from exercising their freedom and, in fact, many people do. People have the capacity to exercise their freedom by taking action, thus illustrating the dialectical relationship between power and freedom (Betta, 2015). Organization constitutes power relations and not the other way around, highlighting its generative capacity; the biggest opportunity might be to start organizing in new ways (ibid). That is what many NGOs are doing, altering power relations by acting upon the world in new ways (Munro, 2014). I argue that collaboration can contribute to extraordinary feats and result in new forms of organizing in which people's intentions and habits are bundled in innovative ways.

An interesting question for the consultant and client is how they can create a mutually enhancing relationship as a condition for the possibility of change or novelty to happen. I argue for an 'affective ethics' that puts 'lived embodied experience' at the center, in which difference and dissent are acknowledged, prioritizing the consultant's and client's personal engagements, centering and de-centering themselves as subjects within a larger engagement, and becoming reflexive on the co-constitution of the collaborative relationship. This constitutes collaboration as a critical practice instead of a compliant one.

An affective ethics de-centers people's focus towards the 'whole' event, while centering their individual experience within it. Both the consultant and the client can express responsibility for their 'lived embodied experiences' and the expression of the difference of others' experiences, hence recognizing their interdependency. In contrast to a social constructionist

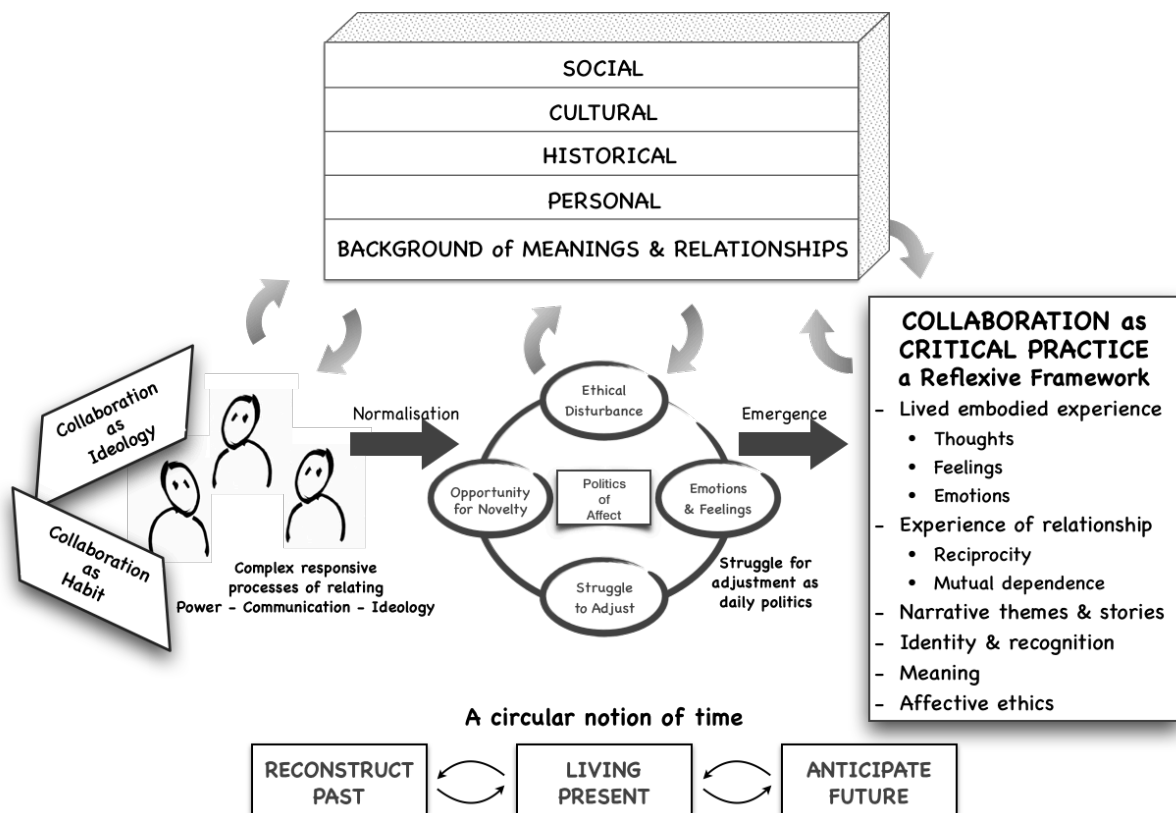
conception, this isn't a negotiation taking place between a multiplicity of personal experiences in order to reach common ground, but a sharing of subjective experiences without trying to reach consensus or trying to manipulate anyone, out of which sensemaking emerges.

Pragmatists such as Mead, Elias and Dewey argue that such an affective ethics emerges out of people's interactions with each other and can't be prescribed or imposed. Griffin explains meticulously how people interact with each other on a micro-level, actively participating in ongoing flows of events in habitual ways out of which identities, themes and ethics emerge (Griffin, 2002). People participate with particular intentions, principles, rules, histories, interests and expectations and from 'stable' identities, but in the complex interactions that are taking place the outcomes are known and unknown at the same time. Known, because of the customs, rituals and habits that people have developed, which guarantee the continuity of their social practices, while at the same time never being sure if continuity will be the case. Tiny variations might give rise to significant and surprising alterations. This makes an 'affective ethics' within the collaboration between the consultant and the client a performative and evaluative mechanism that will, despite its emancipatory potential, always contain power relations, politics and ideology.

## **Final reflection on my arguments**

I believe that together these arguments offer an opportunity to create a different conception of the collaborative relationship between the consultant and the client and of the concept of collaboration in general. I have summarized the key themes of my research in a conceptual framework that gives an overview of the development of my projects and integrates several elements of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. The scheme posits collaboration as an emergent phenomenon that is part of people's normal, daily interactions and creates the opportunity to reflect on them. People cooperate and compete when they collaborate with each other, for good and bad, and this acknowledgment turns collaboration into a concept that is more in accordance with their lived experience than when considered from an ideological perspective.

I will add a few final notions before finalizing the synopsis by discussing my contribution to knowledge and practice.



Scheme: Key themes of the research

The scheme illustrates people’s participative stance in the collaboration, meaning they are already involved in ongoing streams of events and conversations. What becomes immediately meaningful to them provides the practical knowledge about how to go on without much deliberate thought. In accordance with, or despite, people’s rational intentions and plans, they will relate to what is unfolding from their own understanding of the situation and their participation. The individual versions of collaboration as ideology and habit they bring with them will result in simultaneously cooperative and competitive behavior toward each other. The patterns of relating that emerge out of people’s normalized behavior, consisting of generalized values and norms, will have to be particularized in every single situation and create a ‘politics of affect’ as the constant struggle for adjustment of everyone involved.

