

# Management Consultant Talk: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Normalizing Discourse and Resistance

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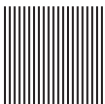
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**Abstract.** *In this article, we explore the discursive possibilities available to men and women when they construct their professional self as ‘knowledge workers’ in multinational management consultancies. We argue that this professional identity construction is embedded in a normalizing, gendered discourse of what it means to be an ‘ideal’ consultant. However, representations of an alternative discourse, which constructs different spheres in an individual’s life, can also be traced in the consultants’ talk. Through a comparison of British and Finnish consultants’ talk, we show the relevance of placing micro-discourses in context. In the UK, discourse on ‘work/life balance’ may be understood as a form of resistance at the level of subjectivity. In Finland, discourse on the ‘balanced individual’ can be seen to be an articulation of a societally bound normalizing discourse. The cultural context can thus be said to have an effect on forms of resistance in knowledge work. **Key words.** discourse; gender; identity; management consultants; resistance*





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Of all the businesses, by far  
Consultancy's the most bizarre.  
For to the penetrating eye,  
There's no apparent reason why,  
With no more assets than a pen,  
This group of personable men  
Can sell to clients more than twice  
The same ridiculous advice,  
Or find, in such a rich profusion,  
Problems to fit their own solution.

(Bernie Ramsbottom, *Financial Times*, 11 April 1981; quoted in Canback, 1998)

Yes, personable *men*. Management consulting is a timely and revealing organizational field for explicating and understanding gendered discourses and identities. On the one hand, the worldwide volume of consultancy business has grown exponentially over the past two decades (Canback, 1998; FEACO, 1999), although the market has slackened somewhat since 2001. Management consultancies and consultants continue to extend their influence, actively generating and spreading 'modern management knowledge' (Clark and Fincham, 2002; Kipping and Engwall, 2002). Consulting is a prime example of knowledge work (see Alvesson, 2001; Legge, 2002). For a number of years, major multinational consultancies have also topped the list of first choice employers by business and engineering students. It seems that consulting is considered by bright and ambitious graduates to be an appealing and professionally rewarding job choice. On the other hand, these appealing and rewarding jobs have traditionally been the privilege of men. Although the number of women recruited to management consultancies has recently increased somewhat, these organizations remain male dominated (Ibarra, 1999).

In this article, we explore the ways in which male and female management consultants in multinational consultancies talk about their work and careers. We are especially interested in the discourses drawn on, and in the ways in which these discourses shape the consultants' professional self-presentations. We examine the discursive possibilities available when consultants (re)construct their professional self. We focus especially on the meanings they attach to professional identity, which in turn shape the particular form that expressions of gender take in their talk on work and career. We treat individuals first and foremost as sites of discursive struggle. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of discourse, the article examines the power implications of various trans-individual discourses. In this line of thought, some discourses seem to



have more opportunities to present themselves; they monopolize communication and make use of strategies of control to ensure their eminence (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Mumby and Stohl, 1991).

We argue that the professional identity construction processes of management consultants are embedded in a dominant, normalizing discourse that resembles what Kerfoot and Knights (1993, 1998) have coined as competitive masculinity. This discourse constructs what it means to be an 'ideal' consultant. It is represented by a reconstitution of individuals in accordance with masculinist priorities such as work orientation and self-assertion. Representations of alternative discourses can, however, also be traced in the consultants' talk. We locate a discourse that may be seen to challenge the dominant discourse by calling into question qualifications that it attaches to professional identity. This alternative discourse constructs different spheres in an individual's life and provides opportunities for resisting the dominant discourse at the level of subjectivity.

With the example of management consultants, we attempt to specify and illustrate a more general point. We build our analysis on texts produced in interviews in two cultural contexts: the United Kingdom and Finland. In the empirical section of this paper, we first present the normalizing discourse on what makes the 'ideal' consultant. We then outline alternative discourses in the UK and Finland. The crux of the paper is to show the relevance of understanding micro-discourses within the societal and cultural context, which, we argue, has an effect on forms of resistance in knowledge work.

## **Management Consulting: Business and Organization of Work**

In order to situate management consultants' talk in a professional context, we begin the theoretical discussion by outlining the phenomenon of management consulting as a global and local business. We go on to discuss how multinational management consultancies become organized and what individual management consultants (are expected to) do as 'knowledge workers'.

### ***Global and Local***

As a global organizational field, management consulting has recently attracted an extensive amount of research interest (for recent edited volumes, see e.g. Clark and Fincham, 2002; Kipping and Engwall, 2002). Consulting has even been conceptualized as an institution (McKenna et al., 2000) in the neo-liberal world order. The way consultancies and consultants generate, disseminate, spread, diffuse, transfer, broker, translate or edit 'modern management knowledge' (ideas and techniques) has been identified as a key question in the literature. Consultancy companies lay claim to knowledge-intensiveness (see Alvesson, 2001). In its essence, the consulting business is based on recognizing and transferring



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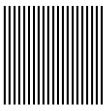
'knowledge' from one place and time to another (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997, 2000; Sarvary, 1999; Hansen et al., 1999). Hargadon and Sutton (2000) call consultancies innovation factories, which systematically use old ideas as the raw materials for one new idea after another. These companies serve as intermediaries, or knowledge brokers, between otherwise disconnected pools of ideas in their client markets (*ibid.*).

