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Guess who's coming to dinner? Structures and uses of liminality in strategic management consultancy

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ABSTRACT

Organizational studies have recently drawn our attention to the importance of liminality in our working lives. This transitional time-space is characteristic of precarious or mobile employment such as temporary, project and consulting work especially. It is understood as a fluid and largely unstructured space where normal order is suspended and which is experienced as both unsettling and creative. This article critically explores liminality through a detailed study of the neglected activities of business dinners and back-stage management consultancy. We argue that liminality can in fact be a highly and multi-structured, comfortable and strategic or tactical space. We find that the use of wider norms and routines of eating and socializing as well as of hierarchical patterns of working and of exclusion and inclusion shape the experience and outcomes of liminality. Moreover, we highlight how the context of liminality is sustained by highly structured organizational activities in the production of domestic and public meals. We conclude that business meals mark a traditional, rather than modern, practice where 'official secrets' continue to grease the wheels of commerce. At the most senior levels especially, the liminality between work and private spheres can be far from unsettling and fluid.

KEYWORDS

eating ■ liminality ■ management consultancy ■ meeting ■ norms

Introduction

We are repeatedly told that the boundaries of organizations are blurring. Some claim that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish that which is inside and outside the organization (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003); between home and work (Hochschild, 1997); between full-time and temporary employment (Garsten, 1999); and between one organization and another (Tempest & Starkey, 2004). Researchers have sought to make sense of this seemingly fluid world by arguing that organizational members increasingly dwell in 'liminal spaces'. Liminality is a social space that is 'betwixt and between the original positions arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony' (Turner, 1977: 95). In an organizational context, this is a space where the regular routines of the formal organization are suspended. Those who dwell in liminal spaces include consultants and their clients who are not quite part of one organization or another (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), temporary employees (Garsten, 1999), professionals who identify neither with their organization nor occupational group (Zabusky & Barley, 1997) and those engaged in inter-organizational networks and projects (Tempest & Starkey, 2004). Finding oneself in a liminal space is seen as a profoundly unsettling experience. This is because the relatively settled organizational identities, routines and rules disappear. At the same time, new blurred or transitional identities, routines and norms are opened up. This means liminality may also be a creative and even desirable place (Garsten, 1999). But is the space betwixt and between organizations so uncertain? When organizational members dwell between organizations, do identities, rules and routines blur hopelessly? Does everything become fluid and unsettling, especially if liminality is becoming more common?

In this article, we recognize the structuring of liminality in terms of its transitional phases for example, but question the current orthodoxy that claims liminal spaces are especially transitory and uncertain. To interrogate ideas of liminality, we have focused on an exemplary case – evening meals shared by clients and consultants during a process of strategic consultancy. We find that meals are indeed valued as liminal space where the burden of many of the rationalistic rituals of the organization is suspended, lessened or proscribed. However, other more deeply rooted and highly developed rituals take their place – those associated with eating and socializing. We also find that liminal spaces such as the business meal are tactically used to explicate and pursue the politics of organizational change by more informal means. An important aspect of this is that certain people are invited to engage in these rituals while others are not. Moreover, we notice that the boundaries of liminality are negotiated and challenged interactively between

participants. We surmise that liminality is not simply or necessarily the unstable and transitional space that many assume it to be. Rather, liminal spaces exist in parallel to, and colour, more formal organizational spaces and have precisely and socially defined rituals and routines, beyond those associated with transition from one state to another. These parallel spaces are actively used by organizational members. We conclude that liminal spaces can be highly structured and conservative as well as being creative and unsettling.

We make this argument by drawing on a rare longitudinal ethnographic study of a strategic change consulting project. We focus on what might be seen as the informal political practices of the consultants and clients which happened over meals. We locate specific routines and rituals that structure this liminal space. In particular, with reference to insights from the sociology of food and eating, we find these routines are typically drawn from rituals of dining and eating that are deeply embedded within our society.

The liminal life

The idea that organizational boundaries are fluid, permeable and open is now commonplace (Paulsen & Hernes, 2003). Commentators argue that as organizations look less like hierarchical pyramids and more like networks, the neat borders between the inside and the outside of an organization disappear. Instead, they are variously described as a 'gas' that spreads into every part of life (Deleuze, 1992), a spider's web upon which temporary employees scuttle to and fro (Reich, 1992) or a network of savvy knowledge workers (Castells, 1996; Barley & Kunda, 2004). In this seemingly strange world: work occurs at home and we are encouraged to make ourselves at home at work (Fleming & Spicer, 2004); some of our closest colleagues are actually employees of other organizations (Garsten, 2003); and the bulk of employees in our organization are considered to be just passing through (Beck, 2000). The boundaries of organization become so busy with border-traffic that it is difficult to judge where they begin and end. This consistent state of fluidity is seen by many to create an almost constant sense of existential anxiety (Berman, 1983; Bauman, 1995; Sennett, 1998).

While some of the claims around boundaryless organizations and their existential effects may well be exaggerated (for example, see an assessment by Webb, 2004), frequent border crossing is not solely the preserve of a small section of the workforce. Researchers have identified a wide range of situations where employees must negotiate their way in the crevasses between organizations on a regular basis. Scientists work across the boundaries of

scientific fields during large-scale projects (Zabusky & Barley, 1997). Temporary workers move between firms with radically different processes, rules and routines (Garsten, 1999). Workers in the culture industries rapidly move between short-term projects with new organizations (Tempest & Starkey, 2004). One of the most interesting sectors of the workforce where boundary crossing is an everyday activity is management consultancy (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). The consultant and the process of consultancy more generally perhaps exemplify the condition of constant border crossing and boundary blurring for a number of reasons. Consultants typically work in the interstices between their employing organization and their client organization. They spend much of their working time at the client site and when they return to their home office, they are deemed to be 'on the beach', that is, not working. Indeed one of the central skills that successful consultants develop is the ability to take advantage of many of the ambiguities presented during the consultancy process (Sturdy, 1997; Alvesson, 2004). Because it captures so many of the characteristics associated with blurred boundaries, we shall take consultancy as the focus of the present study.

Researchers have increasingly turned to the concept of liminality to theorize the radical blurring of boundaries such as those found in consultancy. Liminality denotes a space between formal institutions where institutionalized or cultural rules, norms and routines are suspended or not applicable. Liminality has been applied to relatively persistent phenomena or anomalies, such as forms of 'deviance' where boundary categories are transgressed and therefore seen as dirty or polluting (Douglas, 1966). However, liminality is more typically seen as a transitory condition (Turner, 1977, 1982). Here, actors become separated from an existing social order and temporarily incorporated into another realm, only to move on again. Examples of these moments of transition include birth, death, marriage, promotion from one social position to another or the movement from one home to a new one (Turner, 1987). While occupying such transitional timespaces, participants find themselves 'temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them since they have no rights over others. But it also liberates them from structural obligations' (Turner, 1982: 27). Shared liminality may also lead to a heightened sense of togetherness (Turner, 1977). Further, liminal characters are typically not able to access a persistent status or identity because they cannot easily be defined (Zabusky & Barley, 1997). Some also suggest that by suspending usual social commitments, liminality increases the possibility of creativity and innovation (Garsten, 1999). The ambiguity between organizational boundaries has therefore been interpreted as liminal space where many of the stable rules

and identities are suspended, creating double-edged possibilities of increased creativity with increased insecurity.

