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From prophets to profits: The occupational rhetoric of management consultants

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the construction of occupational identity amongst a new and significant occupation: management consultants. Extending a conceptual framework developed by Fine (1996), we argue that occupational identity is not a consistent whole, but constructed from imagery to interpret and manage situations commonly experienced by occupational members. We argue that consultants, as an occupation, face three key structural constraints as features of their work, which we term, legitimacy, efficiency and vulnerability. On the basis of our interview data, we identify five social roles around which occupational 'rhetorics' are constructed – professional, prophet, partner, business person, and service worker. We explore how consultants use these rhetorics to respond to issues of legitimacy, efficiency and vulnerability, and also highlight how different imagery is used based on its situational salience.

KEYWORDS imagery ▪ legitimacy ▪ management consultants ▪ occupational identity • rhetoric

Introduction

Occupations are more than a set of tasks carried out within an institutional framework. They involve, as well, a range of understandings including the construction of identities for members of the occupation, the meaning of tasks, the rules of acceptable behaviour, and the perceptions that members of the occupation would like to convey to outsiders (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Relatively little attention has been given to conceptualizing occupational identity since the work of interactionist writers such as Howard Becker in the 1950s (Becker & Carper, 1956a, 1956b). A notable exception is the work of Gary Fine (1996), whose critique of the interactionists suggests that occupational identity is constituted from 'bundles' of meaningful imagery organized as 'rhetorics' that may be drawn upon to address problematic situations common to the occupation. Identity, in this perspective, is not fixed, but malleable within a range of shared meanings developed by occupational members. Fine's work has frequently been cited, but to our knowledge has not been applied in a systemic way outside the empirical context in which it was developed.

We believe that there is considerable promise in Fine's concept of occupational rhetoric, and seek to apply it to an analysis of identity construction among management consultants. Consultancy is a particularly useful occupation for the study of identity because of its diversity (Fincham, 1999; Kitay & Wright, 2003) and controversial nature (e.g. O'Shea & Madigan, 1997). We aim to develop Fine's theory of occupational rhetoric by arguing that the key structural features of an occupation shape the overall pattern of identity construction for members of that occupation. In particular, we suggest that in seeking to maintain self-esteem as well as career enhancement, members of an occupation tailor their identity construction to respond to the uncertainties and potentially negative interpretations raised by the structural features of their work and their relations with others. In the study that follows we explore how the structural constraints of consulting work shape the choice of imagery used by consultants to constitute their identity at work, and how different occupational rhetorics are adopted in different contextual settings.

Occupational identity and rhetorics

Surveys of the literature highlight the growing popularity of identity as a focus of research across a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives (Callero, 2003; Ellemers et al., 2002; Howard, 2000). While there has been an increasing focus on identity at work since the 1980s, much of this has focused on its organizational rather than occupational basis (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Albert et al., 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Parker, 2000; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Indeed despite a rich history of research on diverse occupational communities, cultures and ideologies (Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), recent research on occupations and occupational identity is relatively rare (for exceptions, see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bain, 2005; Cohen et al., 2005; Collinson, 2004). Although Watson (2003) asserts that organization has come to dominate occupation as a structuring principle of work (see also Casey, 1996), organizational downsizing, outsourcing, and increasing job mobility highlight the limits to organizational identity in modern work. Indeed, the focus on 'boundaryless' and 'portfolio' careers, and the growth in expert professional services and contract workers highlight a resurgence of broader identities of occupation based around distinctive skills and expertise which transcend the boundaries of single organizations (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Ibarra, 1999). The rapid growth of the management consulting industry is, we argue, one manifestation of this trend. Although consultancy can only be constituted in relation to client organizations, and many consultants work within large consulting firms and are subject to many of the same dynamics as organizational workers, we suggest that consultants also form a distinctive occupation that extends across organizational settings and to which occupational members ascribe central meaning and allegiance. The growth in management consulting, business services and related 'knowledge workers' highlight, we suggest, the increasing relevance of an occupational conception of work identities that complements the focus on organizational identity.

While some occupations may be characterized by strong communal integration and may even embody an 'occupational community' (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), the concept of occupational identity relates more to the way in which individuals define themselves in terms of the work they do. The most useful starting point to understand occupational identity remains that of the symbolic interactionists, particularly Howard Becker (Becker & Carper, 1956a, 1956b). Becker argues that '[k]inds of work tend to be named, to become well-defined occupations, and an important part of a person's work-based identity grows out of his relationship to his occupational title' (Becker & Carper, 1956a: 342). Becker developed the concept of the 'occupational personality', involving the relationship between institutionalized careers and 'self, identity and transformation' (Becker & Carper, 1956b). The interaction between an individual's institutional participation and his or her subjective self was said to lead to both the development of stable identities and the transformation to new identities.

This theoretical approach suggests that identities are subjective responses to external pressures. Thus, occupational identities can change, and not all members of an occupation share exactly the same identity. Becker (1970: 280) notes that '[t]he perspectives a person acquires as a result of situational adjustments are no more stable than the situation itself or his participation in it' and 'if an individual moves in and out of given situations, is a transient rather than a long-term participant, his perspectives will shift with his movement'. Even where there is a strong core identity, different behaviour is likely to be displayed in different situations (Skolnick, 1966).

In an important and more recent conceptualization, Fine (1996: 91) argues that Becker's interactionist notion of occupational identity is too restrictive, involving 'a closely linked set of images that connects one to an unambiguous work world'. Fine's perspective, developed to account for the 'rhetorics' employed by workers in restaurant kitchens, suggests that the imagery used in work situations can vary with the type of work done or the situation in which the work is performed, 'such that identity claims . . . are conditional on social features evident in the work' (1996: 91). According to Fine (1996: 90–1), occupational rhetorics are 'the process of fitting work into a meaning system', making intensive use of images 'that are used to make sense of who one is'. Thus 'rhetorics' make use of clusters of imagery intended to convey meaning about identity to both oneself and others. Occupational members construct identities by making use of imagery associated with a range of social roles corresponding to different aspects of work, such as 'artisans' and 'labourers' for kitchen workers (Fine, 1996), or 'artists' and 'entertainers' for musicians (Groce, 1989), justifying their work in terms of positive imagery or distancing themselves from negative imagery.