Management consulting is originally an American phenomenon (McKenna, 1995). Themes of Americanization, and the question of global convergence versus divergence in the dissemination of knowledge, continue to dominate discussions on management consulting (Engwall and Kipping, 2002). Claims of professionalism made by consultants have also been the subject of heated debate. Standpoints range from pro-consultancy texts to critical positions, but it can still be claimed that 'little is known about the work of management consultants' (Fincham and Clark, 2002: 1). It is also increasingly popular to view consulting as open-ended, situational and contingent (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002) and to stress that there exist different kinds of management consulting as well as consultancy companies (Kipping, 2002).

Although the business of management consulting is dominated by global (multinational) innovation factories with an American heritage, consulting is also a markedly local business. It is based on personal relationships facilitated by social, cultural or educational proximity between consultants and clients. It is thereby mediated by trust and local reputation (Kipping, 1999). As carriers of knowledge, consultants are dialectically tied to the world of their clients (Sturdy, 1997). Relationships between consultancies and their clients are framed by wider social relations and developments in societies. 'New' management ideas and/or techniques take root on the basis of local cadres and elites, local frameworks and the accumulation of evidence on what works in practice (Djelic, 1998; Djelic and Ainamo, 1999). It is evident that the evolution of the management consulting phenomenon has been, and still is, mitigated by local national contexts (Kipping, 1999; McKenna et al., 2000; Ainamo and Tienari, 2002).

### ***Work in the Pyramid Organization***

As professional service organizations, American-led multinational management consultancies operate on 'knowledge' and leverage. On paper, at least, their strict organizing principles and practices articulate and control the way knowledge becomes generated and disseminated in client projects. According to Maister (1993), large consultancies compete on leverage: the (optimal) ratio of senior, middle-level and junior staff in the organization. Because of the need to reap leverage benefits, global management consultancies are organized as hierarchical pyramids with strict formal rules. The more procedure oriented (*i.e.* more standardized) the business, the more juniors are needed to run the show.



Management consultancies provide individual consultants with rigorous systematized methods to structure their client work (Werr, 1999). The larger the consultancy firm, the more the knowledge is systematized and the organizing principles formalized (Robertson and Swan, 1998). There is no need to constantly reinvent the wheel in client projects. The same basic procedures are copied in new locations. Junior consultants are typically recruited as university graduates with 'excellent' grades. They are then quickly and methodically trained in-house. Typically, the new recruits begin by providing research support for their superiors. Next, they take part in work at client sites. Gradually, they begin to pursue team-leader tasks in projects and eventually assume more client-oriented responsibilities. Throughout this step-by-step advancement, consultants are expected to work long hours when necessary, to travel at short notice and, in general, to follow the 'rules of the game' in the consultancy firm (Ibarra, 1999; Werr, 1999).

The everyday work of individual management consultants is not, however, merely about implementing ready-made methods and technologies. It has been argued that consultancy work is an ongoing effort of convincing the client of one's usefulness and contribution (Clark and Salaman, 1996; Sturdy, 1997; Berglund and Werr, 2000). Consulting is about persuading the client to participate in the joint endeavour of problem-solving. Methods need tailoring to fit specific situations. Werr (1999) argues that methods in consulting are best understood as language rather than technical knowledge. As language, methods provide structure for complex reality, support communication and persuasion, and provide means for the exchange of knowledge in the consulting process itself (*ibid.*).

Consultants are 'rhetoricians' (Legge, 2002). The question of assuming authority through skilful performances is relevant in the work of consultants and consultant teams (Berglund and Werr, 2000). Those who aim to pursue an upwardly mobile career within the consultancy firm need favourable individual assessment from each client project they participate in. Personal character seems to be an integral part of a consultant's professional competence. Social skills are of the uttermost importance. Consultants are expected to be not only 'rhetoricians' but 'networkers' too (Legge, 2002).

What discursive possibilities are then available to management consultants employed in multinational consultancies when they talk about their work and career? What building blocks do they have when they construct and reconstruct their professional identity? Is there room for resistance in this identity (re)construction? According to Alvesson (2001: 876), 'where knowledge-intensity is central, so is ambiguity and, contingent upon this ambiguity, issues of image, rhetoric, orchestrating social relations and processes'. This raises the importance of cultural controls and the need to regulate discourse and professional identities



within knowledge organizations such as consultancies (see Alvesson, 2001).

## **Normalizing Discourse and Resistance**

Our starting point is to take the view that discourses not only constitute meanings for terms and practices but also engender personal identities. Rather than being fixed, identities are actively negotiated, reproduced and changed in discourse (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Another point of departure here is related to the way in which we view the role of individuals (as sexed bodies) in constructing their professional identity. We treat individuals as both the subject (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wodak, 1997) and the site of discursive struggle for their identity (Weedon, 1987).