In making sense of the various boundary crossings of consultants, Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) turned to the concept of liminality, paying particular attention to its subjective and transitional characteristics. They used this idea to interrogate how both clients and consultants are located outside of their respective organizational contexts during the consulting process. For them, both consultants and clients are required to occupy an unsettling liminal space where they are neither inside nor outside the client organization or consulting firm. This gives rise to many tensions including consultants having to suppress their own objectives and (temporarily) internalize those of the clients. The result is that they may experience significant uncertainty about their own identity, position and routines (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). At the same time, the consultant and client remain distinguished, experiencing liminality as well as its associated transition structures and rituals in different ways. These rituals are seen to be supervised by the consultants and, in so doing, they turn 'a regular organization into a liminal one' for the client team members (p. 279). A generic three phase linear path is outlined as the clients move from their line roles into the liminal space of the project team and then back again. These are illustrated by the project start-up meeting, the sharing of documents between team members (liminality) and then the final presentation of the project report. Thus, liminality is not wholly unstructured, but the structures are seen as being based on the transitional process itself, without impeding significantly on the overall experience of the uncertainty of liminality. There is even significant uncertainty about where and when consultants should and should not work. This is revealed in the comment by one client to a consultant: 'going to lunch already? Are we now paying you also for meal times?' (p. 274).

Czarniawska and Mazza's (2003) study is important for our understanding of consultancy as well as liminality. Indeed, the traditional view of consultants as simply *organizational* outsiders and clients as insiders is being questioned more generally. For example, Werr and Styhre (2003) point to the growth of consultancy discourses and contracts in emerging network societies where groups of clients and consultants work together in 'partnerships' which challenge conventional organizational boundaries and obligations (see also Marchington & Vincent, 2004). Similarly, Kitay and Wright (2004) counter the traditional insider-outsider view by reference to the persistent importance of personal social ties between particular clients and consultants which allow them to transcend simple transactional relations, into what might be seen as liminal space. Finally, Clegg et al. (2004) reinforce the view of the consulting project team working in a liminal space, by

emphasizing the creative potential it has for the use and development of new knowledge. Here, teams are deemed to be freed from their own organizational constraints to practise improvisation, aided by the presence of the more cosmopolitan consultants who bring new insights to the process. While such a view may overestimate the novelty of consulting knowledge to clients and the potential for creativity after the project has been completed (Sturdy, 2004), it reinforces the idea that consultancy is an important site to explore liminality further.

Liminality at the table

In addition to liminality with respect to the space between formal organizations and their roles, another important dimension is the interstice between work time and non-work time. In the context of consultancy, one of the more interesting and uncertain events in this regard, which Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) mention in passing, are meals. During a consulting project, the meal is a time when client and consultant can come together and communicate in a different way to other formal interactions, including those between project team members. It adds another level of liminality. In doing so, the boundaries between insider and outsider, selling and changing, work time and leisure time, friendliness and professionalism are blurred further. As they share food, these two souls enter into a kind of dangerous communion whereby any persistent organizationally defined borders may be temporarily or partially lowered.

In fact, moving from meeting to eating provides an exemplary instance of liminality which lies right at the heart of the consultancy process and perhaps, organizational life more generally. Indeed, it is common knowledge that in many, but not all, cultural contexts business deals get done over meals. It is therefore surprising that there has been so little research on the dynamics of business meals. Drawing on a wider sociological literature on eating more generally, some attention has been given to differences in lunching patterns at work (Cook & Wyndham, 1953) and the symbolism of organizational celebrations and events around meals (Rosen, 1985), but there is remarkably little research on the collision of eating and meeting. One exception is Kanter's (1977) investigation of the role of men and women in large corporations. She notices that the wives of male managers occupied an unsettling position of being both insiders and outsiders of the corporation, as hostesses for the social gatherings of their husband-managers and their business associates. At dinners and cocktail parties for example, they use their assumed relationship-building skills to garner indirect support for their husbands.

This is seen as being especially important at more senior levels. As Kanter points out:

the closer to the top of the organization, the more traditional and non-*'modern'* does the system look . . . At the top – and especially in interaction with its environment – the organization is most likely to show strong elements of a personal familistic system imbued with ritual, drawing on traditional behaviour modes, and overlaid with symbolism. (p. 118)

At the apex of the organization then, the traditional boundaries which structure the modern corporation become impossibly blurred:

The dilemma that can confront people at this level is the issue of publicness/privateness . . . There may be no distinction between work and leisure . . . People entertain one another on yachts or over long, lavish lunches – all in an attempt to mutually obligate, to create personal relations that will give someone an *inside track* when it comes to more formal negotiations . . . Entertaining in the home with the wife as hostess is especially binding, since it appears to be a more personal offering not given to all, sets up a social obligation, implicates others, and also calls on ancient and traditional feelings about the need to reward hospitality . . .

(p. 119)

What is so striking about Kanter's observations is that these liminal spaces of public/privateness such as the weekend on the yacht or cocktail party are often carefully co-coordinated affairs. Indeed the meal *'may come to be as carefully managed and rationally calculated as any production task'* (p. 121). To avoid making the meal appear as impersonal as a production line, the *'wife is thus faced with an added [boundary] task . . . to make an event seem personal that is instead highly ritualized and contrived'* (p. 121). The result is that the world of top corporate executives and their wives involves the consistent blurring of the public and private realms as well as of inter-organizational boundaries.

While there have, no doubt, been some, perhaps modest changes in business and gender practices in the last 30 years and cultural norms vary in such contexts, this blurring of boundaries continues to be recognized in the organizational literature as important. For example, a recent study in the UK showed how informal interpersonal relations at senior levels and activities such as sports events, were used to nurture inter-organizational relationships

(Marchington & Vincent, 2004; see also Hasselström, 2004). By contrast, in the context of management consultancy, some argue that such activities have become less important recently, with clients being more systematic, rational or regulated in their purchasing behaviour (Czerniawska & May, 2004). However, empirical studies (Jones, 2003; Kitay & Wright, 2004), autobiographical accounts (Pinault, 2000) and prescriptive guidelines (Ramsey, 2004) suggest that they remain 'normal' activities, especially at the more senior levels. For example, lunch meetings can provide a space between work and leisure where both consultants and clients engage in informal 'politicking', sounding out business plans or discovering the real objections of disgruntled actors (Buchanan & Badham, 1999; Alvesson & Johansson, 2002). Indeed, although they do not develop the point, Czerniawska and Mazza illustrate the liminality of such meals within the already (organizationally) liminal space of consulting when they quote a consultant describing his/her subordination to client demands:

Do you want to know about my working day? Yesterday I was at the client's office till 20.00. Then she [the client] invited me to dinner, so I kept consulting (*to a certain extent*) till midnight.