This ‘politics of affect’ articulates the particularity of differences that exists within the entanglements between people, which manifests their interdependency and creates the opportunity for mutual recognition. This might be jeopardized by people’s immersion in the

situation, making them feel vulnerable, hence stimulating protective behavior. What is at stake for them, beside material benefits, is mostly of a social nature that contributes to the experience of sometimes intense emotions and feelings. These reveal threats and opportunities with regard to status, reputation, freedom to act and identity that may jeopardize continuation of the relationship or of the conditions for that continuation.

My narratives show that when people experience events as disturbing, they have become affected by others or by the situation itself. The disturbance signals that their routines are interrupted, causing them to experience uncomfortable feelings and emotions, expressed as embodied resistance. They will look for ways to restore calm to their minds and bodies. The disturbance holds emancipatory potential when it can change someone's relationship to the situation, offering an opportunity for changing the relationship itself. This makes collaboration as a 'politics of affect' inherently practical.

When I ended my struggle on the evening after the chaotic first conference day (see project 4), I was able to reflect upon my experience of the first day and make a connection with the agenda for the second day. Out of the reflection emerged an embodied knowing how to continue the conference that restored my peace of mind and body and ended my embodied struggle. Although this process appeared to be particular to me, it was social through and through in which I included my perspective of the group and of particular participants in the process. Completing the struggle meant re-constituting my relationship with the participants and what had happened on the first day, hence reconstructing my experience of it and anticipating a successful second day. Although this might come across as a rational process, it was an embodied one by which I experienced completing the struggle as a sense of physical and emotional relief.

The complexity of people's social interactions makes it clear that collaboration can't be reduced to a single, prescriptive framework or can solely be regarded as habit. The way people actually experience collaboration is shown in the way they feel (mis-)recognized, constrained and/or enabled, how their values and norms are respected, or not, and how situations change to their advantage, or disadvantage, with regard to perceived identity, position and status.

Collaboration as an ‘affective ethics’ offers an opportunity for people to come to know something about themselves when, in moments of ethical disturbance, they’re being confronted with the alterity of the other. Such moments can become acts of mutual recognition, that is, of self-recognition as well as recognition of others that acknowledge interdependency and reciprocity. The latter here is not seen as an economic exchange but as an opportunity for expressing a latent need or desire that the other has touched upon while being in interaction. Its fulfillment manifests the difference that exists within the collaboration, risking or supporting its continuation.

In the scheme I position collaboration as a critical practice, besides being an ideology and being part of habitual practice. By becoming reflexive, I started to see its enabling, as well as its constraining side and I focused my research on the latter partly because of its neglect in daily practice. As a critical social practice, collaboration offers an opportunity to question other practices and, in particular, managerialist discourse as one that is dominant in organizations. For me, this holds potential to complement the functional perspective of organizations with narratives of people’s personal experiences of daily organizational life:

Ethics as *critical practice* attends to how the ethical or “virtuous” individual constitutes himself as he critically relates to the morality-in-use and the norms it implies... Ethical subjectivity comes into existence in the process of responding to the call of multiple others. (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013: 475)

This ‘affective ethics’ enables people to reflect upon their experience of relations, emotions and feelings, identities and other narrative themes that are considered important and relevant but have also been rejected or neglected because they don’t fit the functional perspective of organizations. Considering collaboration as a critical, reflexive practice creates an opportunity to integrate these aspects, emphasizing the human side of organizations.

These notions contain potential for altering the consultant’s practice in several ways. (S)he can become a more active participant in the ongoing (re-)constitution of the relationship with the client, enhancing his/her ethically and politically astuteness and emphasizing its interdependent and reciprocal character in which both the consultant and client make themselves more visible by making their differences explicit. This is a very different attitude than being a ‘pair of helping hands’ (Schein, 1998). Re-politicizing the relationship can help to resist collusive tendencies, although collusion isn’t necessarily a bad thing (Curtis, 2018),

and contribute to desired changes. But it might just as easily result in the end of the collaboration when the differences are experienced as a threat.

Coping with the inevitable resistance that arises because of experienced differences offers an opportunity to reflect upon them and to explore individual experiences of the collaboration. Reflexivity can be stimulated by starting to ask questions about what the client is occupied with or what is holding him/her captive in order to increase detachment from his/her involvement in the situation. This may also help expand the consultant's own constrained perceptions, and those of others who are involved, to create a more complete perspective upon the situation s(he) finds him-/herself in. This won't necessarily increase his/her effectiveness, but will enhance his/her understanding of the situation, hence holding the potential for alternative actions. The consultant's natural tendency to act and look forward is complemented by a capacity to stand still and reflect upon the consequences of the actions undertaken and consideration of who's interests or positions might be served or breached. This capacity will likely enhance his ethical orientation.

# Methodology

## Research method

Becoming a member of the DMan program at the University of Hertfordshire entails conducting research in a particular way, which I will explain in this chapter. I will go into the theory of complex responsive processes of relating which the program propagates, that serves as a particular way of looking at the world, which has helped me in making sense of it beyond my habitual and taken-for-granted perspective. This way of conducting research exemplifies the relationship between the researcher and his/her object of research as a transactional one (Dewey and Bentley in Brinkmann, 2013), which emphasizes that the relationship, researcher and the researched all transform due to the process of researching (Brinkmann, 2012/2013; Elkjaer et al., 2011). It is this pragmatic and hermeneutical stance that characterizes the research of the DMan program.

What attracted me to the DMan program from the start was the invitation to inquire into my own professional practice as a means for developing a new theory and understanding it better. The close connection between the two highlights the practicality of the program and their interconnectedness. Usually, they are treated as distinct domains, but for several scholars the distinction between practice and theory is artificial (Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Elias, 1987; Dewey 1922/2007, 1929/1958; Thomas, 2012, Brinkmann, 2012) as they come together within our personal experience of events in the form of metaphors, analogies and narratives (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). This is the main perspective of the DMan program: urging researchers to take their own experience seriously when conducting research.