### ***Normalizing Discourse***

We are taking a Foucauldian-influenced approach in our conceptualization of discourse. We see discourses as historically and culturally variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth. The normalizing effects of discourses determine who and what is 'normal', standard and acceptable. Discourse can be defined as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses 'do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Foucault, 1972: 49). Our interest here is to explore how individual subjectivities are constituted and contested through discourse.

'Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault, 1984: 100). Individuals are constituted as subjects through discourses and disciplinary practices and are complicit (whether knowingly or not) in this construction process, turning themselves into particular kinds of subjects. Identities are mobile sites of contradiction and disunity—nodes where various discourses temporarily intersect in particular ways (Kondo, 1990). The construction of self-identity can be seen as a constant struggle against the experience of tension, fragmentation and discord arising from different subject positions offered within discourses.

Individual experience is complicated by the multiplicity of interpretations available in the form of competing social discourses. Some constructions of discourses even become so powerful that they start to seem like common sense, something 'natural' and taken for granted. 'Competitive masculinity' is an example of a discursive framework whose normalizing effects have been recently debated (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; see Seidler, 1989; Bologh, 1990). When referring to competitive masculinities, we draw attention to how the modern organization and management privilege certain dominant notions of masculinity (e.g.



'cool rationality', work orientation) and with them certain bodies, usually male (Whitehead, 1998; Brewis, 1999; Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

Each discourse is, however, imbued with other discourses. Lazar (2000) identifies egalitarian and conservative discourses of gender relations. In Lazar's (2000: 373) analysis, different discourses 'work in tandem to maintain a largely unchallenged conservative gender order'. Meriläinen (2000: 416), in turn, demonstrates discourses of equality and difference in female bank managers' talk of work, family and childrearing, and argues that different discourses provide opportunities for individuals to 'imaginatively integrate identities' that seem mutually exclusive. Both studies put forth the proposition that seemingly opposite discourses feed on each other (see also e.g. Garnsey and Rees, 1996).

What is especially intriguing is the difference between, on one hand, subject positions offered in the discourses of professionalism and, on the other, individual interest and experience. Foucault (1986) defines practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion their own identities as technologies of the self. In constructing their professional selves, individuals draw on a range of competing social discourses to adapt, deny and rewrite the subject positions offered (Thomas and Davies, forthcoming).

### ***Resistance (at the Level of Subjectivity)***

Resistance takes the form of counter-discourses and reverse discourses, which produce new knowledges and new truths and thereby constitute new powers. Resistance comes from challenging the ways in which an individual is defined, labelled and classified. As Weedon (1987) argues, choices can be made through exploiting the contradictions, weaknesses and gaps between alternative subject positions: where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced.

Through the example of 'service workers' (female cleaning personnel) employed by a university, Holmer-Nadesan (1996) illustrates how individuals positioned as subjects reflect upon and challenge their socially ascribed identities. She illustrates resistance to the dominant managerial discourse as well as counter-identification and dis-identification with it. Dis-identification is here especially intriguing. 'When asked what they believe constitutes their primary responsibility, most service workers described themselves as surrogate mothers' (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 73). The re-articulation of the formal organizational role within a maternal discourse may be invoked as a gender-appropriate identity that affords status and legitimacy to an otherwise menial organizational position (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 74). In a similar vein, Katila and Meriläinen (1999, 2002) describe how female academics challenge patriarchal articulations of professionalism in academia by calling into question the everyday organizational discourses in which women are positioned as the



'other'. They argue that resisting the (in)formal organizational role provides women with more space for self-determined action by bringing about other subject positions.

Individual agency takes place in a social world of power relations, which cannot be fully understood without an understanding of general social dynamics. Every society produces its own truths, which have a normalizing and regulatory function. Thus, it is important to understand how these truths operate in relation to the dominant power structures of a given society (McNay, 1992). Discourses are an inherent part of socio-cultural practices that are embedded in contexts; they are socially conditioned and socially constitutive (see Fairclough, 1997). Consequently, it seems that the interplay between different, seemingly contradictory, discourses is crucial in understanding meanings attached to specific identities.

In the present study, we focus on the discursive possibilities available to male and female management consultants in the UK and Finland when they (re)construct their professional self. We are especially interested in the interplay between different discourses and in the ways in which the subjectivities of the consultants are affected by or limited in, and by, the surrounding discourses. By analysing both 'micro' and 'macro' forces, we are able to show how discourse within a given societal and cultural context affects and effects professional identity construction in knowledge work.

## **Researching Management Consultants: Reflections and Reflexivity**

In this article, we draw on a number of social texts generated in interviews with female and male management consultants employed by large multinational consultancies in the United Kingdom and Finland. In the UK, 9 consultants (5 female and 4 male) and in Finland 11 consultants (6 female and 5 male) were interviewed. Their employers represent what Kipping (2002: 34) terms 'a new generation of network building consultancies' rather than 'traditional' strategy consultancies.