(2003: 274, emphasis added)

However, details of what occurs in such events, which lie between meeting and eating, remain largely hidden from research accounts. In what follows, we build on the above studies by examining empirically how the liminal space of meals is used by both consultants and clients during a consultancy project. We then explore this further in relation to broader analyses of eating and ask whether this liminal space is actually as unstable and uncertain as many scholars of liminality argue.

Study and methods

In order to investigate the liminal spaces of consultancy, we have drawn on data produced during a longitudinal in-depth field study carried out in a medium-sized Western European organization which went through major strategic and organizational changes involving the use of management consultants. The study started just prior to the engagement of the consultants and ended, 15 months later, when the strategic changes were implemented. The field data are based on a variety of data sources, but here we draw on interviews and observations in particular.

A total of 92 formal interviews were conducted with the main actors

involved in the strategy review process – the client CEO, members of the board, middle and junior managers and all the consultants as well as representatives of the firm's owners such as two regional banks. The interviews were semi-structured and intended to allow interviewees to reveal their perceptions concerning the events, actions and circumstances during the strategic change initiative and consultancy project. Questions focused on the consultants' and other participants' involvement and the implications of this as well as on perceptions of what happened and why with a particular focus on how decisions and actions were influenced and conflicts resolved.

Additional informal discussions with participants were held while the researcher spent time observing activities associated with the consultancy project. Observations were carried out regularly, for two weeks every month until the assignment was completed, in the capacity of a researcher – 'observer as participant'. What might be considered unparalleled access was made available to one of the authors who knew the CEO from a previous working relationship. The CEO was keen to support academic research and communicated the purpose and content of the researcher's study to all involved. Clearly, however, the presence of the researcher and her role as an interviewer and an observer, combined with the seniority of the 'gatekeeper' CEO, will have had a specific impact on the behaviour of the clients and consultants and therefore on the data we draw on. One might speculate on the nature of this impact, such as greater reticence on the part of participants in otherwise 'private' spaces or when discussing politically sensitive issues. Nevertheless, it is also important to emphasize that the length of time spent by the researcher close to the project team influenced and seemed to lessen this impact. Also, participants were assured of individual anonymity prior to and during their participation in the research.

Consultants' work practices and interactions with clients were observed both on-site and off-site, including workshops, telephone conversations and, as we shall see, client-consultant meals. Those which were not observed directly were explored through interviews, both before and after the event. A schematic representation of the key events in the consultancy project is set out in Appendix 1.

The majority of the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently summarized or transcribed for content analysis on a priori and emergent themes such as strategy practices and informality respectively (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Relevant material was translated into English by one of the authors. Analysis consisted of multiple readings and iterations of the data as well as inter-coder reliability checks and validation from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Fox-Wolfgramm, 1997). Such a method and process of analysis is designed to strengthen assertions made

about actors' interpretations, but cannot of course, give rise to generalizable claims. Rather, the aim is to provide analytical insight into both liminality and business meals. Before presenting some of the data, we briefly introduce the context in which they were gathered, in particular, the company and its consultants.

Locco (a pseudonym) was among the top 50 automotive component companies in Europe with around £200 million in revenues in the late 1990s, mostly from major car manufacturers and other European automotive suppliers. It was founded in the 1950s by the current CEO, who still holds a majority stake in the company. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the company followed a continuous expansion strategy based on establishing production plants outside Western Europe. This was profitable and in the 1990s, Locco entered a new, more sophisticated automobile supplier market at the same time as the overall market demand was declining due to 'overcapacity' in car manufacturing worldwide. From 1993 onwards, despite an increase in sales, company profits fell steadily, leading to the experience of financial difficulties and, eventually, the decision by the owners (mostly banks) to encourage the CEO to employ consultants to review their existing strategy.

On the basis of close social and business links with the owners, the firm's auditors were contacted. They owned a consulting business which was employed without any competitive tender. At the time, it was one of the top four firms in the field of strategic and organizational consultancy globally. The Locco team consisted of three consultants working at the client site – a partner, senior consultant and junior consultant. In addition, several consultants in the headquarters were involved during the assignment, either carrying out short-term assignments or contributing with specific expertise. The project subsequently led to the initiation and development of changes in Locco's product and market strategy and its capabilities and resources (see Schwarz, 2004). However, we are concerned here only with the process and, in particular, three dinners held during the period of the project – at the CEO's home, an 'up-market' restaurant and a pizzeria.

Findings

Dinner at the CEO's home

At the beginning of the consultancy assignment, the CEO invited the partner of the consulting firm, the senior consultant and all Locco's senior managers (as well as the researcher) to his home for a dinner. He explained this to the partner:

... it would be good to get together in a more informal way ... to get to know each other better ... and give you an opportunity to learn more about the history of our company.

More generally, he wanted to establish trust between the different parties and get to know 'on a private, personal basis' the person he would be working with. He seemed to feel protective towards his company, pointing out that 'we are not just any other company, we are like a big family which has grown over a long period'.

For the senior managers, the invitation was not seen as especially unusual as the CEO had held such events previously, to celebrate special occasions such as the opening of a new production plant or to discuss important strategic issues. It was however, felt to be an obligation and the Marketing & Sales (M&S) manager, for example, was not looking forward to the event. He anticipated a boring evening and, recognizing the social norms of house guests, identified alternative motives on the part of the CEO.

This is going to be one of those one-man shows of the CEO. We all have to sit around him and listen to his stories. He probably wants to influence the consultants ... let them know what he expects to be the outcome of the project. The CEO usually likes to do this while dining in his home where you can hardly oppose his views.

The consulting partner was however, surprised to be invited to the CEO's home at such an early stage in the project and was cautious about the possibility of a hidden agenda such as the revelation of problems between the CEO and his shareholders. Nevertheless, like the CEO, he saw it as an opportunity to 'break the ice', as well as to gain some political insight in terms of seeing 'who talks to whom and who doesn't'.

For the most part, the invited guests had met each other only twice before, at a strategy meeting and workshop prior to the dinner (see activity 4 and 8 in Appendix 1). Given this and the nature and location of the event, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was, what the senior consultant later described as, an 'awkward atmosphere in the air' when the guests arrived. The CEO was initially not present, but, following long-established patriarchal business traditions as described by Kanter (1977), as well as formal dinner norms, the CEO's wife invited the guests to enter the lounge for an *aperitif*. Here, the partner started to talk with the M&S manager while the senior consultant chatted with the Research & Development (R&D) manager with whom he had had a meeting the day before. The CEO's wife seemed to know the senior managers well, as she asked after their wives (there were no female managers) and children.