A counterargument to this way of doing research could be that exploring one's subjective experience isn't really scientific, let alone generalizable or interesting for a wider audience. I argue that, contrary to this common thought, conducting research in a subjective and personal way can be, and often is, interesting and relevant for an audience. The dualistic notion that is implied in this argument, of locality versus generalizability, theory versus practice, or subjectivity versus objectivity, is used to reject specific kinds of research that don't meet the prescribed criteria of research, whether quantitative or qualitative. It implies that if we execute the right methods and follow the right procedures and rules we will automatically attain new knowledge and theory (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Alvesson and Kärreman,

2011). I contend this isn't the case and that to be scientific is to have an interesting research question to start with, and a situation that is bothering or intriguing someone so much that this person is committed to finding an answer to it (Thomas, 2012). The solution attained can take place by applying several methods, but its success is marked by dissolving the problematic situation by changing it from an indeterminate into a determinate one (Lundquist Coey, 2015; Dewey in Brinkmann, 2013) and offering a better explanation of the world as a result of the research conducted (Thomas, 2012). These pragmatic criteria are different to those used from a positivist point of view, which is that knowledge can and must be validated, is verifiable and corresponds to reality.

This correspondence claim is problematic, suggesting that people have an unimpeded access to reality and 'know' when their theories match reality. However, Sven Brinkmann suggests that our immediate knowing of the world reveals something else, namely that we're always already involved in it, affected by it, and that in order to try to understand it we continuously talk about it (Brinkmann, 2012; Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015). He claims that human beings are existentially meaning-making beings and in order to do that they're continuously interpreting what they experience and perceive, and so can't know reality directly or know objects 'as-themselves' (Brinkmann, 2012). The world that we're involved in is always immediately meaningful to us and what isn't is simply excluded from consciousness. This reveals a background structure of social, cultural and historical meanings and relationships that provide us this immediate knowing that is fundamentally social, and not the ultimate reality that positivist scientists would like us to believe in.

This raises the question that if we're not aiming to get to know reality 'out there', what are we actually trying to attain when we're conducting research? In answering this question, I turn to pragmatic philosophy. Scholars from this tradition, such as John Dewey, William James, George Herbert Mead and Charles Sanders Peirce, hold that theories serve as tools for people to help them cope better with the world. Knowledge, then, is always of a practical kind, leading to meaningful action, with truth being ascribed to it.

When the knowledge we acquire, as well as our thinking and acting, is aimed at anticipating possible futures, it will be inherently uncertain and tentative because we're never sure that it will fulfil its purpose. That is why John Dewey talks about theory as 'warranted assertabilities' (Dewey, 1941: 169) that will stand the test until a better explanation for a



phenomenon comes along. The temporal character of knowledge has consequences for social research in the sense that it will generate local and temporal knowledge that is fallible, not because it will be proven untrue, which is a realist position, but because alternative explanations will be developed in the future. And so it happens that many social theories with different ends-in-view can exist beside each other, contradicting each other (Joas and Knöbl, 2009), not emphasizing their correspondence to a single reality but the co-existence of multiple social realities. This shifts the relevance of social theory towards its explanatory function while de-emphasizing its causal one because there are simply too many variables to determine the conditions for their functioning (MacIntyre, 2007). As a consequence, knowledge can be better judged, from a pragmatic point of view, by its plausibility and persuasiveness, rather than solely on its predictability and validity (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

Does that make every social theory that is developed equally valid, presuming the kind of relativism or anti-realism that is implied by postmodern, constructivist and discursive theories? According to pragmatist philosophy it doesn't, because people rely on their experiences and purposes to guide their judgments and discussions with each other about what is ethically and practically relevant (Martela, 2015). This post-foundationalist stance doesn't deny any ground, but neither does it aim at finding final ground, which is reminiscent of the positivistic stance (Mowles, 2010).

Taking personal experience and purpose as the point of departure for my research means inquiring into the situations that puzzled, worried or upset me. Such interruptions of everyday life function as opportunities for becoming aware of our habitual and unreflective 'lived experience' (van Manen, 2001: 35-37), illuminating our immersion in a social world that we assume is real and take for granted. What we consider 'normal' is already always meaningful and relevant to us and mutually confirmed in our interactions with others (Garfinkel, in Joas and Knöbl, 2009). This makes the research socially relevant and generalizable, focusing on significant social situations that offer opportunities for reflection upon the social, historical and cultural embeddedness that we are, most of the time, unaware of.

Taking my own experience seriously resembles the process of abduction that Peirce talks about as a method of scientific discovery in which these surprising events lead to temporary hypotheses that are strengthened, refuted or refined by further observations and reflections

that ultimately lead to the development of new theory (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Dougherty, 2016; Levin-Rozalis, 2000). In this way of doing research, practice and theory mutually support each other in a way such that from individual, subjective experience generalizable, scientific claims can be derived that will resonate within a specific professional community, in my case that of consultants and managers. Besides, abduction offers the opportunity to hold existing theories and concepts against our lived experience (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011: 58), resulting in better explanations of it and generating better ‘tools’ to navigate the world and to reach our ends-in-view (Brinkmann, 2012). The usability of the outcomes of our research makes it objective too: that is, applicable for others (ibid).

The idea of ‘lived experience’ that I talk about here isn’t limited to the subjective perception of an individual or the passive, unprejudiced reception of external stimuli by an individual through the senses. For Dewey, experience is the undergoing of a social situation by the subject in which subject, object and situation mutually constitute each other in an active manner out of which meaning about selves and the situation emerges (Brinkmann, 2013; Dewey, 1929/1958). This interpretive process is deliberate and active, although unconscious, aimed at attaining ends-in-view. Hermeneutics emphasizes the historical character of this circular process, iteratively alternating between pre-understanding and understanding, and between the parts and the whole (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Martela, 2015). It is this mutually constitutive character of pragmatism which transcends the dualisms that are characteristic of systemic thinking, which can’t explain the emergence of novelty and change (Elkjaer et al., 2011; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). Instead, it keeps human identities intact and reifies objects, concepts and situations.

George Herbert Mead is another influential pragmatist scholar who influenced Dewey’s thinking (Simpson, 2014), and became well-known for his social understanding of experience:

Meaning ... arises in experience through the individual stimulating himself to take the attitude of the other in his reaction(s). (Mead, 1934/2015: 89)

People have the learned capacity to see themselves through the eyes of others, to anticipate their likely reactions to their actions and to take the generalized attitude of the social group to which they belong, or even the whole of their society. This is what Mead calls the attitude of the ‘generalized other’ (ibid). When we conduct research, we take the likely reactions of our

peer groups into account and this will influence what we inquire into and how we conduct our research. Taking the attitude of the ‘generalized other’ makes the research a social affair, even if our conversations are restricted to the private, imaginative conversations between the normative ‘me’ and the spontaneous ‘I’, which Mead calls mind (Mead, 1934/2015: 133). These conversations highlight another facet of experience, which is its circular and temporal character. Experiences can be seen as punctuated events in an ongoing stream of activities caught between past and future. While their interpretation is based on history, they also anticipate possible futures. Thus the process isn’t linear but circular. As a consequence, research conducted in the present will create meanings and explanations that not only try to connect past, present and future in a coherent ‘whole’, but will also likely result in a re-creation of the past anticipating these likely futures (ibid; Elkjaer et al., 2011). This circular notion of time is called ‘living present’ within the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000: 36; Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 327).