Fine's concept of 'rhetorics' implies a less cohesive conception of occupational identity than proposed by the earlier interactionist writers. As Fine argues (1996: 92), '[f]ew occupations have a single rhetorical stance, but, rather, occupational rhetorics are applied strategically' (1996: 92). Thus occupational imagery does not reflect 'a single work reality, but is articulation work that is done to construct meaning . . . linked to a worker's sense of self' (p. 92), that is capable of rapid shifts and is not fixed to a particular set of meanings. Furthermore, particular situations encourage the use of some images but do not preclude others. In other words, members of occupations have access to 'bundles of images' (Fine, 1996: 91) that may be situationally drawn upon and are not necessarily consistent with one another. Given its social constructionist nature, Fine's depiction of occupational rhetorics bears some similarities with interpretations of identity as self-constituting narratives (Brown, 2001; Gergen, 1994).

Fine's work has been frequently cited (e.g. Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Glynn, 2000; Symon, 2000), but has not been applied systematically to the study of identity in other occupational settings. We believe that Fine's framework makes a distinctive contribution to the concept of occupational identity, and in this article we apply and extend his analysis by examining the rhetorics that management consultants deploy in talking about their work and the imagery they use to construct them. However, while Fine (1996: 92) argues that 'the choice of an occupational rhetoric solves identity problems for the worker', this does not explain where such 'identity problems' come from. Indeed, it is not until the final paragraph of his article that Fine (1996: 113) tells us that 'Beyond this interactionist analysis stands the interpenetration of changes on the state, institutional and organizational level and the situated assignments of workers'. These structural features 'produce the constraints under which workers toil and under which they define their selves'. This echoes the broader point made by Casey (1995: 5) that insufficient attention has been paid to the institutional basis of 'self' at work. Indeed, as Stryker (1980: 52) suggests in his critique of symbolic interactionism, during interaction social structure constrains 'the behavioural opportunities and repertoires that bound and guide the interaction that takes place'. Here we argue there is a need to extend Fine's analysis to more cogently account for the relationship between broader social structures and identity construction within occupations. In particular, we suggest that in seeking to maintain and enhance their self-esteem, as well as their material interests, management consultants tailor their identity construction to respond to the uncertainties and potentially negative interpretations raised by the structural features of their work and their relations with others.

Occupational rhetoric and the nature of consulting work

As Fine (1996: 93) notes, all occupations are characterized by tensions between multiple identities. However, conflicting identities and a broader range of rhetorics are more likely in occupations which lack a clearly defined social status and which undertake a broad range of tasks. Management consulting is a good example of such an occupation.

For example, the social status of management consulting as an occupation is highly ambiguous. Despite aspirations to professionalism, management consulting lacks many of the characteristics commonly ascribed to traditional professions such as formal education, a codified knowledge-base, and regulation by a professional association and/or the state. Low barriers to entry and the uncertain nature of consulting expertise, mean that consultancies often promote their status on the basis of market reputation (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003). While a number of large global consulting firms, particularly in the area of strategic advice, promote strong organizational cultures based on an elite identity (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), the vast bulk of consulting organizations trade in more mundane business services and present an appeal to the market based more on technical experience and efficiency. Indeed, despite self-characterization as a 'professional service' (Kubr, 1996; Maister, 1993), management consulting has been subject to growing critical comment from academics, the business press and management practitioners who have questioned both the expertise and merit of consulting services (e.g. Clark & Fincham, 2002; O'Shea & Madigan, 1997).

Management consulting is also a highly diverse occupation (Fincham, 2003), with consultants engaged in an extensive variety of work tasks. Reviews of the consulting industry highlight variations in functional focus and structure, ranging from large global corporations to medium-sized domestic firms, small partnerships, solo practitioners, academic consultants and corporate 'internal' consultants (Wooldridge, 1997). While traditionally characterized as 'business advisers', during the 1990s the consulting industry grew dramatically, based on a widening of activities into more 'hands-on' roles within client organizations (Armbrüster & Kipping, 2003; Morris, 2000; Werr et al., 1997). Downsizing and outsourcing of business activities have also fuelled the growth of an extensive periphery of smaller consultancies and individuals providing services ranging from strategic advice through to more routine outsourced managerial work. Recent analyses of the work roles consultants perform have stressed variations in the nature of the expertise employed (varying from esoteric to more technical knowledge), differing boundary relationships with clients (transactional to relationship-based) (Kitay & Wright, 2003), as well as diverse client needs and political positions (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002).

In reviewing the structural features of consulting work, three main constraints to social interaction appear central. First, management consulting as an occupation faces a problem of *legitimacy*. While all occupations need to establish a legitimate basis for their work activities, arguably the challenges are unusually high for consultants who (unlike accountants and lawyers) lack a clearly articulated professional status and whose knowledge domain is ambiguous and diverse (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002). Indeed, popular interpretations of management consulting within the business press have stressed a negative image of consulting, highlighting the involvement of consultants in the spread of management fads, costly and harmful organizational changes, and sometimes engaging in ethically dubious or corrupt activity (O'Shea & Madigan, 1997; Pinault, 2000). More specifically, as Kipping and Armbrüster (2002) argue, consultants as 'outsiders' suffer from the problems of not only establishing the legitimacy of their expertise to prospective clients, but also overcoming internal resistance to their presence and the implementation of their ideas; the so-called 'burden of otherness'.

A number of writers have suggested that consultants legitimize their role primarily through the use of systems of persuasion by which client impressions of an often intangible service are managed (Alvesson, 1993; Clark, 1995; Clark & Salaman, 1996). However, rather than 'masters of persuasion', others have argued that the problem of legitimacy is an on-going struggle for consultants, many of whom are well aware of both the more general criticism of their occupation, as well as client scepticism of their contribution (Sturdy, 1997).