The CEO then joined the guests and invited them to take a seat at the table in the next door dining room. Soup was served by the CEO's wife and consumed while the CEO exchanged 'pleasantries' with the consultants in terms of their families and hobbies. A traditional roast dinner was then served and, as planned, the CEO started to talk about the company's history and commented on its relationship with the current shareholders. The serving of the dessert marked another change of topic as the CEO raised his concerns about typical rumours with regard to the use of consultants and redundancies. This continued as cheese and liqueurs were served and consumed. Here the CEO was more prescriptive in setting out how he did not want the consultants to raise any cost-cutting initiatives which might lead to job losses – 'I really don't want my people to get this impression'. Completing the highly traditional format of the event, the guests were invited by the CEO to join him in the lounge for a *digestif*. Here, initially, more sensitive issues were raised such as the M&S manager referring to profit margin problems to the senior consultant and the CEO discussing the lack of profitability of one of the firm's production facilities in Eastern Europe. Finally, the partner spent time talking to the CEO's wife, thanking her for the dinner and finding out about her hobbies. While everybody got their coats and jackets, she commented to her husband 'what a nice man' the partner was. The evening ended with the guests leaving by car or taxi to their homes and hotels and the clearing and cleaning of dishes.

What was particularly striking about the evening was the fact that, during the meal itself, conversation occurred almost exclusively between the CEO and the two consultants. For the most part, the senior managers and the CEO's wife (and the researcher) were quiet spectators. Indeed, in keeping with the M&S manager's expectations, the managers appeared quite bored, exchanging glances and, from time to time, making minor comments supporting what the CEO had said or asking for clarification from the consultants. They were polite rather than silent. There was also other 'polite' work which went on behind the scenes which was necessary for the event to occur. This included preparation of the event, carried out by the CEO's wife, and the preparation and clearing away of the food and dishes which was performed by staff of a local catering company.

Dinner at the castle

Following the dinner at the CEO's home, the consulting partner purchased a guide to the best restaurants in the region and in the third week of the consultancy project, invited the CEO to an 'up-market' restaurant in a converted castle close to the client's firm. Echoing the aims of the CEO

earlier, the partner saw the dinner as an opportunity to get to know the CEO better as well as gain his consent to their proposed approach to the strategy review. He also sought further information on the firm, including political insights, and hoped that the CEO would be more frank in the context of a restaurant.

I want to gain his trust and make sure he agrees with our approach . . . We seem to have problems getting access to data from the R&D and M&S managers . . . I need to talk to him about this . . . also, I would like to know more about the politics going on among the senior management board . . . I also need to talk to him about what he perceives to be the core problems in the firm. Although he already mentioned some at our first board meeting . . . I am not sure if this is really what he thinks.

The CEO and the partner of the consultancy firm arrived separately at the castle and ordered the recommended five course menu. After initial small talk, the CEO outlined his past successes and pointed to the 'great performance' of the new R&D department. He also commented on what he saw was at the heart of the current financial difficulties. As regards political interests, the CEO revealed that there were two main groups of senior managers who favoured different product and market strategies. Such insights were seen as very useful to the partner.

This informal meal provided me with insights as to how they manage their business, who are the key decision-makers . . . what are their management and leadership styles . . . how many interest groups there are among senior managers, who belonged to each of these groups and which interests and motivations hold them together . . . This kind of information gives us an indication of who is open to talk and work with us. Usually these are the sources where we get easier and quicker information when we need it.

Indeed, he saw it as having been a great success, in terms of relationship building and allowing him to redirect the focus of the consultancy assignment.

[The CEO] seemed really pleased with the meal and the conversation . . . I think I have him on my side. Interestingly, I misjudged the position of the R&D manager . . . after talking to the CEO it appears that he does not act without any support and back-up from the CEO . . . It

seems that I have to be more careful about the M&S manager . . . He talked a lot about the firm's different views on the product portfolio. Originally, I would have spent some time analysing this, over a couple of weeks . . . but now [after the meal] I think we should do something about it quickly.

In a classic political manoeuvre, the partner discussed the agenda for the next senior management meeting. In addition, with the aid of a chart, he introduced three different strategic (market) scenarios for the firm which they discussed in detail. The CEO agreed with the proposed approach for the next meeting but seemed to be unsettled by the latter issue:

Later when we got to the dessert, he [the partner] laid out some scenarios he would like to discuss at our next board meeting. That came a bit like a surprise . . . I didn't expect that. But then again, I appreciated that I was the first one to see these ideas laid out . . . I couldn't really agree to propose this for the next morning's session, so I asked him to talk to me about this in more detail in the coming week with more detailed analyses.

Nevertheless, the CEO was satisfied overall, feeling a sense of trust in the partner:

I have a good impression of him [the partner] . . . I don't think he will let me down. I was relieved to hear that he viewed our problems the same way as I do . . . I don't want the consultants to spend lots of time analysing all kind of activities and businesses within the firm.

Several of the senior managers heard about the dinner with the partner and CEO at the castle. To some, it prompted the familiar scepticism and mistrust from those who are excluded or, at least, those who are threatened by the presence of consultants and the associated sense of a lack of control they can provoke. For example, the R&D manager commented:

They [consultants] don't know our business. How can they make a judgement about what we have to do? These consultants only think about job cutting . . . or going to expensive restaurants . . . that's the only thing they know how to do. I am very sceptical of the benefit of employing them . . . It appears to me that the CEO does not trust in our skills and ability to solve the problem.

Dinner at the pizzeria

A few weeks after the dinner at the castle, the senior consultant invited middle managers of the M&S, Finance and International Markets departments to join him and the other (junior) consultant for 'a pizza and a beer' in an Italian restaurant in the middle of the town where the company was located. The restaurant was classified as 'mid-range' and was known locally for good pizzas and already popular among Locco managers and staff.

The senior consultant stated that the purpose of the dinner was to:

. . . exchange information, get opinions on some of our analyses, see how some of middle managers react . . . I like to exchange ideas with the middle managers of Finance and Sales & Marketing . . . They think in the same way as I do . . . They do not hesitate to correct me if I get it wrong and they are quite open . . . Our impression is that they welcome our involvement in the project.

Indeed, this was the second time this group had dined at the restaurant. The managers were seen by the senior consultant as 'politically well connected' in the firm and experts in their areas – as 'good implementers'.

Other client middle and senior managers were not invited to the dinner, but some were aware of the event. A middle manager from R&D for example, felt excluded:

I know that from time to time the senior consultant and some of the middle managers meet at one of the Italian restaurants. I think it happens usually when the consultants are up to something . . . suggesting some important recommendation . . . It looks to me as if they try to get the buy-in of these guys [middle managers]. I have so far never been approached by the consultant . . . and feel left out . . . Sometimes I worry that my lack of involvement might have a negative impact on my career.

However, not all those who were invited were positive about the prospect. The middle manager from International Markets felt pressured by his colleague from M&S to attend the dinners, although it is not clear as to exactly why this was:

When the consultants approached me to join them for dinner, I was hesitant at first . . . I heard from John [an M&S middle manager] that he would be there and he thought that it would be a good idea for me

to come as well . . . He thought it might be very useful for my career. In the end, I decided to join them . . . but due to peer pressure.