Above, I have given an explanation of the research method that I have used, together with some principles derived from pragmatist and hermeneutical traditions. Next, I will turn to the theory of complex responsive processes of relating that contains many of the theories and principles that I already discussed. I will locate this way of thinking in relation to other discourses, such as autoethnography and narrative inquiry, and discuss how it is interwoven into the DMan program.

### **The theory of complex responsive processes of relating**

Taking my own experience seriously as research method implies taking a critical look at it and going beyond my self-evident and habitual ways of thinking and working. The program stimulated me to start approaching organizations as ongoing, iterative processes of cooperation and competition between people that produce patterns of relating and themes which produce further patterns of relating (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). It holds that there is nothing outside our interactions with each other, and that we form an inherent part of and are constituted by it. This perspective contradicted my habitual stance of seeing organizations and myself as autonomous individuals, where I act upon the organization that I facilitate, applying expert knowledge in order to improve its effectiveness. This systemic kind of thinking (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), considering the assemblage of parts and the whole, uses the

metaphor of space instead of time and temporality, with the latter being characteristic for the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. Starting to use the latter metaphor changed my view of my consulting practice considerably.

Using the theory of complex responsive processes indicated a shift in my position from an external and observant point of view towards a participatory one. This shifted my orientation from an emphasis on applying methods and attaining results towards paying attention to what was happening as I was collaborating with clients. Dewey (1929/1958) expands on the interrelation between practice and theory, stating that when we acquire a new theory we start seeing the world anew. This transactional point of view (Brinkmann, 2013) was what I experienced during my research. I noticed how my attention used to focus on abstract elements, such as plans, visions and results, that is second-order abstractions (Stacey and Mowles, 2016), while considering interpersonal aspects as irrational, only paying attention to them when I had to. I was pre-occupied with the macro-perspective of organizational life that I had grown accustomed to. The relational aspects of my work had vanished from view and this felt rather embarrassing, as I claimed to be a dialogic OD consultant specializing in developing relational practice by paying attention to inclusion, engagement and participation. My functional and conceptual treatment of these aspects, which my clients considered completely normal as well, turned my attention away from the struggles, ambiguities and contestations that make up an important part of our interactions. I argue that this happens for a reason.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating pays considerable attention to what transpires between people when interacting with each other. In contrast to the common belief that people are minds within bodies, with verbal communication being the primary activity (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015; Burkitt, 1999), interactions between people resemble choreographic moves of human bodies, like in a dance, where they constantly adapt to each other's movements, affecting other bodies while being affected by them at the same time. Meaning emerges out of this choreography that every participant is part of, but which can't be controlled by any of them. We can become tied up in this interactive 'game' (Elias, 1978: 131), not being able to look at ourselves anymore from a bird's eye perspective and experiencing feelings from anxiety to outright fear because of the loss of control or the lack of understanding people are experiencing about what is happening to them or what has become of their jointly constructed worlds.

Magico-mythical ways of thinking, that is, using fantasy, fuel this dynamic and are still a common feature of our social dealings with each other (Elias, 1987: 18, Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 9). When this happens, people are often unable to find enough solid ground underneath the constantly shifting figurations of groups of people and events to make them feel secure. As a result, they get caught up in a vicious cycle where lack of understanding generates feelings of anxiety that lead to an experience of loss of control, further increasing feelings of anxiety etc. (Elias, 1987). Their pre-occupations with fantasies and defensive behaviors hinder their ability to pay attention to what is actually happening and how they're affected by it. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating is pointing us in that direction when asking us to start taking our experience seriously, considering the fact that we can never stand outside our interactions with others and that everything our interactions produce are further patterns of relating. By taking an involved-detached attitude in our interactions with each other, we add a reflexive awareness to our involvement that make us conscious of our relationship with the unfolding situation and where we stand in that relationship.

During the research project I started noticing several things. I became more interested in the details of my narratives, and with every iteration of a project I added more detail to it or deepened my reflection of it. I started to ask myself more questions about taken-for-granted situations, actions and thoughts, and these questions led to other layers of meanings. Sometimes I felt that I could go on with this reflective and reflexive process *ad infinitum*; this made it clear for me that the interpretive process theoretically never ends. I will never find a final base upon which my knowledge firmly rests. Some of the questions that I started to ask myself went beyond the immediate research topic and considered my changing position, which led to new questions and related topics. For example, in project 4 I made a move from being collaborative, or helpful, towards giving an account of myself that changed the content of the concept considerably. In the project I reflected on what made me change the content and how I came to see myself differently in relation to the research topic. Bringing these reflections to the fore illuminates another important part of the research, writing personal narratives in a reflective and reflexive manner.

My main activities in doing research were reading, writing and dialoguing with others: co-researchers, supervisors, faculty members and clients. Characteristic of these activities is that they are constituted in language, so claiming truth and generating knowledge from 'lived experience' are the temporary outcomes of a joint, interpretive process of inquiry that is

fundamentally indeterminate (Derrida in Sandberg, 2005). This represents an “ontology of becoming” where subjects, objects and knowledge are never fixed, but ongoing social constructions of realities and relationships (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). Based on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, these emerge out of our ongoing interactions with others in the form of communication themes and patterns, power relations and ideologies. It produces nothing beyond these processes but further patterns of relating (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). This research approach is interpretive, processual and aimed at developing a perspective as an ‘unmanageable surplus of truths’, instead of a correspondence claim on truth (Sandberg, 2005).

That doesn’t mean, however, that we have no ground to stand on or that everything that the research brings forth has validity. On the contrary. The post-foundationalist position of the DMan program holds that researchers bring with them their own experience, histories and predispositions that provide them an embodied and experience-based sense of what they hold true. Part of it is subjective and part is objective, shared with others, but none of it is final and up for scrutiny when brought into the joint research process. Schrag’s criterion of ‘correctness’ (ibid: 52) for interpretive research approaches, such as the one that the DMan program propagates, intends to counter the appearance of a multiplicity of truths as equally valid by means of critical scrutiny of them, which leads to a reasoned justification for one truth above the other (ibid). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) opt for a similar approach of critically comparing and contrasting a new theory against alternative existing frameworks.