A second core concern of management consulting as an occupation relates to the need to operate profitably as a service business, a factor recognized by both critical (Kipping, 2002; Sturdy, 1997) and mainstream writers (Maister, 1993). We have termed this the constraint of *efficiency*, reflected in the need of consultants to undertake a range of activities involving the provision of their expertise to clients, as well as managing themselves and their businesses in a profitable manner. While the constraint of efficiency is likely to be more pronounced for solo practitioners and those in smaller consultancies where competitive pressures and client demands may be greater, existing literature also highlights the significant demands that exist for consultants in larger practices where long work hours and a frantic work pace are often a central part of daily work life (Meriläinen et al., 2004).

Third, consultants face the constraint of *vulnerability*. There are three reasons why consultants are economically vulnerable to a greater extent than many other professional services. First, and most important, expenditure on consultants is discretionary for clients. A consultant may help a client to improve their business, but the consultant is generally not directly involved in, or necessary to the ongoing day to day operations of the enterprise, nor (unlike accountants and lawyers) are their services required by regulatory or legal requirements. Second, there are low barriers to entry to consulting (Clark, 1995). Overheads can be very low – many solo consultants work from home, with little more than basic computing and telecommunications facilities – and there are no formal credentials or licences required. Third, much consulting work is inherently transferable. In many cases, consultants are hired because it is cheaper than maintaining a particular skill base inside the firm, but there is nothing to stop activities performed by consultants, from long-term strategy to standardized training, from being returned in-house. As a result, in contrast to the vision of the 'confident consultant', critical writers have highlighted how consultants often suffer from the same socio-psychological anxieties and uncertainties that are claimed to bedevil their clients (Sturdy, 1997).

In the sections that follow we focus on how consultants utilize different rhetorics and imagery to provide a discursive response to these structural constraints and hence promote a positive identity of their occupation and its broader contribution.

Methodology

In examining identity construction by management consultants we adopted a qualitative methodology. The data for this article consist of semi-structured interviews with 58 Australian management consultants conducted from 1997 to 2001. This methodology was adopted because it best allowed respondents to reflect on the practice and context of consulting work, the relationships they have with clients and colleagues, and their understandings of the meanings associated with consultancy. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours and were taped and transcribed, prior to analysis by the authors using the qualitative software package QSR NVivo. This software enabled detailed interrogation of the interview transcripts and has become a widely used tool of qualitative research (Crowley et al., 2002).

While the definition of 'management consultant' has been the subject of debate (Kubr, 1996), we adopted several guidelines for inclusion. First, interview subjects had to genuinely self-identify as 'management consultants', which also needed to be accepted by significant others, particularly clients (a number of which were also interviewed as part of a broader study). While some have questioned whether management consulting constitutes a single occupation (Fincham, 2003), for all the respondents we interviewed, identifying oneself as a 'consultant' was the dominant descriptor of one's work identity and an important and meaningful social categorization. Second, individuals needed to provide business services, and these services needed to be of a managerial or specialist rather than clerical nature. Third, we excluded those who were little more than disguised employees of the client, or were working for enterprises that provided 'rent-a-manager' services to fill temporary gaps. Based on this selection, the consultants we interviewed covered a spectrum of large and small consultancies and different functional specialties (business strategy, information technology, human resources and operational efficiency). They also had varying levels of seniority and experience and included both men and women of various ages. Twenty-six came from large firms (>30 staff), 11 from medium (5–30 staff) and 21 from small or solo practices (<5 staff). The majority of respondents (44) specialized in change management and human resources, with eight working in strategy consulting, and six in operational efficiency and information technology consulting. Beyond the solo practitioners, 20 of the respondents were senior consultants or partners, and the other 21, mid-level or junior consultants. The gender mix was 43 male and 15 female. Our sampling procedure sought to include a representative mix of consultants, but not to seek statistical representativeness.

The material that follows is an analysis of rhetoric that either conveys the message 'this is what consultants are like' or 'this is what consultants should or should not do'. The researchers proceeded inductively, by identifying images, agreeing on the definition and application, coding in NVivo and checking for consistency. Initially, through a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we identified 63 images representing 1724 text passages. As Fine (1996: 92) argues, 'Rhetorical images constitute a resource to create a role-based identity, a particularly salient issue for those occupations that fit into organizations in multiple ways'. In a secondary stage of coding we therefore reanalysed the images and found that 46 of the most extensively coded images (1455 text passages) could be readily grouped in terms of a range of social roles, which we termed the *professional*, *prophet*, *partner*, *business person* and *service worker*. This categorization emerged over time from our analysis of the data, and was the outcome of an iterative process of identifying role-based rhetorics that were distinctive, made intuitive sense, and incorporated the largest number of images from our initial analysis. The most commonly used images that comprise the rhetorics are detailed in Table 1. We examined those images that did not readily fit any of the categories, but were unable to discern additional rhetorics that both made sense and incorporated sufficient text references.

We also coded each interview according to a variety of attributes (size of consultancy, consultancy type, firm status, respondent seniority, and experience), as well as cross-coding text passages according to the tasks referred to (challenging versus routine) and context (referring to clients, other consultants, their own consulting practice, or self-reflection). As a result, we were able to analyse the data according to the varying use of imagery between consultants with different characteristics and in varying situations. Although the five roles around which the rhetorics are based are not the only ones available to consultants, they were by far the most commonly used by our respondents, and are explored in detail below.