The consultants and managers sat down at the same table as they had on the previous occasion. The senior consultant ordered beer for everybody and then everyone ordered their food individually. The discussion started with small talk such as over a recent football match and Formula One motor racing as well as exchanging accounts of how weekends were spent. It then moved on to work and the project such as an analysis of the firm's weaknesses and its core competences. Here, the senior consultant brought out two sheets of paper with charts and graphs illustrating these themes and showed them to the middle managers. They then all discussed each of the identified weaknesses and the managers pointed out additional ones which were added to the list. During this discussion, the managers also revealed various political dynamics such as the senior managers' personal preferences and rivalries. The discussion of the core competences was less lively and the Finance manager suggested taking the charts home with him and thinking about it over the weekend. The M&S manager agreed to do likewise and suggested meeting again in the restaurant at the same time the following week.

The cost of the dinner was shared except for the first two rounds of beer which were paid for by the senior consultant. After the meal, the party went on to another venue for further drinks, including spirits. Here, the atmosphere changed whereby business issues were no longer discussed and emphasis shifted towards making jokes. It was clear that they felt comfortable in each other's company. Indeed, the evening was seen positively by those who attended. The senior consultant for example, found the event very useful:

. . . [I] have a more accurate view of the weaknesses of the firm, but I also understand the political climate better . . . The relaxed atmosphere in the restaurant also helped to develop a rapport with some of the key managers . . . Some of them know exactly why the company has a problem . . . they already have some ideas for solutions and in some cases they have already tried out these solutions without the knowledge of the senior managers. The middle managers we are working with are also very useful if they are well connected to senior management . . . [they] provide access to restricted information and good ideas for solving the client's situation.

He also saw such activities as a normal and important part of consulting in his experience, in that client firms often have individuals with considerable

expertise, 'but their voices are not heard'. Moreover, he noted how this was not the first time that they had informally shown their initial analyses to the Locco middle managers and then adjusted their results for presenting to senior managers. Such an approach seemed to have been supported by the CEO who encouraged these encounters in the hope that the middle managers would 'wake up the senior management out of their deep, long sleep (and) . . . make them aware of how seriously their position is threatened if they don't immediately start to change . . .'

The managers who attended the dinner also found it useful as well as enjoyable:

The senior consultant is very entertaining . . . You always have a good time with him . . . He is really good at imitating other people, in particular our senior managers. I also learned something yesterday. I had no idea that the [our] XYZ products have such a low profit margin.
(Finance manager)

. . . it was a good evening . . . it was fun. They [the consultants] keep me informed of what they are working on . . . In return, I tell them how feasible their suggestions are considering our internal politics and organizational processes . . . [after the meal] when I walked to the car with the senior consultant I got some informal confidential information.

(M&S manager)

Rumours spread among senior and middle managers about the dinner and, unsurprisingly, some felt threatened. Once again, the R&D manager was critical, this time pointing to ethical rather than career concerns:

They seemed to have discussed issues which will be presented by the consultants at the next board meeting. I could not find out what they were talking about . . . I don't trust these consultants. Why would they first talk to these managers before they publicly announce it? It sounds not right.

Other meals

The above accounts describe some of the 'off-site' instances in which strategy and consultancy were conducted through food and meals at Locco. As outlined in the Appendix, other meals were observed or discussed, such as a city restaurant lunch between the CEO and partner prior to the appointment

of the consulting firm and, before that, lunch between the firm's auditor and the partner of the consulting firm. In addition, a number of informal and formal lunch meetings and coffee breaks were also observed on-site, in the Locco offices, where key decisions were made or information conveyed. For example, the consultants' final recommendations for strategy implementation were revised in the Locco canteen over an impromptu lunch.

Discussion

The uses of liminality

It is well known that many key business decisions and activities occur during meals such as dinner parties. Yet little is known about these liminal events. This is because they are not recorded and are hidden to all those excluded from the 'guest list'. Using rich ethnographic data, we have explored the business dinner in the context of strategic management consultancy, another largely hidden activity which is often at the heart of organizational politics.

We found that the succession of meals provided an important liminal space that both the consultants and clients used tactically. Meals in modern societies are typically treated as private or semi-private affairs which denote intimacy (Van Vree, 1999). Indeed, sharing food creates conviviality in both a symbolic and, even, biological sense (Douglas, 1984). This means that even when meals take place in a public space such as a restaurant, it is appropriate to explore 'private' issues such as family and interests and express views which are 'off the record'. The meals that we observed reflected this pattern. They were used and valued as a space where the consultants and clients could get to know each other 'on a private, personal basis'. This included swapping information about their backgrounds, interests and family circumstances at the CEO's home, the CEO and partner engaging in personal negotiation at the castle and the middle managers sharing sporting stories and jokes at the pizzeria. These exchanges helped each participant to form judgements about their opposite numbers and assess their trustworthiness. Incursions into individuals' private lives and informal behaviour appeared to be easier in spaces outside the workspace. Also, they seem to conform to Czarniawska and Mazza's (2003) transition stages, as participants move into and out of the liminal space. But what is even more striking is that the kinds of intrusion into private lives were dictated by the environment – the CEO's home encouraged discussion of domestic affairs, the castle restaurant was an occasion for frank discussion between two 'movers and shakers' and the pizzeria elicited jocularity and masculine bar room conversation about sports.

As well as providing a space for building trust, the suspension of rational organizational routines provided an important space where consultants and clients could examine and test the political dynamics of the firm. Notably the dinner at the CEO's home was more an opportunity for self-aggrandizement on the part of the CEO and a stoic performance of solidarity on the part of the senior managers. In contrast, the dinner at the castle provided a space where the consultancy firm partner could explore some of the political dynamics of the client organization (such as discovering how the R&D manager would react to a particular proposal) and the CEO could shape proposals before they were publicly debated. The pizza restaurant was also a hot bed of politicking with the consultants discovering political dynamics of the firm and some middle managers garnering valuable information about the change process. Thus, the suspension of the routines of rationality associated with the firm provided a space where valuable information could be traded. This enabled the consultants to build an informal 'power map' of the organization (cf. Hagan & Smal, 1997). This would not only allow them to identify potential allies and enemies, it also helped them prioritize who to access and talk to and whom to be careful with. Moreover, it allowed the senior consultant to choose like-minded and competent people who would help ensure the change succeeded.

Further, by suspending the rules of the firm, a space was created for what has become known as 'issue selling' (Dutton & Ashforth, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001). This involves various actions by middle managers especially, which are directed at influencing top management's understanding of issues (Dutton et al., 1997). An important part of issue selling is the 'holding your finger to the wind' to develop a sense of what is considered to be acceptable or not. We found that this involved testing issues, altering how they were framed to fit with dominant political dynamics and discarding those which did not appear to be politically acceptable. During the meal at the castle for example, the partner was able to test and alter strategic scenarios he proposed to introduce at the firm's board meeting. He was also able to use information gained from the CEO to change his priorities about which tasks to focus on. Likewise, during the dinner at the pizzeria, the consultants were able to sound out, and build some tacit support for, some of their analyses with middle managers. At the same time, the managers were able to voice their opinions and concerns about the change process. In each of these situations a more open flow and exchange of information was encouraged. The opportunity to engage informally around issues meant that they could be made more politically acceptable before they entered into the more public domain of formal organization strategy-making.