This reasoned justification is reflected in five dialogical principles that Pozzebon et al. (2014) describe in their article on qualitative inquiry. They reflect the post-foundational position I mentioned above, which is similar to what they call a non-foundationalist one: there is no theory-free knowledge, no observation can be made free from theory, and there is no ultimate reference from which we can establish a neutral and objective viewpoint (ibid). Four of the five principles are commensurate with the elements in reflective research that Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) distinguish, being:

- a) Authentic: Has the researcher ‘been there’ and is he able to provide sufficient detail about his involvement in the field, using rigorous techniques?
- b) Plausible: Does the written text make a good enough connection between the world of the researcher and the reader, i.e. is the text engaging enough?

- c) Critical: Does the text offer the reader a re-consideration of some of his taken-for-granted ideas or beliefs?
- d) Reflexive: Is the text self-revealing and confessional in the sense that it reveals the subjectivity and involvement of the researcher who reflects on his own position, use of language and research choices?

The authors add a fifth principle to these four, which they call ‘artfulness’, that reflects the creativity of the researcher-writer. They argue that, besides the cognitive dimension of the text, the reader should somehow be touched when reading it, emphasizing not the logic or factuality of the content, but acknowledging its co-constitutive power in the sense that knowledge is co-created in the interaction between reader and text:

Something ‘works’ because it touches me, because it is beautiful, because it is a powerful metaphor, but one can also hear engineers (as well as others) say of machines, ‘look how beautifully it works!’ (Czarniawska, 1999: 27)

I think that the DMan program stimulates its participants to pay attention to all of these principles, although not in a conscious way such that it has turned these principles into a set of prescribed criteria. It is by their way of working that these principles are inherent aspects of doing qualitative research, and I will try to explain how they come about.

Entering the DMan program meant that I became a participant in a community conducting research in a social and relational way, that is by means of having conversations about my work with other researchers in the community. The community, comprising a group of sixteen to twenty people, consisted of smaller learning sets with a maximum of four researchers and a supervisor from the staff in each set. I chose a personally meaningful topic that I wanted to explore, something that bothered me and which I found interesting and engaging, to start investigating. Eight times a year I met my fellow researchers in the learning set, physically or virtually, in order to discuss our work. We all read each other’s work, commenting on it and asking questions in order to clarify what was unclear. Receiving feedback was enormously helpful for me as it pointed out fallacies and helped me to improve the coherence and logic of my projects. Because the research and faculty members differ considerably in occupational and scientific backgrounds, and come from different social and cultural backgrounds too, the variety of feedback always reflected back on my thinking about why I wrote my stories as I had done, where I had been unclear or incoherent in my writing and whether or not it was

interesting and compelling enough for them. I have never considered my research to be a solitary affair, but instead a social one, where the comments that I received were a kind of touchstone showing if my writing engaged a wider audience, referring to Alvesson and Sköldbberg's principle of plausibility (2009), or failed to do so.

The method that I used was writing organizational autoethnographies, which stems from ethnomethodology that contains methods for studying the life world of ordinary people. In my case, it was about everyday organizational life, in order to find out how social order comes about (Joas and Knöbl, 2009). The concept of 'life world' holds the view that people live their lives from a naïve givenness of the world, taking it for granted and living in an unreflective and habitual way, from which they derive their everyday actions and interactions with others. In order to learn about the hidden assumptions, beliefs and convictions that drive their actions, people can reflect upon their ordinary activities by slowing down and starting to ask questions about them:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). (Herrmann, 2017: 1)

So, autoethnographic stories are stories about myself set against the taken-for-granted social and cultural background in which I was raised and in which I live. I have chosen personal experiences as a consultant that at the time perplexed me and explored these in my role as researcher by describing them and reflecting on them. In a way, then, autoethnography is a process of resolving breakdowns by re-constituting them through inquiring into these moments of breakdown (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

Reflection and reflexivity make up an important part of the autoethnographic method. Being reflexive is the ability of people to reflect upon their own thinking, which is different from the reflective capacity to cognitively look at themselves from a distance in order to see what they're doing and form an opinion about it (Tsoukas, 2005). Both activities can be considered social, whether or not they are taken up in dialogues with others or restricted to a private, internal conversation. The latter case is also social, because when we have this private conversation with our self, the voices of others, which Mead calls the 'generalized other' (Mead, 1934/2015), are always included and the actions that follow from them are social too. While reflection is aimed at adapting our behavior, reflexivity is aimed at becoming curious



about the question, how do we know what we know and how have we come to know it (Mowles, 2015):

We ‘bend back’ (*re-flectere*) our thinking on itself and on ourselves in order to call into question our own role in understanding what it is we are trying to understand ... We interpret our interpretations and this can be the beginning of a critique of what we are doing and how we understand what we are doing. (Mowles, 2015: 61)

When practising reflexivity, we in fact re-consider our relationship with regard to an external object, situation and/or others, how we think about this relationship, ourselves and the way we construct a narrative about the situation in language. And when we dialogue with others in a reflexive way, the process becomes even more complex. According to Mowles, calling reflexivity a radical practice is for him a tautology (ibid). It illustrates that practising reflexivity isn't an easy task, from which many prefer to refrain. This is one of the reasons why a dedicated time is reserved for this activity during the residential four-day meetings that are held four times a year. Every morning, the group starts with a community meeting that lasts for one-and-a-half hours. There is no agenda; no one is in charge. Whatever comes up can be discussed and, in particular, attention is paid to people's experiences of being together as a group (Mowles, 2017a/b). Sometimes in our group we sat in silence for a long time, while at other meetings conversations started off immediately and in an animated way. I couldn't stop noticing myself, and my thinking, in relationship to others and their thinking which stimulated me into becoming reflective and reflexive. In moments when I didn't participate verbally, I still felt intensively involved in group dynamics, considering my position with regard to others in the group and my thinking about the topics we were discussing.

What is further characteristic of ethnography is that we explore a topic or situation from within, implying that we're already familiar or even experts in it, but still perplexed by it in such a way that we want to probe deeper. Although collaborating with clients is a familiar practice for me, and I take many aspects of it for granted, I find the consultant–client relationship still hard to comprehend. This created an opportunity for me to come to understand it better, beyond my taken-for-granted assumptions, by taking a good hard look at it. The knowledge that it generated was really valuable for me, and I believe also for other consultants and managers who participate in similar relationships. Especially in the exploration and taking apart of underlying assumptions, rules and regulations, customs,

beliefs and habits, I've changed my relationship to it considerably and by that I've been changed. This is another characteristic of autoethnography: one is changed by the research (s)he conducts because of becoming an active participant (Adams et al., 2015). In order to prevent the risk that the research in one's own practice becomes self-indulgent or even narcissistic (Coffey, 1999), autoethnography stimulates a dialogical approach in which others are invited to actively join in the research in order to question, debate and challenge its content and approach (Adams et al., 2015). The organization of the DMan program guarantees this dialogical approach.