The constraint of legitimacy: Professional and prophet

As we have argued, one of the key structural problems for management consultants is legitimacy, reflected in the ambiguity of consultants' knowledge domain and professional status, as well as growing public criticism of their value and contribution. In our analysis of the interview data, a broad

Table 1 Rhetorics and key imagery of management consultants

Rhetoric	*Image*	*Definition*
Professional	*knowledge*	Knowledge based on experience or expertise
	experienced	Consultants are experienced or mature
	integrity	A consultant is someone who bases their actions on what they think is right
	exploiter	Negative image of a consultant as someone who exploits clients or is only interested in money or who takes advantage of other consultants
	passionate	A consultant is someone who genuinely cares about what they are doing and about clients
	superficial	Consultants lack expertise in what they are doing or do not understand what they are doing. Inexperienced or naive
	rigorous	Consultants are rigorous or work in a disciplined way
	independent	Consultants base decisions on their own judgement
	professional	Being a consultant is likened to being a professional, or specific favourable comparisons between consulting and established professions are drawn
	uncertainty	Consultants need to be able to handle uncertainty or pressure
	credible	A good consultant has to be credible, or establish credibility or a good reputation
	up to date	Consultants are up to date on the latest developments
	collegial	Consultants share their knowledge and skills with other consultants
Prophet	*visionary*	A consultant is someone who has a 'big picture' of ideas or organizations, or who takes a long-term view of a business
	pioneer	A consultant is someone who searches for new things or creates new ideas or practices
	intelligent	Consultants are intelligent
	searchers	Consultants are people who are on a search, particularly for deeper meanings
	elite	A consultant is part of an elite
Partner	*partner*	A consultant is a business partner for the client. Includes any mention of setting up long-term relationships
	guide	The consultant acts as a guide for the client
	tailor	Consultants are people who tailor their services to the needs of the client
Business person	*business person*	A consultant is someone with good business skills
	deliverer	A consultant delivers projects on time
	sellers	Consultants are able to market or sell themselves
	slick	Negative image of consultants as slick or hard sell
	persuasive	Consultants are persuasive
	communicator	A consultant is a good communicator
Service worker	*contractor*	A consultant is brought in to do a job and then disposed of
	precarious	Being a consultant is a precarious way to make a living, or leaves you open to being exploited
	repetitive	Consulting work can be repetitive or boring or menial
	on call	A consultant is always available when a client wants them
	routine	What consultants do is unexciting or everyday sorts of activities

range of imagery was presented by respondents which sought to address this constraint based around two key rhetorics we termed the *professional* and the *prophet*.

The rhetoric of the professional

The most common response to issues of legitimacy hinged on the rhetoric of the *professional*. Indeed, this represented the most commonly used imagery among our respondents, with nearly half of the coded passages in the interview transcripts referring to aspects of professionalism. Underlying this rhetoric was the notion that consultants must be knowledgeable, independent and have integrity. For example, asked specifically what he meant by 'professionalism', a solo human resource consultant said, 'Giving advice that you know is correct rather than trying to give bullshit advice . . . And I think from doing that sort of thing, people respect your professionalism'. Another consultant who had worked in both small and large firms related, 'There is another individual who is forever late for client meetings . . . and you felt so embarrassed, because it's professionalism. So, you know, those sorts of things get to me, because I have a professional way of operating.'

A key aspect of such 'professional' behaviour was the related imagery of *independence* and *integrity*; often listed as an important feature of the traditional professions (Macdonald, 1995). Independence was emphasized particularly by senior consultants in major firms. In these cases, the consultant was portrayed as someone who would do what is right even if it meant conflict with the client or losing business. As the head of one of the major strategy firms stated, 'Our model is comfortable with going into a client and causing change to happen, and if our relationship gets damaged because there was a traumatic process, so be it. That's what we get paid for'. In a similar manner, a senior human resources consultant described his work as having a, '. . . reputation or market perception of elegant, qualitative, ethical, best practice approach. If it's not good, it's not right, don't come. If you don't want to do it right, you don't talk to us.'

The other main component of professional rhetoric was *expertise*. Knowing what you were doing was seen to be crucial. Not knowing what you were doing was severely disparaged. For example, a solo consultant who had built a long career in organizational change reflected that,

> You know, I do, honestly know more about it . . . if you spent thirty-four bloody years thinking about one thing and one thing only, the chances are that you might have thought of a few more things about it than people who had been thinking about five things at the same time.

However, the 'good' consultant was also presented not only as someone with expertise, but also with the *experience* to know when and how to apply it. For example, a senior consultant in an international strategy practice stated, 'you know MBAs come out of MBA school thinking they know all about business, and yet, in our general experience, it takes a good two years for them to sort of round them out, to become an effective consultant'. Thus for most respondents, technical knowledge needed to be combined with the experience of how to make use of it, and the 'freshly minted' MBA was presented as a negative image against which a positive identity was constructed.

Most consultants made use of professional rhetoric in our interviews, and it comprised nearly half of all coded passages. It formed a somewhat greater proportion of the rhetoric used by IT and organizational efficiency consultants than strategy and HRM consultants, and was more likely to be used by junior than senior consultants. In the case of junior consultants, this reflected their concern for having their knowledge and experience accepted as credible by clients. Hence, a consultant with less than six months' experience told us, 'I think for me the biggest issue's the confidence issue and dealing with clients . . . and now that you have a bit more knowledge of what you're doing, I feel more confident in being able to speak to a client'. Demonstrating technical knowledge appeared to be the most salient matter when consultants relied on professional rhetoric, as the largest proportion of imagery was based on specialist knowledge or intellectual rigour. Interestingly, a small proportion of the imagery used by consultants in constructing professional rhetoric was negative, against which their own positive imagery was contrasted. Hence, the principal of a boutique consultancy was critical of *superficial* consulting work, asserting, 'We're into substance in this place. And there's a big difference, there's a lot of recruiters into froth and bubble. You know, it's all pizzazz and no substance.'

The rhetoric of the prophet

A second rhetorical approach used by many of our respondents to address the constraint of legitimacy was to present themselves as people who are inherently distinctive to others, and worthy of trust on this basis. As 'people apart', we refer to this as rhetoric based on the social role of the *prophet*. Prophetic rhetoric was used to explain a specific form of consulting work, such as dealing with unstructured problems and long-term horizons. Part of the imagery underlying prophetic rhetoric presented consultants as *visionary*: people who see further than others and lead clients towards uncertain ends far in the future. As the managing director of a major strategy firm said,

> If I'm helping a CEO or a Chairman build a more effective management team by improving the organizational design, it may be difficult to see tangible benefits. In those cases it's usually based upon an element of trust and, non-quantitative assessment of performance.

Similarly, the consultants with the highest public standing were often lauded for being *pioneers*, creating new knowledge or approaches to business, sometimes taking risks in the process.