The suspension or lessening of formal codes associated with the

organization also appeared to offer a safety valve for cynicism and disgruntlement (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Informal resistance often thrives during shared meals, drinking, festivals and even lunch breaks (Cook & Wyndham, 1953). Such communal eating and drinking creates a space where subordinates can voice their discontent and parody the powerful without fear of immediate reprisal (Scott, 1990). This was evident during the pizzeria meal at Locco when the consultants impersonated senior managers and the middle managers expressed cynical views about them, as 'sleepers'. While this reflects the freedom of liminality to invert the organizational hierarchy, in this case through mockery, it is important to note that formal organizational rituals and structures are not wholly suspended or removed. This is evident in the way in which conversation during the meal at the CEO's home maintained hierarchical distinctions and even intensified rituals of deference. Likewise, the status of the restaurants matched that of the diners, with *middle* managers invited to a *middle* range restaurant. Similarly, selected participants reproduced, at least in part, functional organizational divisions such as R&D and M&S. However, and as we shall argue in the following section, other, wider dynamics, structures and boundaries were also present.

Structures and layers of liminality

We have seen how the meal in the private setting of the CEO's home unsettled, if not wholly removed, some of the traditional rational routines of the workplace. However, these were replaced or coloured by other routines and morés, most notably, those of bourgeois dinner party etiquette which tightly structured the evening. The guest list was carefully confined to the inner circle of senior management. The meal was a traditional roast dinner and had a well-known structure of three courses with 'appropriate' drinks delivered with precise timing (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). The topics of conversation were routinely gendered with appropriate discussion of wives and families. Similarly, when the middle managers were asked to a meal, a series of well-known routines were acted out. The traditional pairing of pizza and beer was served which suggests informality. The participants followed the rituals of sitting around a large communal table and the consultants acknowledged their status as 'outsiders' by paying for drinks, thereby creating a degree of conviviality. Moreover, the contrast between this and the dinners in the CEO's home and castle does not simply reflect the distinctions of organizational hierarchy, but class too, through contrasting eating tastes and practices (Bourdieu, 1977) as well as appropriate levels of civility while dining (Elias, 1939; Mennell, 1985). In each case then, deeply embedded norms and routines associated with meals and eating played an important role in

structuring these liminal spaces, replacing or colouring those of the workplace.

We also find different levels and degrees of liminality. For example, those meals held on-site are closer to the daily work activity and norms than dining in a restaurant or home. One might expect participants to be less forthcoming about political dynamics during lunch in the office canteen for instance. At the same time, and as we saw in the case of dinner at the pizzeria, actors may feel even freer to divulge secrets in the space between the meal and the home, in this case, on the way to the car. Here, the participants move from one liminal space to another. This was also evident in the references to taking work home from the meal such as when the consultants handed out their initial analyses in the restaurant. Thus, we can identify different social domains of liminality or reference points, such as between the organization, restaurant and home. This suggests that liminality is not so much an absolute quality. Rather, we found that as meals moved further away from the daily rational routines of the workplace, increased space for liminality was opened up. Moreover, it highlights the limitation of using the formal organization as the sole reference point with regard to liminality and work.

Similar ambiguity is evident in relation to how the liminality of business meals was experienced. As well as finding its freedom useful, both politically and in terms of exploring ideas, there were moments when actors, particularly from the client firm, felt uncomfortable about being located between business and pleasure. This is in keeping with prior studies of liminality which point to its useful, creative and yet unsettling qualities. However, the discomfort in our case at the suspension of formal organizational norms also arose from ethical concerns. This was clearly evident for those managers who were not invited to participate, but also included one of the pizzeria diners who saw the event as a violation of the ethical, bureaucratic principle of conducting business in an open and accountable fashion (Du Gay, 1999; cf. Buchanan & Badham, 1999). By contrast, the consultants and senior clients appeared to be quite at home in this liminal space. However, even here, there were moments of discomfort. This can be seen in a number of instances including the CEO and managers feeling uncomfortable when business plans, charts and documents were presented during dinner. What is particularly interesting here is that while *talk* about work issues did not seem to be particularly unsettling, these business boundary objects were troubling. By introducing such documents, the more rational routines, processes and logics associated with the workplace became visible. In other words, the liminal decision-making space of the meal began to be replaced by the far more rationalized space (and obligations) of the business meeting. In these situations, the clients responded mostly by resisting the

consultants' intrusions and restoring liminality by delaying the work tasks presented to them. What this suggests is that although structured by conventional and, in part, organizational norms, liminality cannot be taken for granted. It is an ongoing social achievement that is patrolled and achieved in action. It appears then, that there is significant liminality work which goes into ensuring that the conversation does not become too business-like with rational norms prevailing. Such work is necessary to maintain a feeling of familiarity while also doing business.

As we have seen, there were precise limitations and distinctions as to who was invited to join the liminal space provided by meals. This selection partially overlays the broader social norms of eating with organizational structures in relation to the hierarchical distinctions and pairing of actors and restaurants. It also adds an informal political structure in terms of those managers who were at the same level as invitees, but excluded from the events. In addition, our findings appear to confirm those of Kanter (1977) in suggesting that, as actors climb the hierarchy, they gain more opportunities for entering and exiting spaces of liminality. Indeed those at the top of an organization, like the CEO, seem to exist in a world where divisions between private and public life spheres are frequently blurred and this is borne out by the number of key meals attended by the senior figures in the strategy process overall at Locco (see Appendix 1). Moreover, and as a consequence, those at the top seem more comfortable with this experience. For instance, when the senior managers were invited into the CEO's home, they predicted what would happen and actually felt quite bored at the prospect, while some of the middle managers felt quite apprehensive before attending the dinner at the pizzeria and excited afterwards.

The issue of who was on the guest list and what happened behind closed doors appeared to be an important issue to others too. We have seen for instance, that the dinners held at the CEO's house, the castle and the pizzeria were known about by many of those who did not attend, some of whom were concerned about what was being plotted. Although such events have been presented as largely outside formal organizational routines, for Weber, these 'official secrets' are also highly functional for bureaucracy. Indeed, the 'concept of the "official secret" is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and nothing is so fanatically defended by the bureaucracy as this attitude' (Weber, 1920: 51). Everyone might well know that conversations occur 'behind backs' and that agenda items are agreed in advance, but this does not mean that these deals are *explicitly* acknowledged. Indeed, if they were, their effect would be reduced if not neutralized. What is crucial about such liminal practices is their secrecy and the pretence of apolitical rational decision-making or of shared interests. They are what Taussig

(1999) calls 'public secrets' similar to what has been well documented in employee relations contexts as 'indulgency patterns' (Gouldner, 1954). Indeed these public secrets are particularly charged with an almost demonic power of fantasies of mass re-structuring and secret deals done behind closed doors, often over dinner.