We focus on the processes of identity construction within the interview, which we offer as a critical reflexive engagement. The interview material is not claimed as 'pure data'. Rather, in the spirit of a social constructionist influenced methodology, we present here 'living social texts', recognizing the fluidity of the meanings ascribed to professional identities, constructed collectively by the researcher and the researched (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). We aim to understand through the lived experiences of those involved in the research process—to give voice (Calás and Smircich, 1999). Recognizing that meaning is constituted in language and social action, our interpretations are constructions of these meanings and therefore a construction of the construction by the actors studied (Thomas and Linstead, 2002).



As authors of this paper, we are a team of four. The empirical research began on the Finnish side, where first the female consultants and then the male were interviewed. The interviews, carried out in the Finnish language by one of the authors, were all recorded on tape and transcribed verbatim by an outside expert. Two of the Finnish interviews were translated into English and thereby made available for the UK researchers to interpret (apart from these, however, the UK researchers rely on the Finns' translations of pieces of texts from the other interviews). The two UK researchers divided the fieldwork so that they both carried out a number of interviews with management consultants, some individually and some together. Again, all interviews were taped and transcribed by an expert. The two Finns were given direct access to all the interview transcripts.

In the interviews, the management consultant was typically first asked to 'tell her/his life story' in her/his own words. If the interviewees asked for specification, they were asked to tell their life story 'since they finished secondary school'. Second, the interviewees were asked to answer questions on specific topics such as self-assessment, work tasks, characteristics of their employer as an organization, etc. The questions proceeded according to a loose agenda, with the interviewer asking additional questions and at times provoking the interviewees to elaborate on and/or illustrate their answers on specific topics. After these questions, the interviewees were asked to reflect on the impact of gender on their everyday work and career, and to give examples thereof. They were also asked to reflect on combining work and a career in consulting with the sphere of family life.

As interviewers, we took the initiative in the interview situations; we asked certain questions, commented on the answers and otherwise contributed to the management consultants' accounts. We are therefore active in the production of the research subject. The interview is an organized and institutionalized encounter. It is a social act and thus involves a degree of negotiation between the participants about positions and meanings, which then influences the direction of the accounts and their form.

As well as taking into consideration the 'interview arena', we need to reflect on our own 'knowledge' of the societal context of, and socio-cultural practices in, the situations where the accounts are produced. It is present in the interviews—and it guides us in attempting to sort out (categorize or analyse) the entire set of interviews. It is not acceptable or possible to utter just anything in an organized encounter such as an interview between a management consultant and an organization studies scholar. The inherent dynamics of the interview situation guide and 'censor' the flow of the conversation. Interviews are, however, contextual in another fashion. They take place in a particular place at a particular time. They can, and in our view must, be placed in a 'wider' societal and cultural context (see Rantalaiho, 1997).



Being members of particular cultural settings—British and Nordic/Finnish—makes us, as researchers, important carriers of cultural beliefs, understandings and conventions. Our ‘knowledge’ of the context of the interviews, that is, the cultural scripts involved, enables us to come up with in-depth intertextual readings of the interview transcripts (see Fairclough, 1997) and to construct links from them to other kinds of social texts. Specifically, it enables us to compare and contrast the British and Finnish management consultants’ talk and to understand why, for example, something that is represented as normal, standard and acceptable in one cultural context could be ‘read’ differently in another. The collaboration between researchers from different cultural backgrounds helps in making sense of the ways in which cultural and societal discourse might affect both the repertoire of discursive possibilities available to people and the meanings attached.

### **The ‘Ideal’ Consultant**

In the discourses that the management consultants draw on when talking about their work and career, a representation of what we term an ‘ideal’ consultant can be identified. This ‘ideal’ consultant is constructed on the basis of themes such as work addiction and self-assertion. The ‘ideal’ subject seems to be common to both the British and Finnish consultants’ talk.

#### ***Work Addiction***

‘Consultancy attracts workaholics,’ says Liz, a senior British consultant. ‘If you want quality of life, I would suggest not doing this job.’ Work orientation and full-time availability are themes that come up repeatedly in the texts of management consultants. Phrases such as ‘working night and day’, ‘working one’s guts out’, ‘work around the clock’ pepper the consultants’ talk. These phrases all express an individual’s full commitment to consultancy work. By using such expressions, consultants construct an image of a workaholic who seldom has time for other things in life.

Erika, a childless Finnish consultant in her late twenties, living in a relationship, exemplifies this:

‘. . . but let’s say that I have cut down on social life, perhaps. I’m lucky to have a close person who also works a lot. But when you are used to it . . . on weekdays you do long hours, but at the weekends you also steal some time for other things.’

The ‘ideal’ consultant is represented in the consultants’ talk as an individual who works long hours and takes practically no time off, because, if you do, it is considered ‘an expression of a lack of motivation and disloyalty to the company’.

John, a middle-ranking consultant in the UK, links the ‘ideal’ consultant to customers who ‘are buying technical expertise but also commit-



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ment and enthusiasm and vitality and all those other things. And I think if you [i.e. consultant] start behaving like employees then you start losing the reasons for actually employing a consultant.' Being a consultant is essentially about exploiting the opportunities to 'understand big things' in customer projects and learning to 'build a view of the totality', as Anna, a Finnish consultant, summarizes. 'You have to somehow be able to be visible [in consultancy work]', Tom, another Finnish consultant, says. He adds: 'you always have to give an impression that everything is under control.'