Unlike professional rhetoric, the imagery used in prophetic rhetoric was often based on interpersonal faith – or at least the belief that the consultant was in possession of wisdom that would eventually be revealed but must for the moment be taken on faith. The principal of a boutique change management consultancy told us that his strength as a consultant was his imagination, and that clients sought his services for his ability to make connections that others could not see. An unusually articulate speaker, his narrative suggested that he would often present his analysis verbally to clients in terms of metaphors or parables, the nature of which were revealed to clients when he eventually explained their meaning, as a magician whisking away his cape to display a rabbit on a previously empty table. He said,

> I'm good at connecting the specifics of their problems to the big picture stuff in social change. And they end up saying, 'oh wow, that's amazing, that's fantastic, that works so well' . . . and whereas we were originally hired for, you know, the bricklaying, we're now being hired for the architecture and the landscape design.

Thus 'big picture' consultants explained their prowess in terms of prophetic imagery of the far-seeing *visionary*.

A subset of imagery associated with prophetic rhetoric was largely confined to the large strategy firms, and was particularly prevalent among the most senior members. The largest proportion of prophetic rhetoric used by these respondents suggested that consultants constituted an unusually *intelligent elite*. Hence, the comment by the managing director of one strategy firm that, 'We recruit exceptionally talented, highly intelligent people from the best schools that have MBAs', was typical. The head of another strategy firm told us, 'We do look for smarts. We call that horsepower. Just sheer horsepower . . . It's way up there, top five per cent' (later increased in the interview to 'top two per cent'). As the ratio between partners and associates in these companies is low, the business model for these firms involves very high fee structures (Maister, 1993). Indeed, these firms present themselves as an elite by pricing themselves out of routine consulting activities. A strategy managing partner declared:

> Well, there's a hand-off. You know, like we're not going to write code. We may help a client develop an e-commerce strategy. We may help set the specifications, line up the joint ventures, but when it comes time to sit down and write in code, you know we're too expensive for that. Give it to Andersen to do it. Or one of the Big Six, Big Five, Big Four, whatever it is now, and get them to do it.

As a more junior strategy consultant put it, you do not hire 'rocket scientists . . . to just turn the crank on implementation'. By asserting distinctiveness, these consultants emphasized their elite status (see also Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), better equipped than anyone else to take on the most difficult business problems, for which a commensurate level of fees was justified.

Thus in seeking to overcome the constraint of legitimacy both to themselves and others, our respondents made use not only of rationally based rhetoric, but also of rhetoric based on the imagery of distinctiveness and the ability to see things that others could not. However, such prophetic rhetoric was relied upon far less frequently than professional rhetoric, and fell into clearly delineated social and situational patterns. It was disproportionately used by members of strategy firms, and more by senior than junior consultants. It was more likely to be used in self-reflection or when referring to one's own consultancy, than to interactions with clients. When the imagery was associated with identifiable tasks, these were much more likely to be identified as challenging than repetitive. Hence prophetic rhetoric was used to explain particular styles of consulting, distinctive recruitment practices, and in some cases the high fees charged by some firms. In many cases these were related.

The constraint of efficiency: Business person and service worker

Beyond the constraint of legitimacy, we have argued that a second core concern of management consulting as an occupation is the constraint of efficiency, involving the need to operate profitably as a service business. Like legitimacy, the constraint of efficiency was a recurring theme within our interview data, both for consultants in major firms with large payrolls and offices in prestigious city buildings, as well as solo operators working from home earning little more than a modest living. Again a range of imagery was presented by respondents which addressed this concern, characterized in the rhetorics of the *business person* and *service worker*.

The rhetoric of the business person

The major rhetorical response to the constraint of efficiency was based on the role of the *business person*. Consultants' responsibilities varied depending on their situation, but nearly all either were, or expected to be, required to get new business, communicate with clients, manage projects, meet financial targets, and in many cases work with other consultants. Indeed, there was little variation in the use of business person rhetoric among the respondents. Most of the coded passages clustered around the mean for nearly all types of consultants and consultancies, with the only variation being that junior consultants were slightly less likely to use it than others. Given the nature of business tasks this is perhaps not surprising. As noted earlier, junior consultants typically were more concerned to establish themselves as technically competent professionals and made more use of professional rhetoric than their seniors, whereas business skills become more significant as consultants took on administrative and marketing responsibilities.

When using the rhetoric of the business person, two sets of images stood out. By far the most common references were to the need to be a capable *deliverer*, bringing in projects profitably and on time. Among senior and middle-level consultants in medium to large firms, this included people management. As the managing partner of an international firm put it, 'there's all this stuff about managing assignments and people and things like that, because it's a very people intensive industry'.

Consulting engagements can also be inherently ambiguous and open to interpretation and re-negotiation. Hence, a core dilemma for the consultant is to keep a lid on the tendency of client expectations to rise, to 'deliver the goods' and to do so profitably and on time. Managing the relationship between project scope and financial viability was mentioned repeatedly. A solo HRM strategy consultant observed that, 'As the scope expands and the complexity increases, it's harder and harder to pin down the deliverables, it's harder and harder to manage the work, the project managing of the work.' The hard-headed business approach was exemplified by the managing director of an international firm:

> I mean people talk about outrageous fees that you pay for consultants. But you know there's a huge level of naiveté in terms of actually running these businesses. So alright, you're averaging, whatever the rate, $3,000 or $4,000 a day for a consultant. But that's not what the

> issue is, that's what they're getting for the consultancy working. You balance it off against your utilization, and all of the other cost factors. And so on. You can understand why you've got to charge those sorts of rates to make a decent buck.

Thus the rhetoric of the business person comes to the fore when it comes to keeping the consultancy going, meeting deadlines and making 'a decent buck'.