Such an approach generates a diversity of discursive constructions by means of the many stories that people tell about them. In fact, without these stories to tell one might wonder if organizations would exist at all, which is a thought that narrative theory holds true:

Narratives are means through which organizations are brought to life in the different ways that people can construct meaning and identity from organizational events and experiences. (Rhodes and Brown, 2005: 178)

This interpretation raises an interesting question: whether or not it is possible to study organizational life at all, if in fact what we research are stories about it. It implies that it is impossible to make statements about organizational reality, and even if I would like to make such a statement, this would be in the form of another narrative or story besides the manifold stories that already exist. Several authors refer to this 'crisis of validation' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) or 'crisis of representation' (Adams et al., 2015) which makes it obvious that the knowledge we create by any method of research is always of a local nature, temporary and restricted by the use of language, although the temporariness of its nature can differ greatly.

Narrative theory emphasizes the temporality and locality of knowledge and gives primacy to time. Discursive realities are subjective and intersubjective and are manifold and multi-faceted. It means that the new narrative the researcher creates is subjective as well and is actively constituted, serving particular objectives and perspectives. However, this doesn't mean that the knowledge generated is less true or valuable. When it is accepted and appreciated by the community that it is written for, it serves a function for them, while acknowledging that its use is a temporary one.

## **Ethics**

I consider my research a thoroughly social affair, rather than a solitary one, by being immersed as a researcher in a wider community of fellow-researchers, in a community of fellow-consultants, and as a consultant in the communities of several organizations over the years. The ethics of collaboration that I discuss in this thesis is applicable to the research conducted and the people within the communities that have been a part of it. This means that I have taken into account the way I portrayed people in my narratives, asking myself if I could in any way harm them. I believe I do not, because the main focus has been laid upon my own actions and thoughts which I reflected on for the most part, while those of others were secondary.

I have anonymized the organizations and the people that I write about; they can't be recognized by others. Both clients have read the papers that I have written, except project 4, and I have discussed the content with them. The thoroughness that I've taken in my writing, through anonymizing and discussions with clients, are in line with the professional guidelines of the consulting industry in the Netherlands, which are clear on confidentiality and ethical issues. I would jeopardize my business and the relationship with my clients if I breached their trust.

Ethical issues were regularly discussed during the residencies of the program and the sessions with my learning set, as they are an ongoing concern in our narratives. Behaving ethically is an integral part of the program. The DMan program takes a pragmatic standpoint on ethics, believing that ethical guidelines are valuable but also of limited use in the sense that they can only reflect the initial intentions of practitioners and researchers. What they can't anticipate are situations that may arise during the research, which is why I've made ethical considerations an integral part of my research practice. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, ethics emerge from the interactions between researcher and participants, and as such the researcher is constantly aware that whatever he does will have ethical consequences (Griffin, 2002).

## **Contribution to knowledge and practice**

The research is relevant for the community of consultants and managers, in particular those who fulfill the role of client for consultants or third parties. In addition to that, any professionals who collaborate with colleagues or third parties might find the research interesting, providing an opportunity to reflect upon their own practice of collaboration. The research might also be interesting for HR consultants and managers who are responsible for the development of collaboration within their organizations.

Hereunder, I summarize my main contributions to knowledge and practice, and end with a reflection on topics that are open for further research.

### **A processual orientation on research**

I have taken a processual stance by exploring human interaction within organizations, in particular between clients and consultants. This happened against the background of a managerialist discourse which creates distinctions between inside-outside, individual-group and rational-irrational, to help managers and consultants design, control and enhance the effectiveness of organizations. I conducted the research without creating such distinctions in advance for the methodological and ethical reasons discussed.

A systemic orientation creates a distinction between subject and object, and between intervention and change. It leaves out the researcher's participation, considering his/her mental frames, histories and dispositions as irrelevant and unwanted. The participative attitude chosen in this research includes these subjective aspects and reflects upon them. This generates additional and relevant knowledge in comparison to the macro-perspective of systemic thinking, revealing the thought-style of the researcher and historical, social and cultural backgrounds, hence emphasizing the local and contextual relevance of the research findings instead of claiming universal truth.

My autoethnographic narratives have provided rich descriptions of everyday organizational life by taking a micro-perspective on people's interactions within organizations. I explored phenomena, such as power relations, identity, emotions and feelings, as features of complex social acts that apparently happen in routinized, unreflective ways. Exploring these narratives revealed the intricacies of human interaction that generated relevant insights about the

phenomena studied. The theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) was central in this study and helped to generate rich and detailed knowledge about everyday human interaction within organizations, and in particular, collaboration.

The knowledge developed in this way comes from immersion in daily practice and systematic reflection that reflects the mutual constitution of theory and practice (Thomas, 2012). It is practical in the sense that it can be applied, tested and reflected upon by consultants, managers and other professionals, and as such the knowledge can be made useful in local situations, hence rejecting any pretention of universality. It is meant to better understand what they are doing when collaborating with others by reflecting upon their individual experience, and this makes the knowledge that the thesis provides tentative and provisional (ibid).

### **The paradox of restrictive freedom**

The research points to a significant transformation taking place within the governance structure of organizations that affects the consultant–client relationship. As a result, organizations tend to become de-politicized, meaning that difference, dissent and politics are masked or driven out, and employees’ engagements embedded within the governance structure (Catlaw and Marshall, 2018; Mühlhoff, 2016). The concept and practice of collaboration may contribute to this development by normalizing employees’ behaviors and attitudes to be themselves and act authentically in interactions with others, to cooperate in cordial and intimate ways, and to continue improving themselves. Hence, individual freedom and autonomy become part of the managerial discourse and paradoxically deprive employees of these aspects, despite contradictory promises. The asymmetry that is inherent in the relationship will be exercised by the employer-client and even if it isn’t, employees will likely anticipate the threat of employers exercising their authority which might lead to their exclusion.

The changing authority relationship between employer and employees spills over in the consultant–client relationship, with consultants being complicit in this development (Sturdy et al., 2015). The research points to the consequences for the consultant’s role, contribution, attitude and behavior, because of the collaborative tendency to expel politics, dissent and difference from the relationship, turning it into a straightforward one where the consultant delivers what is agreed upon. The consultant’s complicity becomes double-edged, where (s)he

complies with the changing nature of the relationship and with the assigned role and accomplishments. Consultants have to realize the consequences of the choice they make when they start a new assignment, because it will affect their identity, professional integrity and the freedom to manoeuvre within the collaboration. This is what the research attends to.