The representation of the costs that an individual working in the consultancy business has to pay for her/his success is an essential part in the construction of the image of the 'ideal' consultant. Lena, a senior Finnish consultant who has a husband and a child, said:

'Well, to take an example, in March I slept two and a half to three hours a night during the week, and I thought that my system was going to break down. I was so tired. When the alarm clock rang in the morning I was about to throw up. That's how tired I was . . . my husband told me that if I cannot handle the situation any better in the near future he will take it as a sign of my inability to take care of my part in our family life. So, I also got a warning from the home front that this cannot go on forever.'

A consultant is constructed here as a person who is willing to do whatever is needed to produce results (and thereby pursue an upwardly mobile career) within the consultancy business, even at the risk of temporarily jeopardizing his/her health and/or family life. The emphasis here is on the consultancy career as a 'stepping stone' in life—a short-term pain for long-term gain. Stuart, a UK partner in a consultancy, says: 'There's a narrow margin between having a real adrenaline buzz and thinking "this is brilliant" and "I am so knackered I can't keep my eyes open".' In all, by constructing an image of being addicted to work, management consultants participate in the (re)production of a normalizing discourse that reflects self-interest through continuous commitment.

### **Self-Assertion**

Another recurring theme in the work and career talk of consultants, which is closely connected to work orientation and full-time availability, is the need to be ambitious and successful. The 'ideal' consultant competes not only with other consultants but—and above all—with her/himself. This becomes evident in the consultants' career accounts in the ways in which they talk about the importance of continuous self-improvement and excelling oneself. Eva, a Finnish consultant, provides an example:

' . . . professionally speaking, you aim higher and higher and higher all the time . . . according to my set of values, an ideal situation is one in which you can take every project, and the problems linked to it, as an intellectual



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challenge. And each time you aim at doing it better and better and better . . . so, it is a very intensive job.'

A characteristic feature of an 'ideal' consultant is that s/he is visible and outspoken. Visibility is crucial both in the consulting organization and in relation to clients. The 'ideal' consultant should have 'ego power' (Robertson and Swan, 1998). This is expressed in a variety of ways in the consultants' talk. Liz, a senior UK consultant, comments: 'You have to manage your own career, no-one manages it for you.'

By highlighting the importance of being visible and outspoken, the consultants participate in the (re)production of a discourse that equates self-assertion with the successful demonstration of individual competence, which can be, and is, constantly monitored and evaluated. In such a discourse, the 'ideal' consultant is an individual who is prepared to be the object of endless evaluation. As Phil, a British junior consultant, comments: 'You've got to get your face in front . . . do a presentation to a team meeting . . . get your face known . . . network.' Rona, another UK consultant, says: 'The network is important, you know, you've got to be seen out there, you've got to be associated with big wins, you're going to have to hassle the client side because that's what you get recognized for in the firm.'

Success in being a consultant is represented by fast advancement in the pyramid organization. Stuart, a UK partner, comments: 'It is an environment where you're falling down if you're not moving forward.' He observes:

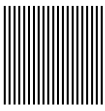
'No-one's going to question your technical abilities because that just gets you to the party. The thing that differentiates you is your ability to make things happen and to get on with people, so you have to be a self-starter, you have to be prepared to put in a huge amount of effort, you've got to be able to cope with a fairly unusual lifestyle.'

To be successful, you need to deliver results for the client and for the consultancy on a constant basis.

Eva, a Finnish consultant, says:

'Well, as regards my strengths, one thing that I consider as an advantage in being a consultant, for example, in negotiations and in planning, is my quickness. What I mean is that when I listen to the customer, I can draw everything together pretty sharply. And then another thing that has been my strength, especially as a consultant, is that I have always been able to provide solutions for clients that they could not have imagined themselves. . . . And the third thing that I am good at is selling.'

In being a management consultant, it is not enough that you are quick-witted and creative; you have to be business minded as well. To quote Anna, a Finnish senior consultant, you have to be 'good at handling customers', 'a good team leader', 'good at numbers', 'good at selling' and 'good at developing people'. In short, you have to be an all-rounder—or appear to be. A part of the image of an all-round management consultant



is that s/he must appear qualified in all circumstances. It is of great importance that 'you have faith in what you are doing', as Eva puts it. Hence, distinguishing the successful consultant from the less successful is fundamentally a matter of credibility. A characteristic of this discourse is that it often silences or displaces the expression of doubt and/or ignorance (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993).

In all, management consultants seem to attempt to live up to an appropriate and desirable identity (Garsten and Grey, 1997; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). It seems that the dominant discourse that the management consultants draw on comes close to competitive masculinity. It is a discourse imbued with instrumentalism, careerism and the language of success (Bologh, 1990; Seidler, 1989, cited in Kerfoot and Knights, 1993: 671). Furthermore, it is a set of related statements with little vocabulary to acknowledge or describe weakness and failure (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993: 674).