The other major imagery within business rhetoric was the *seller*. This imagery comprised about a fifth of the coded passages for business person rhetoric. A former executive relatively new to consulting asserted, 'I believe the successful consultant is one who is able to sell themselves, sell their product, establish credibility and then use that, through their existing client base, to broaden it'. The inability to sell was widely seen as a major reason why some consultants failed. Indeed, among the few respondents who were not successful financially, one related that his problem was 'the difficulty that people like I have in marketing ourselves', while another told us that, 'getting out there and glad-handing people . . . doesn't come easily with me' and 'I didn't want to go out and hustle'.

While respondents preferred to talk about their professional expertise and integrity, experienced consultants also asserted that the ability to sell was paramount. Junior consultants tended to be more concerned with their technical skills, as shown by a relatively new HRM consultant in a medium-sized firm, who believed that you, 'need to know what [you're] talking about in order to be able to sell our solutions', while the recently mentioned managing director of an international firm, focusing again on 'bucks', told us that:

> You could have an individual who wasn't that strong competently, but was OK, and was brilliant in the marketplace. And that's the guy at the end of the day who's going to be successful, in the way that business looks at it. Because at the end of the day it has to be translated into bucks in the door.

The change in the extent to which junior and senior consultants used professional and business rhetoric indicates the changing nature of the problems that they confront, from establishing credibility based on expertise, to ensuring that a business prospers by selling and keeping projects on track.

The rhetoric of the service worker

However, the pressures of running a consulting business efficiently also result in a less glamorous rhetoric of being a *service worker*. This rhetoric acknowledged that not all consulting activity involves 'blue sky' strategy projects with high fees, and indeed, a lot of the work is often more mundane. For example, a number of respondents highlighted the imagery of *routine* or *repetitive* work, particularly in large IT implementations. As an experienced, mid-level consultant in one of the Big Four consultancies noted:

> . . . well how do they organize on large projects, particularly large system implementation projects? And the difference is on those projects you create a factory model. It becomes the electronic sweatshop in some cases. One of the projects I worked on . . . there were 300 people on it and probably two-thirds of those were consultants. And you create this enormous machine, layer upon layer, and it's a horrendous experience I think for the grads who come in. Because you know, in that case, some people were just simply editing other people's training documents. You know it was piecework. So you're bringing in intelligent people with aspirations and giving them horrendous piecework with this formal project management rolls up through the hierarchy. It's a horrendous experience.

This reference to the 'electronic sweatshop' was not isolated. A new consultant in the local branch of an international firm related how she was temporarily 'loaned' to a corporation to do what was effectively call centre work:

> It was actually a very laborious project, and I think that's why they gave it to me, being the grad [laughter] . . . I had to do ninety phone interviews within a week and a half . . . and they're all home numbers, so I couldn't get them during the day, so I was doing long hours . . . All it was, was calling up and following a structured interview.

However, taking on repetitive work can be a deliberate strategy for some consultants. The co-principal of a boutique change management firm told us how he got his start 'doing lots and lots and lots of, what I would now think of as pretty low-level busy work things' such as basic market research, before shifting over a period of years to more high-level change management and executive coaching. Even now, this consultant indicated that a considerable amount of routine work was involved in what was otherwise an intellectually challenging consultancy, but that financially he was not in a position to hire someone else to do this work.

Unlike the 'labour rhetoric' used by the kitchen workers studied by Fine (1996), service worker rhetoric was not self-affirming. It usually referred to an aspect of the occupation from which they had escaped or would like to, or was used to draw a negative contrast with their own practice, or to express that this was 'just the way it is'. Where service worker rhetoric was associated with identifiable tasks, they were always routine in nature, never challenging. This rhetoric was seldom used by strategy consultants, with little difference in usage between HRM and IT or organizational effectiveness consultants. Not surprisingly, service worker rhetoric was more likely to be used by less experienced than experienced consultants, and by junior than senior consultants, and those working in firms that we judged to be low, as opposed to, high status. Where more senior or experienced consultants used such rhetoric, it was usually to refer to what they used to do, or what they now had others do for them. Thus respondents characterized consultancies as stratified, with the more interesting work percolating to the top. The service worker was therefore a role known to consultants, and experienced more by those in particular niches – junior consultants and those in new firms or who were not in a position to pass this work on to others.

The constraint of vulnerability: Service worker and partner

Vulnerability is another feature of management consulting arising from its structural position. As we have argued, this reflects not only the discretionary nature of much client expenditure on consultants (including the potential to internalize activities previously outsourced to consultants), but also the competitive context of an occupation with minimal barriers to entry. Such vulnerability was a recurring theme in many of our interviews and linked to a range of imagery stressing the precariousness of consulting work (a part of the *service worker* rhetoric), as well as more positive imagery associated with a rhetoric of the consultant as a *partner* to the client.

The precarious service worker

Elements of the rhetoric of the service worker, discussed above, highlighted the broader constraint of vulnerability. In particular, the imagery of *precariousness* was highlighted by many of our respondents. In smaller and solo firms, consultants explained that their business, and thus their incomes, could be highly variable. While some consultants were able to attract the 'big bucks' mentioned earlier, others enjoyed far more modest incomes. As a solo outplacement consultant told us, 'According to what you would consider to be measures of success, even my busy times are lean times'. As well, the precariousness of their work left consultants open to having unreasonable demands imposed on them by clients. As a part-time consultant related, 'You have to do long hours because the time frames for most of these projects are insane. You know, quite insane. And you can't question the timeframe as a consultant'. Even a successful change management consultant related that the nature of his work left his business highly vulnerable, because his clients were primarily in the government, and that they 'know, that if they screw you and you object . . . you will lose, because no bastard will ever hire you again'.

Service work can also be episodic, and the 'outsider' status of consultants was captured in imagery which suggested that they were *contractors*, with fixed and limited responsibilities. An inexperienced consultant stated that 'I would go into projects, in and out. So you don't expect to become attached to anything for very long. You deliver and get out.' Such language was sometimes used to express considerable frustration with their work, for example, 'most of the time you report, your initiatives aren't implemented . . . And even though it is the solution to the problem, the politics will not allow it to happen, and that's frustrating'. Others, however, accepted this as an inevitable aspect of consulting work, either philosophically – 'You've got to keep your mind on the end game, that you're not there forever, you do actually walk away and say "thank you Mr Client"' – or more cynically – 'it's "get, gobble and go". Don't breed dependence.'