Although functional for workplace routines and partially overlaid with organizational structures of participation and privilege, each of the meals we have investigated represented a liminal space where the traditional rules of bureaucratic rationality were unsettled. However, they were far from liminal for many of the 'background' participants who worked for the catering company working in the CEO's home, the castle restaurant and the pizzeria. For them, as well as for the CEO's wife, the very table which the clients and consultants experience as a liminal space is actually a highly ritualized and ordered place of work (Whyte, 1946; Fine, 1992). Indeed this is the very work, as much as that by the diners themselves, that maintains the social infrastructure of this liminal space or turns 'a regular organization into a liminal one' (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003: 279). Through their cooking, serving and cleaning, the restaurant and catering employees, like Kanter's (1977) corporate wives, allow the consultants and clients to get on with business/pleasure and not concern themselves with nasty questions like who will do the washing up. This realization pushes us to consider the other kinds of non-liminal work, both paid and unpaid, that has to occur to sustain liminal spaces and the creativity this apparently produces.

Conclusion

Liminality has become a popular and productive organizational concept in recent years with the increased attention given to the permeability of organizational boundaries, in project working, temporary staffing and client-consultant teams for example. Here, liminality is seen as both a desirable and creative, but also potentially unsettling and fluid place. In this article we have explored one instance of liminality – the business dinner. We have argued that it opens up an important liminal space, which is betwixt and between formal organizational and 'non-work' practices. By tracing through three successive working meals during a consultancy strategy project, we have identified some important, and often deliberate or tactical, uses of liminality. These include assessing trustworthiness, exploring and shaping political dynamics, testing out and selling issues and as a safety valve for pent up cynicism and frustration.

We then identified different structures and layers to the liminal space.

First, in focusing on business meals in a consulting project, our study engaged with both the liminality between organizations as well as that between meeting and eating, or work and home. We also identified other gradations of liminality such as that of the on-site meal and between dining and leaving for home. In the case of the consultancy dinners we studied, it appeared that activities were possible which would not have arisen solely in the liminality of consultancy project teams such as that discussed by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003). Rather, the rational routines of both organizational and inter-organizational working were lessened. However and importantly, we saw how the creative space of liminality should not be characterized as largely one of flux and the suspension of normality, structured largely by simple phases of transition. But, elements or traces of organizational routines and structures, such as those of the organizational hierarchy and functional divisions, remain. These are coloured or supplemented by other deeply engrained routines and norms associated with dining, sociability, gender and class. In short, while transitory and betwixt and between, liminality is not isolated from either organizational or other social routines, norms and structures.

Partly linked to this structuring, we also found that participants experienced liminality in different ways and negotiated its boundaries. In keeping with Kanter's (1977) observations of corporate executives, we found that for senior managers and consultants, liminality was a regular haunt and, combined with its perceived utility, therefore a relatively comfortable space. Furthermore, liminality was experienced in a positive way, but not so much from creativity or freedom from conventional obligations, but in terms of career and influence, from inclusion in the inner circle and playing by the rules and routines implicit within that domain. While others did experience some discomfort, again, it was not simply the sense of alterity associated with liminality in general – being 'out of place' (Douglas, 1966: 35) – but included normative concerns at the suspension of organizational routines. At the same time, and following Weber (1920), these 'official secrets' were not simply external to the organization, but complementary or functional to it. However, such practices and their liminal character cannot be taken for granted. Rather, they are sustained, threatened and negotiated by participants through interaction such as the use of boundary objects as intrusions to the comfort of liminality. Furthermore, they are dependent on the non-liminal back-stage work carried out by those surrounding the participants such as catering workers in the case of meals.

Our findings then, support existing work which claims that liminality is an important part of organizational life and the consultancy process (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Clegg et al., 2004). Also, it is a potentially

disturbing and yet also liberating, creative and productive place to be by virtue of its location beyond 'normal' practices (Garsten, 1999). However, we also found that liminal spaces are not wholly insulated from normal organizational routines, but coloured by them. Moreover, liminality can be far more structured than simply following ritualistic phases of transition. Similarly, we have found that some apparently liminal practices, such as the business dinner, can readily be seen as a comfortable, 'usual practice', but also as liminal. Indeed, many apparently liminal practices such as temporary work, contract work or project work such as consultancy have their own quite strongly embedded scripts and routines that define what is to be done in each situation (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Here then, liminality is seen as something more structural than experiential. Moreover, by assuming that liminality is largely a 'modern condition' produced by the increasing blurring of life spheres, many of the traditional forms of liminality that grease the wheels of commerce as well as their ethical status are discounted, such as 'official secrets' and after-hours corporate entertaining. Perhaps we should think of liminality as being a consistent, multi-layered, but not all encompassing (Marshall, 2003), feature of organizational life, particularly at the top of organizations.

In highlighting the multi-structured and layered nature of liminality and its use as an organizational tool or tactic, this article has touched upon some vital concerns that have not been adequately addressed in the study of organizational life. To draw this article to a close, we would like to suggest that four areas, in particular, deserve further investigation. The first is liminality itself. Here, our analysis has drawn attention to the importance of considering varying bases, structures, experiences and ethics of liminality and pointed to its negotiation in action. However, it is the latter area which has yet to be explored in detail and one which would reveal a more socially produced and experienced notion of boundaries rather than one which takes social domains and routines for granted. Likewise, we have pointed to some of the politics of liminality, but largely in terms of structures of inclusion and exclusion. There is considerable potential for developing an analysis of liminality and its use through a more relational view of power.

The second area is the role of meals and eating as potent spaces where work and organization occur. We have already noted how, with a few rare exceptions, there has been very little research on this topic in organizational studies. In this study, we have confirmed that collective meals can play a central role in negotiating consultancy projects and the broader process of organizational change. We also saw how social rituals and routines around eating and drinking shaped the possibilities of liminality. However, the emphasis has been on how the meals facilitated organizational practices and

creativity, more than setting limits to them or undermining them completely, although the fragility of liminality was mentioned. Moreover, although a modest contribution can be claimed to addressing the empirical neglect of meals, further studies should investigate how business meals are structured, what is eaten, when and who is invited to eat and so on. Here, research might also draw further on the rapidly expanding sociology of food (e.g. Ferguson & Zukin, 1995; Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Warde & Martens, 2000; Watson & Caldwell, 2004) in paying attention to context and alternative theoretical perspectives.

The third area with potential for further research is that of management consultancy. While it is well known that business dinners are an important part of consulting work, both within and beyond specific projects, we have shed some light on the nature of this hidden world. Indeed, we have shown how the liminality of meals reinforces and re-shapes that associated with the project team and emerging 'partnership' relations between organizational spaces. It is consciously used by both parties as a political, rhetorical and relationship building, time-space, subject to negotiation and contestation, much like other consulting tools and methods. This begs the question as to whether there are other liminal spaces used in consultancy and how they compare with that of the business dinner? It is possible that, as with meals, they are largely the preserve of more senior personnel. This then points to an important new direction for client–consultant research – on the hidden and liminal practices of emerging business elites.