The 'ideal' consultant in multinational management consultancies resembles what Acker (1990, 1992) terms the disembodied 'ideal' worker, who must have the means (qualifications), opportunity (full-time and continuous availability) and motive (work orientation) for high work performance. Hidden within the concept of the job of management consultant are, thus, assumptions about separations between the public and private spheres of life and about the gendered organization of production and reproduction. The 'ideal' consultant corresponds to a man's body.

However, there are also representations in the management consultants' work and career talk that seem to challenge or contradict the representation of the 'ideal' consultant. A number of alternative discourses vie for the consultants' attention (Davies and Thomas, 2001). The dominant discourse becomes subject to challenge.

### **Management Consultant Talk in the UK Context: 'Work/Life Balance' as Resistance**

In the UK context, issues of 'work/life balance' have historically not been a main focus of public policy. The political programme of the UK Conservative government between 1979 and 1997 prioritized free market forces (Brannen and Lewis, 2000), and ensured a limited emphasis on family-friendly provisions within organizations. Public subsidy for childcare has also been limited, with the reconciliation of work and family demands considered as a private responsibility and associated more with women than with men. Most part-time workers in the UK are women with dependent children. It has been suggested that this may be the only viable choice given a cultural context of long working hours and high childcare costs (Fagan and Rubery, 1996; Ginn et al., 1996). Preferences for part-time working amongst British women may also be influenced by



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the 'male as breadwinner' ideology that continues to construct work and family as a woman's issue.

In the UK, full-time employees, especially men, work much longer hours than those in most other countries in the European Union (Fagan, 2001). In recent years, there has been an increase in working unsocial hours, particularly weekends, across the EU, but this is generally much higher in Britain than elsewhere (Rubery et al., 1999). Talk about working long hours also seems to be the overriding element in the texts produced in our interviews with UK consultants.

Management consultants are 'special people' is a leitmotiv that runs through the texts. This special person is a highly ambitious, high-performing individual who excels at every aspect of work, is in total control, is successful, one of the chosen few, action oriented, a self-starter. Being a 'special person' is part of the ideal consultant subject position, which individuals draw on in their identity construction. The long hours, essential mobility and selfless devotion to the organization (though self-devotion to personal career) are seen as part of the job description. Long hours can be worn as a 'badge of pride', a testament to a consultant's masculine toughness (see Kondo, 1990). Thus, the British consultants' talk can be seen to draw on a discourse of competitive masculinity in their identity construction.

However, putting boundaries around work time can be seen in the British consultants' talk. The emphasis here is on the consultancy career as being a 'stepping stone' in life. It is clear that, while the consulting career is being pursued, there is seldom time for other aspects of life. There seems to be a general acceptance by UK consultants that, being in the business, there is little 'free time' over and above the demands of work. So as Carolyn, a newly recruited junior consultant, reflects on her life, she argues:

'I really, really enjoy the job I'm doing, the people, the intellectual challenge, the, you know, the chance to make things work better, you know everything, it's great for me. But there's a whole lot of other things I want to do and I think I'll just take the view I can't do it all at once, right, I'm just going to have to compartmentalize it.'

There seems to be a lot of resigned compliance in the consultants' talk: 'That's your decision isn't it, there's lots of other jobs you can go into', as Roz, a middle-ranking British consultant, comments. Stuart, a partner who has been involved in recruiting, observes:

'It's self-select in the sense that you have to be honest at interview about whatever your lifestyle is. . . . There's a huge amount of travel which at that age [i.e. 25–35] people quite like, you're working with very bright people internally so that's appealing and you're paid a lot more than you are if you're in industry. So in that sense you tend to get people who want that lifestyle and who want the rewards to go with it and they're quite driven people.'



There has been much debate in the UK media in recent years over the long hours culture and low take-up of 'family-friendly' policies. The male breadwinner model still dominates within professional identity construction. This is the case also in management consulting. Within the UK culture, the prevailing model is of the hierarchical and unbroken career, where the ideal worker is flexible and long working hours are viewed as a symbol of commitment (Lewis, 1997). Consequently, in the UK, the concept of 'work/life balance' has come to denote company-specific policies and initiatives to take care of the potentially negative consequences for employees working long hours. Such 'family-friendly' initiatives may include job shares, flexible working, career breaks or reductions in work hours. There may, however, be risks and disadvantages for employees who take up the provisions offered. They may find themselves marginalized within the organization (DTI, 2002).

With regard to management consulting, it is clear that initiatives for 'work/life balance' do not readily match with the conceptions of what a consultant is supposed to do: be visible (i.e. be constantly present) and produce results. Given the societal and cultural context in the UK, combining a career in consulting and family life is particularly difficult for women. It is seen to be a personal problem, a choice one makes, as Carolyn's comment exemplifies:

'I think it's partly my attitude of family. I mean there's no point in going to the effort of having children unless you're actually going to see them. If you were of the, you know, 'have the children, have a nanny' school of thought, which, you know, it's a free world, and then I guess it would be compatible. But it just doesn't . . . it's not compatible with my view of how I would want to do it, and I think [husband] is of the same sort of opinion. He works for [financial consultancy firm], so he works all the hours god gave too.'