Challenging vulnerability: The rhetoric of partner

However, a key response to such precariousness and vulnerability amongst our respondents was the rhetoric of the partner role, in which respondents emphasized imagery of *partnership* and *walking alongside* their clients. This was encapsulated well by a solo industrial relations consultant, who told us that, 'I very much try to build relationships with clients that we're in partnership, we're in this together and I don't care what time of the day or night you ring, what day of the week it is, we'll fix this.' Similarly, a specialist consultant in one of the Big Four firms told us, 'When I go into an organization I feel like I'm on an equal footing . . . I'm not there as their servant. I'm there walking alongside them these days'. Hence, unlike professional and prophetic rhetoric which portrayed consultants as superior to their clients either in terms of their expertise or their brilliant visionary capability, partnering rhetoric presented them as equals, working together towards a common outcome.

Importantly, this rhetoric sought to address the constraint of vulnerability by seeking to retain clients and ensure a steady flow of business. As studies of professional service firms have highlighted, the discourse of the client is often a central feature of the socialization and culture of these organizations (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000), although we found that this rhetoric was also pronounced amongst small and solo consultants as well. Many of our respondents had in fact built their business model on the notion of partnership and portrayed an enduring relationship as fundamental both to their financial viability and what they could offer to clients. The head of a small human resources consultancy told us that:

> We're selling a relationship, and that we understand your business and we sometimes have a longer history, a longer memory than they do, because they can come and go. I have a file on them. I have given files back to my clients because they didn't have the detail I have on them. So I desire a long-term relationship and try to court that relationship and that it is repetitive, you know, coming back.

While the imagery of partnership primarily related to business partners, a strong form of this rhetoric also involved the imagery of *intimacy*. For example, a specialist consultant in a large firm, referring to the intensive three year projects in which she typically engaged, described her relations with clients as, 'like being a therapist, when you put them through this process you'll be taking them through it, so you know them intimately and they know you intimately'. An organizational change consultant related some advice that he had given to a larger consultancy with which he had worked. 'You're dating. You're dating lots of companies. Lots of agencies. But you need to be married. For a company that's got a lot of people, it's got to pay their salary day in and day out, you need marital relations, not dating.' Describing his own consultancy, he went on to add, 'we have very blurred boundaries, and you end up, you become part of the organization. You have friends in the organization.' Thus the rhetoric of partnership constructed consultants as people who work closely with clients on an equal footing and share their interests, metaphorically becoming 'like' therapists, friends or spouses.

Partnering rhetoric was more likely to be found among strategy and HRM consultants than IT and organizational efficiency consultants reflecting the broader tension between consulting approaches that stress project versus relationship-based business models (Karantinou & Hogg, 2001; Kitay & Wright, 2004). Partnership was also very much a client-centred rhetoric, much more so than the other rhetorics we discerned. Along with professionalism, partnering was therefore an important means of devising an external 'pitch' attractive to clients, and sought to respond to the broader constraint of consultant vulnerability.

Discussion

We have argued that broader social identities, such as occupational and skill-based affiliations, continue to be an important source of self-definition for many individuals, particularly for those in new occupations which have grown within a context of organizational restructuring and the emergence of 'portfolio' careers (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Cohen & Mallon, 1999). Management consultants and their use of complex occupational rhetorics are, we suggest, a good example of the continued importance of occupation as an organizing principle of work and employment.

This is not to suggest however, that organizational identity is unimportant for consultants. For example, many of our interviewees from large consultancies highlighted a strong level of organizational identification, stressing the distinctiveness of their firm with respect to rival organizations (see also Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). In particular, as we have highlighted, a subset of the *prophetic* rhetoric was strongly represented by senior respondents from large strategy consultancies who characterized themselves and their firm as a distinctive elite, who undertook original and unstructured problems, and employed the 'best and brightest' graduates. In these cases, prophetic rhetoric was linked to a strong organizational or 'corporate identity' (Cornelissen et al., 2007), which emphasized the distinctiveness of membership of particular consulting firms.

This raises the issue of the interaction of organizational and occupational identities. On the one hand, such strong organizational differentiation appeared to downplay broader occupational affiliations amongst the senior individuals who presented themselves as loyal guardians of their firm's unique culture. However, other respondents highlighted how such distinctive organizational identities could also contribute to a broader occupational identity over the course of an individual's career. In particular, a number of the solo consultants we interviewed had worked in such 'elite' firms prior to establishing their own consulting practices, and emphasized how strong organizational identities could act as a form of 'reputational capital' (Martin, 2005) for career development. For these individuals, time spent working in such distinctive firms was presented as playing a major role in the development of their expertise and identity as consultants and something they could recount to clients and others as a source of legitimation. As a result, rather than alternatives, occupational and organizational identities often overlapped as 'nested identities' and could operate in both tension and combination (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Zabusky & Barley, 1997).

In addition to emphasizing the importance of occupation as a source of contemporary identity construction, we also have sought to build upon

Fine's arguments regarding occupational rhetorics. Fine's (1996) depiction of occupational rhetorics developed in response to what he perceived as the rigidity of earlier interactionist interpretations of occupational identity, and stressed how occupational rhetorics did not simply reflect a singular work world, but were applied situationally to convey meaning to oneself and others. However, while Fine explains the way in which such rhetorics could solve 'identity problems' for individuals (1996: 92), the source of such 'identity problems' remains obscure. As we have noted, Fine (1996: 113) makes mention at the end of his article to the structural features of occupational work producing constraints 'under which workers toil and under which they define their selves'. Guided by the comments of Casey (1995) and Stryker (1980) of the need for a greater focus on the material and institutional context of identity construction, we have sought to build on the suggestions provided at the end of Fine's analysis to account for the relationship between broader social structures and occupational identity. Our analysis of the interview data demonstrated that the majority of imagery and rhetorics used by the consultants we interviewed related to three key structural constraints that have been emphasized in the broader critical literature on management consulting; what we have termed legitimacy, efficiency and vulnerability.