The final concern stems from the above, but at a more general level – the role of secrets in organizations. This has not been adequately addressed since Weber's early work on bureaucracy. Here, we noticed that the public or official secret associated with each of the dining events fuelled speculation and intrigue about what the consultants were doing. What was particularly intriguing and what perhaps warrants further research is how the circulation of secrets can give an almost sacred charge and air of danger to organizational processes which is characteristic of, but not peculiar to, liminal spaces.

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Appendix I. Summary of key activities in consulting project

Formal consultancy practices

- 1) **Practice:** Shareholder meeting
Who: CEO, shareholders, auditor
Where: Board meeting room at client's site
Outcome: Agreement to employ consultants, auditor selects the adequate consultants
- 4) **Practice:** Meeting with Senior Management Board
Who: CEO, senior management board, C partner, senior and junior C.
Where: Client's board meeting room
Outcome: Presentation of Consultants' proposal (approach, actions, deliverables, timing)
- 8) **Practice:** Workshop
Who: CEO, senior management, C partner, senior and junior C.
Where: Board meeting room
Outcome: Presenting consultancy approach
- 10) **Practice:** Individual meetings (face-to-face)
Who: C partner, individual senior managers, senior C.
Where: Senior managers' offices
Outcome: Requesting information, supporting staff for gathering and analysing data, discussion of potential solution from senior managers' perspective, indication of internal politics
- 14) **Practice:** Meeting
Who: CEO and C partner and senior C.
Where: CEO's office
Outcome: Requesting support for access to information (problem in some departments), discussion of internal politics and conflicts of interests among senior managers

Notes:

1) = timely sequence of practices
 Consultant (partner) = C partner
 Senior consultant = Senior C.
 Junior consultant = Junior C.
 Locco = name of the firm
 ** = informal practices discussed in detail

Informal consultancy practices

- 2) **Practice:** Telephone conversation + meeting for lunch
Who: Auditor and C partner
Where: Headquarter of Auditing/Consultancy Firm
Outcome: Request consultancy service, formulate vaguely the assignment, request the CV of other consultants to be involved, agreed C partner will get in touch with CEO
- 3) **Practice:** Lunch meeting
Who: CEO and C partner
Where: Restaurant in the city
Outcome: Agreed to write a proposal and arranged a meeting with the client's senior management board
- 5) **Practice:** Lunch
Who: Senior managers
Where: Client's board meeting room
Outcome: Agreed to employ consultants
- 6) **Practice:** Telephone conversation
Who: CEO and C partner
Where: CEO's office
Outcome: Confirm consultants' involvement, send confirmation letter via fax
- 7) **Practice:** Meeting
Who: C partner, senior C, and auditor
Where: Auditing/consultancy firm
Outcome: Discussed the proposal and detail working plan
- 9) **Practice:** Dinner at CEO's home**
Who: CEO, C partner, senior management board
Where: CEO's home
Outcome: Information on historical development of firm, management and leadership style, exchange of personal issues
- 11) **Practice:** Observation of activities and communication flow
Who: Senior consultant
Where: Office of senior manager of Sales & Marketing
Outcome: Insights into politics, power, culture, language (e.g. which middle managers are seen in the office)
- 12) **Practice:** Coffee/tea break
Who: CEO, C partner, senior C.
Where: Client's canteen
Outcome: Insights into the critical issues of the firm
- 13) **Practice:** Dinner at 'castle***
Who: CEO, C partner
Where: Upmarket restaurant
Outcome: Internal politics, decision-making style, product portfolio
- 15) **Practice:** Observation
Who: Senior C. (before lunch meeting)
Where: CEO's office
Outcome: Insights into internal politics, role and tasks of CEO's secretary, communication flow in and around CEO's office
- 16) **Practice:** Telephone conversation
Who: C partner and auditor
Where: Consulting firm
Outcome: Discussion of financial and organizational weaknesses

Appendix I. Continued

- 19) **Practice:** **Workshops**
Who: CEO, senior management board, C partner, senior and junior C.
Where: Client's board room meeting
Outcome: Presentation and discussion of consultants' analysis results
- 20) **Practice:** **Individual meetings**
Who: Senior C., senior and middle managers
Where: Individual manager's offices
Outcome: Presentation and discussion of consultants' analysis results, requesting more data
- 22) **Practice:** **Board meeting**
Who: CEO, senior management board, C partner, senior C., middle managers
Where: Client's board room meeting
Outcome: Proposed involvement of middle managers, discussion of market and competitor trends
- 26) **Practice:** **Meeting + lunch**
Who: CEO, senior management board, C partner, senior and junior C., middle managers
Where: Client's board room meeting
Outcome: Presentation and discussion of possible solutions
- 27) **Practice:** **Individual meetings**
Who: C partner, senior C. and individual senior managers
Where: Client's board room meeting
Outcome: Discussion of consultants' recommendations
- 29) **Practice:** **Workshop**
Who: CEO, senior and middle managers, C partner, senior and junior C.
Where: Client's board room meeting
Outcome: Revision of recommendation, presentation of business plan and new consultancy project
- 31) **Practice:** **Working group meeting**
Who: Middle managers, individual senior manager, senior C.
Where: Client's team group meetings
Outcome: Revision of implementation plan
- 17) **Practice:** **Dinner at pizzeria****
Who: Senior C., middle managers
Where: Italian restaurant
Outcome: Analysis of client's weaknesses, internal politics, core competences
- 18) **Practice:** **Telephone conversations**
Who: Senior C. and internal consultancy colleagues
Where: Consultancy firm
Outcome: Exchange of information on market trends, competitor information and consultancy approach
- 21) **Practice:** **Telephone conversation**
Who: C partner and CEO
Where: Consultancy firm
Outcome: Discussion and agreement of agenda for next meeting and involvement of middle managers, information on competition
- 23) **Practice:** **Telephone conversation**
Who: C partner, auditor, CEO, individual senior and middle managers
Where: Consulting firm
Outcome: Follow up questions of meeting, discussion of possible solutions
- 24) **Practice:** **Informal workshop**
Who: C partner, auditor, individual senior and middle managers, senior and junior C., internal consultancy colleague
Where: Consulting firm
Outcome: Discussion of product strategy and recommendations
- 25) **Practice:** **Telephone conversations**
Who: C partner and CEO
Where: CEO's office
Outcome: Discussion and agreement of agenda for next meeting, request for CEO's support against certain individual senior managers, discussion of the outcomes of meetings with senior managers, sell new contract/services
- 28) **Practice:** **Lunch and coffee/tea breaks**
Who: C partner, senior C. and middle managers
Where: Client's canteen
Outcome: Discussion and revision of solutions, discussion/plan of implementing changes, internal politics
- 30) **Practice:** **Telephone conversations**
Who: C partner and CEO
Where: CEO's office
Outcome: Discussion and agreement of agenda for next meeting, negotiation of terms of reference for next consultancy project and discussion of conflict of interest among senior managers

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