By resisting reducing the collaboration to a simplified relationship, the consultant insists on staying with the uncertain, ambiguous and complex nature of collaboration and the consultant–client relationship. A main feature is the paradoxical nature of being cooperative and competitive, or antagonistic, at the same time. The paradox is the simultaneous acceptance of otherness by the consultant and the reciprocal acceptance by the client of the consultant’s otherness, together constituting cooperation in each other’s acceptance of difference while reconciling it within the collaboration. Collapsing the paradox by choosing sides will remove it from the relationship, hence avoiding complex issues that, if being dealt with, might enhance the quality of the relationship and illustrate interdependence and reciprocity. The research suggests that when the consultant and client keep the paradox alive in their collaboration, they do justice to their own experiences of the relationship, hence expressing difference that is constitutive of collaboration.

### **Taking a participative stance**

Managerialist discourse holds the assumption that futures and outcomes can be designed and produced in predictable and controllable ways. Consultants and clients are the ‘intentional agents’ meant to make it happen with collaboration as an important means for attaining that end. What goes unnoticed is the absence of daily reality in the discourse, omitting experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity, resistance, impossibilities and improbabilities.

To compensate for that omission the research has focused on people’s ‘lived embodied experience’ and argues that taking one’s experience seriously is a valuable way of inquiring into problematic situations. The knowledge it generates often stays concealed when a planned change or an action-research approach is chosen, such as Appreciative Inquiry, which focuses primarily on answering the question of how a desired future can be attained in the best possible way. In contrast, taking one’s experience seriously may point attention to what the consultant and client are currently producing together and what they avoid or neglect,

implying the need to start facing the consequences of their actions and taking responsibility for them.

The research de-centers a focus on the self by including multiple perspectives, scientifically and subjectively, taking a temporal view on events in which the consultant and client both participate instead of being observers or analysts from an external, detached position. Instead, the research takes on a Deweyan perspective where these events, with the entanglements of subjects and objects, become the focal point of inquiry, instead of taking a narrow solution-focused perspective. They reveal to what extent the consultant and client mutually affect each other and the situation, while simultaneously being affected by it. Being immersed in the situation, both are in a position to inquire into the event, foregrounding their mutual dependencies and interactions, and understanding how their identities are shaped by the situation while shaping it at the same time.

Taking such a position runs against many people's preference to discuss discursive fantasies, such as ideas, visions and plans, instead of their daily skirmishes and practical problems, let alone to solve them. The latter confronts them with a reality that can be anxiety-provoking, because of the restrictions it exerts on them and on the execution of their ideas and plans. It makes them aware that their freedom isn't boundless, that they are dependent upon others, and that not all ideas are easily attained, or even attained at all. This will complement their positive self-images with experiences of power relations, emotions and competing ideologies. It is likely that these less-positive images will be rejected, illustrating the increase in narcissistic behavior within Western society (Ekman, 2013).

### **Towards a new concept of collaboration**

The research argues for a perspective on collaboration that is based on 'lived embodied experience' in which difference and dissent become manifest. The inclusion of difference is conditional for the engagement of the consultant and the client, for if they are not allowed to include what matters to them, they will likely detach themselves emotionally from the assignment and/or the relationship. Not becoming engaged implies not being disturbed by what happens or what the other does, and this will also undermine the success of the collaboration.

A 'politics of affect' reflects the consultant's and client's immersion in the collaboration, where responsibility for each other is expressed in the mutual recognition of difference. Accepting the cooperative-antagonistic structure emphasizes its dynamic nature with identities, habits, power relations and ideologies as stable features that are simultaneously susceptible to change because of tiny variations in the particularization of these elements. Differences that exist must be made explicit by the consultant and client in order to create the collaboration, avoid collusion, and enhance the chance for transformation of the relationship with regard to set identities, ideology, power relations and/or communicative patterns. Otherwise, 'I' disappears from 'we', and without it the collaboration remains an empty promise and risks becoming a cult value (Mead, 1934/2015).

Collaboration as a 'politics of affect' emphasizes its political, emotional and ethical character. It reflects the consultant's and client's mutual engagements in the collaboration, out of which a relationship emerges that can be reflected upon. The cooperative and antagonistic efforts make up the collaboration and take place in an embodied manner as the constant coordination of bodies. Much of what happens within these interactions is habitual and unconscious, and is aimed at maintaining or enhancing the relationship, allowing for the dominant ideologies and identities to be sustained in the near future.

The taken-for-granted collaborative relationship becomes a focal point of attention for the consultant and the client when they realize that their interactions constitute and re-constitute the assignment as an ongoing negotiation of the outcomes and the collaboration, instead of holding them as prescribed and fixed. How they cope with the cooperative-antagonistic dynamic of the collaboration will make the difference in their experience of each other's engagement, their mutual recognition of each other and the enabling constraints they experience within the collaboration. In order to attain a reciprocal, interdependent relationship in which both the consultant and the client are willing to give an account for what they are doing, acknowledgment of this cooperative-antagonistic structure is conditional.

The choice that a consultant makes to participate in a new assignment is also a choice about the nature and quality of the pursued relationship and his/her self-identity in it (Dewey, 1922/2007). There are situations where the client has a power differential over the consultant and sets the terms of the contract to which the consultant adapts. Situations also exist where the opposite is the case. In both cases, the consultant who deliberately pursues a collaborative



relationship chooses to enact reciprocity and interdependence, thereby resisting collusion and foregrounding difference. (S)he acknowledges the inherent asymmetry of the relationship and becomes politically and ethically astute in his/her relationship with the client, hence reflective of the relationship. This kind of relationship is more complex and difficult to attain, probably running against the habitual orientation of the consultant, the client and of existing power figurations. Therefore, the consultant's choice is political, ethical and consequential.

Such a collaborative relationship can't be realized in advance and this also turns collaboration into a reflexive practice. When the practice allows for the inclusion of the consultant's and client's 'lived embodied experience', it will likely surface conflict, emotions and feelings, power relations, ideology and identity, hence contributing to uncomfortable emotions, feelings and thoughts. The practice turns critical when these experiences run counter to managerialist discourse by revealing undesired aspects of it and suggesting alternative directions. The shared exploration isn't a negotiation about separate narratives of subjective realities, but an authentic attempt to reconcile otherness with sameness hence creating an opportunity for novelty to emerge within the process of collaboration.

### **The importance of 'lived embodied experience'**

The research emphasizes the importance of emotions and feelings in people's daily interactions. They help them to make sense of what is going on in an embodied, visceral manner while generating value judgments about others and the situation in an often habitual and unconscious way. Feelings and emotions reveal power relations going on that result in the inclusion and exclusion of people and topics, and the framing of issues that give rise to social emotions such as shame and embarrassment. The research emphasizes the embodied, non-discursive aspects of sense making that reveal unconscious processes going on, that when paid attention to enrich the experience of collaboration as the mutual positioning of living bodies.