As we have seen, the motivations underlying the construction of a positive self-image through occupational rhetorics appear to have both structural and subjective components. On the one hand, such rhetorics offer a number of tangible advantages to consultants in terms of convincing clients of their expertise and value, as well as improving the career prospects of individual consultants by presenting them as members of a high-status occupation. Importantly however, the advantages of occupational rhetorics also extend to individual's subjective perceptions of themselves. Hence, following social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), many of the images on which the rhetorics used by our respondents were based stressed strongly positive definitions of consulting work that served to enhance self-esteem. For example, in terms of client relations and the structural constraints of vulnerability and legitimacy, respondents not only used the rhetorics of *partner*, *professional* and *prophet* to overcome the sense of unease caused by the structural issue of a lack of demand for their services, but also to address the deeper psychological vulnerabilities that could flow from a lack of legitimacy as members of an accepted and valued occupation. In this sense, consultants not only want to be wanted by clients for the purpose of making money, but they appear also to want to believe that it is right and proper that they are wanted.

While we are not implying that structure determines identity, we do argue that there is evidence that the broader structural features of work influence the patterns of identity construction that members of particular occupations present about themselves and their work. Indeed, we find parallels with earlier literature on occupations which has noted the way in which aspects of work shape identity as a member of an occupation. For example, it is hard to reject the role of danger at work as a key factor shaping identity construction amongst occupations such as construction workers and the police (Haas, 1977; Skolnick, 1966), just as 'responsibility for others' and public safety have been argued to play an important role in the occupational identity of train drivers, air traffic controllers and nurses (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Clearly, in the case of management consultants, issues of physical danger and public safety are not relevant to their daily work, however, we argue that other structural dynamics of consulting work, such as legitimacy, vulnerability and efficiency, are central.

We have suggested that these structural constraints are pervasive to management consulting as an occupation. However, following Fine (1996) and his criticism of earlier interactionist literature, we have emphasized how members of occupations do not present a singular vision of themselves and their work but use rhetorics in a complex and situationally contingent manner (e.g. varying work tasks and contexts). In this respect, it should be noted that the imagery underlying different rhetorics are not entirely consistent, and in some cases reveal tensions within the occupation. Indeed, we argue that rhetoric is an important mechanism for managing the tensions inherent in working life. As Fine (1996: 112) notes, '[m]ost occupations incorporate diverse tasks that have more or less creativity, autonomy, boredom, and goal-directedness', thus it is not surprising that '[i]n practice, workers use images and typifications when and if they seem appropriate: the bricolage of identity work'. For example, the *elite* imagery commonly used by members of high status strategy firms to legitimize their standing – and high fees – within the industry sits uneasily with *partnering* rhetoric. Not surprisingly, our empirical analysis reveals that this imagery is used in different contexts – the former when drawing distinctions with other firms, partnering almost always in the context of clients. Similarly, the imagery of *independence* which forms part of professional rhetoric contrasts with a central image of the *partner* role, which promises to 'walk alongside' the client. Indeed, imagery of *regimented* or *repetitive* work underlying the rhetoric of the *service worker* rhetorically cordons off aspects of the job which are commonly seen as boring and mundane, which consultants wish to rise above to join the *elite* or at least engage in work that requires a high level of *expertise*, and leave the more menial tasks to those new to the industry who must serve their time before gaining access to more challenging activities. As Cohen et al. (2005: 782) note, using somewhat different terminology, occupational 'discourses are not objective entities, but analytical constructs. As such they are local and contingent: the products of certain times, places and people'.

Conclusion

In contrast to the significant research focus on organizational identity, we have suggested that more attention needs to be directed to conceptions of occupational identity. This is particularly relevant given changes to labour markets such as downsizing and outsourcing which weaken the ties between individuals and organizations, and the rise of new technical and managerial occupations which operate both within and alongside traditional organizational settings. Management consultants are a good example of such an occupation. We have used interview data to show how consultants use rhetoric and imagery to construct their work identities. Building on Fine's (1996) arguments, we show that consultants constitute their identity from a range of resources, and following Casey (1995) and Stryker (1980) we have examined how the main structural constraints on consultants influence their identity construction. We note, as does Fincham (2003), the diversity of consultancy as an occupational group, and provide preliminary insight into the differential use of rhetoric by consultants with different backgrounds and specialities.

Rather than a mechanistic relationship between structural constraints and rhetoric, we have suggested that the use of imagery is complex and situationally contingent. Not all structural constraints are experienced in the same way by all consultants in all contexts, and rhetoric is a flexible resource, hence, following Fine (1996) we would not expect to find a singular, universal occupational identity. Furthermore, as we have shown, identity can be internally inconsistent, as with the perceived need to *partner* while at the same time remaining *independent*. However, identity is not completely open ended, because '[a] sense of identity . . . counteracts or closes the possibility of responding to contingencies with limitless plasticity' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 624). Our diverse group of respondents indeed understood and used common images to convey their identity to others.

Considering the implications for further research, if access to direct encounters between consultants and clients could be negotiated in order to undertake observation, it would reveal in more detail how the use of rhetoric varies situationally, as Fine (1996) found with restaurant workers. Beyond the study of identity construction, our findings also have implications for understanding labour market and occupational structures. There has, for example, been considerable attention devoted to new labour market structures, such as ‘boundaryless’ and ‘portfolio careers’ outside traditional bureaucracies, as well as to the significance of knowledge work, or even terms such as the ‘knowledge economy’ (Blackler, 1995). From the perspective of the consultants themselves, there is considerable ambivalence towards their labour market position. Their position is one of perpetually ‘moving on’, but there is also a negative aspect of precariousness and openness to exploitation. Life outside the traditional bureaucracy may be boundaryless, but the consultants in our study also note that it is vulnerable. Unlike earlier generations of workers who responded to market vulnerability via collectivism and solidarity, modern ‘knowledge workers’ like consultants appear to eschew such strategies in favour of more individual solutions. While this results in an occupational identity which is complex and often contradictory, these rhetorics nevertheless play a central part in the process of self-definition for these individuals.

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