Research in the UK has shown that employees have a low sense of entitlement to demand or take up 'family-friendly' initiatives (Lewis, 1997). Men in particular may not feel it is legitimate to express a preference for shorter working hours because this might be interpreted as lacking commitment (Fagan, 2001). A further problem for 'work/life balance' is the fact that 'greedy' organizations can become seductive (see Hochschild, 1997); that is, work may be interesting and attractive and combining parental leave with a responsible, exciting and time-consuming job is becoming increasingly difficult for many men and women (Brandth and Kvande, 2002). This is clearly the case in consulting in the UK. 'Yes, the pressure's good, it focuses you but it's also good if it's interesting, you know, it's not ostensibly dull,' as Phil, a junior consultant, comments. 'I really enjoy the quick kill, the pace.' Hugh, a British middle-ranking consultant says: 'it's very seductive.'

Carolyn goes on to consider how many of her female colleagues have children. Reflecting on this, she first comments on the fact that most of her colleagues are in fact male:



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'Mainly male definitely, definitely and I'm sure that's to do with the lifestyle thing, if you look at the women . . . this is appalling there aren't many of us here! And I can't think of anyone who's got kids, the blokes have got kids pretty much without exception but of course none of the women have.'

Men's commitment (time/space visibility) is facilitated by women at home—or women working part time.

In the UK, the concept of 'work/life balance' has come to denote not only company-specific, 'family-friendly' policies and initiatives, but initiatives that are in practice targeted especially at women. However, policies and initiatives often do not materialize in organizational practice. Roz, a middle-ranking British consultant, explains the difficulties she has in managing her time:

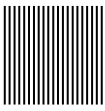
' . . . basically come in here at 8.30 in the morning, get home about 10.30 at night. And it's been longer than that for you know the last few weeks . . . the number of hours I do is at least fifty percent more . . . and I've been raising it, you know, saying 'I need some resources' . . . and the only time they could see me to discuss it was yesterday, so to talk about work/life balance, I had to have a meeting on a Sunday.'

In all, we suggest that, in the UK context, talk about 'work/life balance' may be considered a form of resistance at the level of subjectivity. It acts as a competing discourse that individuals draw on in the process of identity construction and in challenging the discourse on the 'ideal' consultant. Management consultant talk in the UK suggests that professional identity is bound up with understandings of commitment, defined in terms of high levels of dedication (time/space) to the organization. For the British consultants, it seems, 'life' is the problem, because it gets in the way of 'work'.

### **Management Consultant Talk in the Finnish Context: 'Balanced Individual' as Normalizing Discourse**

Societal arrangements in contemporary Finland are based on an egalitarian-individualistic, double-earner understanding of family, where men and women are considered individual breadwinners (Julkunen, 1999). According to Julkunen (1999: 87), work orientation remains the essential trait of the Finnish woman, whose 'central identities are strength and survival'. She is expected to be active at home *and* at work. Satu Apo (1999: 23), professor of folklore, maintains that 'work and competence continue to be a respected part of a woman's life' in Finland. The *raison d'être* of the Finnish woman is productive rather than solely caring (Apo, 1999). Moreover, she is often expected to build bridges between home and work (Aaltio and Hiillos, 2002).

There has been a gradual extension of public childcare facilities in Finland. All children up to primary school age are now entitled to state-subsidized childcare, most often in kindergartens (Julkunen, 1999; Jalli-



noja, 2000). In principle, this arrangement enables combinations of childrearing and labour market participation for both sexes. Labour market research indicates that, compared with countries with more open—or ‘traditional’—male dominance, the position of women is ‘good’ in Finland. This is so, if one accepts the notion that a just society is ‘one that allows individuals to exercise autonomy and to fulfil themselves in life regardless of sex’ (Meriläinen, 2000: 417; see Berry, 1997). Finland boasts the smallest difference between men’s and women’s working time in the European Union (Julkunen and Nätti, 2000). Further, it is evident that long working hours accumulate, especially within ‘two-career’ households in Finland; there are households where the combined working time exceeds 90 hours per week (Jallinoja, 2000).

Combining work and family life has, in practice, increasingly become a question of individual solutions within households and families in the Finnish context (Jacobson, 1991; Meriläinen 2000; Jacobson and Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001; Tienari et al., 2002). It may be assumed that a ‘battle’ for time is typical of ‘two-career’ households (Julkunen and Nätti, 1999, 2000). It is possible for female professionals such as management consultants—and a must, if they have children—to find personal solutions to manage time. Public daycare for children is likely to help in this. It is, however, useful to note that public childcare arrangements in Finland are predominantly intended for parents with ‘normal’ working hours (from 7–8 a.m. to 4–5 p.m.), which is typically not how the days of ‘knowledge workers’ such as consultants are structured (Korvajärvi and Lehto, 2000).