Expression of engagement happens in an embodied manner, mostly by means of words spoken and feelings expressed as emotions. The research pays particular attention to emotions and feelings because they are often underestimated and considered irrational from a business point of view. It shows that people's embodied experiences of situations, and of themselves,

are always made up of thoughts, feelings and emotions, and are mandatory for making sense (Burkitt, 2014; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). More precise, embodied experience *is* the process of sense making instead of the cognitive, discursive processes of narrating that mostly happen retrospectively (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Stacey, 2003;2005).

People's interactions consist of more than what can be observed or heard and interpreted. The research points to the unconscious, bodily processes of attachment and separation (Stacey, 2003) that direct their responses in sometimes unpredictable ways. Sense making isn't a solely cognitive and discursive affair, but a complex and multifaceted embodied process (Shotter, 2008; Boje, 2008; Bakhtin, 1993) that is ambiguous, uncertain and unfinished with regard to its continuation. The research argues that narratives and stories are never completely 'ours', or completed, which de-centers the subject as being the solitary owner of a narrative. Instead, it highlights the open and social character of sense making, inviting individuals to become reflexive upon the 'whole' event and their participation in it.

### **Changes within my consulting practice**

I have established a change practice within the Netherlands in the last fifteen years that is primarily based on the method of Appreciative Inquiry. This is a positively based change approach that focuses inquiry on what works and what organizations want to have more of, instead of emphasizing problems. I have written three books on the subject and published several articles over the years, so organizations approach me frequently to conduct research, facilitation and training, and to attend conferences and workshops.

The DMan program has had a significant impact on my consulting practice by inviting me to start paying attention to what I have actually been doing when facilitating change. What became clear in my exploration of cases as part of this research, in which I applied Appreciative Inquiry, that its unilateral interpretation of organizational life as 'a mystery to be embraced' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) concealed aspects that didn't fit its positive ideology. This finding doesn't only concern Appreciative Inquiry, it also applies in general to the field of organizational development and many change approaches that focus on realizing idealized future states.

What these methods have in common is that they treat the present as secondary to the future, hence trumping ideology over reality. The change itself, mostly in the form of a vision to be realized, contains a performativity that excites and unites people from different departments and professional backgrounds, opting to relegate existing problems, dilemma's and conflicts for future dissolution under the premise that the vision will be executed. The reality that these approaches deny is that obstinate problems seldom disappear; they are only temporarily sidetracked by the change initiative.

I started to pay attention to the worries and concerns that people expressed, making them part of the change process and our dialogues. My interpretation of what it means to be appreciative shifted towards what others considered valuable and worthwhile to talk about, which increasingly resulted in having conversations that were not considered to be very positive. Currently, I am adapting the Appreciative Inquiry approach towards a more critical kind of inquiry and integrating that in my trainings and workshops. People who attend this training are enthusiastic about the different approach because it relates better to their personal experiences of work. The adaptation of my AI-approach will continue and is becoming central to a recently started network of AI-facilitators. I am planning to publish an article next year and will probably attend the AI World Conference in 2019 to present the development of my thinking.

Besides my AI practice, I am reconsidering my focus as a change consultant and thinking about a combination of teaching and facilitating groups in becoming reflexive on their local practices. My intention is to take a complexity perspective in my teaching and facilitating about collaboration and human interaction, helping people to become aware of their complicities in the creation of desired and undesired situations and their effects. As a consequence of this research, I am considering writing an article and publishing a book in Dutch.

My identity has started to shift as a result of this research, and I expect that this will continue for a while. I notice that I'm paying less attention to plans, tools and models than I used to, instead regarding them more as conversation vehicles. I look how people use them, who the people are who are using them and what the likely consequences of their use are. I have become more sensitive to what happens within people's interactions, paying more attention to the emotions, feelings and thoughts of myself and of others. I notice I'm paying more

attention to details of the interaction going on and sometimes I notice myself sticking to a single word or gesture. I speak more freely than I used to do without worrying too much about the consequences. Also, I'm less focused on just the results and pay more attention to what is happening within the process. And I talk more often about aspects that are considered non-functional than I used to, often to express part of my experience, or to stop and reflect, trying to stimulate others to do the same. I also feel an increasing need to discuss unresolved issues that others avoid because of their ambiguous and risky nature. What attracts me to them is the potential they hold for generating other kinds of discussions that might be interesting for everyone involved, and which can contribute to the release of stuck patterns of relating. Though I might give the impression that I could easily integrate these aspects into my work and life, in reality I don't. I find it an exciting but also a discomfoting process that is, I realize, inherent in any change effort where relationships, identities and ways of thinking and behaving are changing in important ways. I believe these experiences to be extremely valuable for change consultants and coaches.

I hope that my research will contribute to the enhancement of other consultant's ethical and political awareness in their collaborations with the client. Acknowledging and taking the antagonistic aspect into consideration might expand their experience of what is happening within their relationship with the client. This won't necessarily make them more effective in an economic sense, but it will add important aspects to their interactions with the client that are often avoided or neglected. It might generate a different kind of knowledge, of situations that are considered uncertain and unsettled, that can increase the consultant's, and others', understanding of the changes and developments that are taking place, hence his/her capacity to better cope with them. The ethically and politically engaged consultant, who experiences him/herself more as directly participating in the hurly-burly of daily organizational life, will likely attain a different experience of his/her collaboration than its ideological description, hence making him/her likely to be in a position of better adapting to local circumstances than when in the position of detached observer-bystander.

## **Final remarks**

My research hasn't finished here. In particular, my interest in power and politics is growing as well as in the topics of affect, emotions and feelings. They all share the attribute that they

aren't easily talked about in organizations, despite their omnipresence. The themes are often used interchangeably, power-politics and affect-emotion-feeling, and I think it would help organizations if they could be introduced and discussed in more understandable ways.

Definitions of these terms are often vague and varied, with different authors explaining them differently and often in abstract ways. For example, power and politics are used interchangeably and the same is true for feelings and emotions. Power is applied by people (Weber in Whimster, 2004, Pfeffer, 2010), but also a structural characteristic of relationships (Elias, 1978), while politics are concerned with people's tactics and actions in order to attain order, results or advantageous positions (Mouffe, 2013, Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006). Also, emotions are considered feelings of bodily changes by William James (James in Hacker, 2018), but considered a collection of bodily changes connected to mental images by Damasio (Damasio in Hacker, 2018). Further research in these topics is needed to enhance their comprehensibility, increasing their accessibility for use in organizations and elsewhere.

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