A discourse of balanced individuals pervades the Finnish context. This is a discourse that normalizes talk about being able to master (or balance) the different spheres of life—work and private—satisfactorily. This discourse is available to both sexes. It is part of a wider discourse of equality in Finnish society. There are visible symbols of the equality discourse: at the time of revising this article, for example, the president of the Republic of Finland and the newly elected prime minister were both women.

In the Finnish context, the discourse of balanced individuals draws upon a shared cultural reserve of legitimate topics. It also incorporates culturally shared ways of talking. The discourse of balance directs women and men to stress that they are able to ‘have’ both active work and family (private) life. Tom, a senior consultant, talks about being in charge of his diary:

‘Today, for example, if I know that I have to pick my youngest kid from day care and take [the child] to a dancing lesson for five o’clock, well, who would make me stay here? I just go . . . there’s a degree of freedom here . . . I can just as well make my PowerPoint presentation at home, I’m not tied up in that way.’



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Tom constructs this as something normal in the consultancy: 'here, most people will have left by five, and I don't have any problems picking my kid up from day care.'

The societal arrangements described above ensure that for female professionals to talk about being forced to choose between work and family would be out of place in this context, rather than to talk about 'having' both (see also Jacobson, 1991; Meriläinen, 2000). To express autonomy within the parameters of the larger social entity (see Berry, 1997) can be argued to be a discursive norm in the Finnish context; here, it is about emphasizing one's abilities to come up with individual solutions in combining work and family life in a satisfactory way. Anna, a senior consultant, talks about the arrangements she and her partner (who is also a 'knowledge worker') have regarding their child:

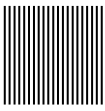
'His dad takes [the child] to day care as he usually goes to work a bit later, around half past eight or nine, he doesn't have to go that early while I, in turn, try to leave around four [in the afternoon] and I get to work early in the morning . . . I have given my secretary instructions that she mustn't book meetings for me after four o'clock, and if there is something, I must be asked first.'

The message is that Anna and her partner share the daily responsibility for taking care of their child, and that their arrangements are tolerated by the employers of both parents.

The balance between different spheres of an individual professional's life has been a recurring topic in public debates in Finland in the late 1990s and early 2000s, that is, at the time the female management consultants were interviewed for the present study. Jallinoja (2000) studied interviews published in the Finnish media as well as email messages that she had received in response to her own commentary in the media. Jallinoja maintains that these texts reflect a shift in public debate in Finland towards a more positive tone regarding family, a development that gained strength in the late 1990s. A recurring theme in the texts studied is the narrator's 'repentance' for dedicating 'all' his/her time to work.

Such 'repentance' is constructed, for example, in Lena's talk about the few hours she slept while working on a project, quoted above. Lena makes a sharp distinction between her previous and current ways of combining work and family life. Whereas she constructs her past as a time when she was able to sleep two and a half to three hours a night during the week, the present is constructed differently:

'It's different. First of all, now I have breakfast with my daughter, take her to school, and get [to work] around eight twenty, eight thirty, and I leave every day a quarter to six, or six thirty, depending on whether I intend to pursue my hobby that evening or am picking up my daughter . . . so I work around ten hours a day on a regular basis.'



The key plot in the texts studied by Jallinoja (2000)—and in Lena's account—is a 'great turnaround', which starts a new stage in the narrator's life. The past is described as a stage where one is oriented towards challenging work, with successful outcomes, whereas the turnaround marks a shift towards more emphasis on family life (see Hearn, 1998). Most of the texts in Jallinoja's (2000) material were of this kind, narrated by men in responsible positions at work. Our interviews suggest that women occupying high positions in organizations located in Finland also draw on the discursive repertoire that reflects a shift from workaholism towards 'balance'. Such texts can be read as heroic stories about individuals sacrificing (at least temporarily) professional career to 'give time' to family life, which is possible and acceptable in contemporary Finnish culture. In this way, the construction of self as a balanced individual may be considered a normalizing discourse in the Finnish context.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we have explored the ways in which management consultants in multinational consultancies talk about their work and career, examining the discursive possibilities available to women and men when they (re)construct their professional self as 'knowledge workers'. We have located a dominant, normalizing discourse in the consultants' talk and argue that the professional identity construction processes of consultants are embedded in a discourse of competitive masculinity, which is represented by a reconstitution of individuals in accordance with masculinist priorities (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1998). The most salient meanings attached to professional identity within this discourse are work addiction and self-assertion. Such meanings make up the representation of the 'ideal' consultant (see Acker, 1990). Struggles over identity construction are, however, always ambivalent (Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999). We have located a discourse that seems to challenge the dominant discourse in the consultants' talk. This alternative discourse constructs different spheres in an individual's life (see Caproni, 1997).

The crux of the article has been to show the relevance of placing talk produced in interview situations into societal and cultural context. This needs to be done in order to make sense of the meanings attached. Two points can be made on the basis of such contextual analysis. The first is related to the discursive construction of the 'ideal' consultant. This normalizing discourse appears to be fundamentally similar—and gendered—across societal and cultural contexts. The discourse is similar, although themes such as working long hours acquire slightly different connotations. Beyond the global hype, management consulting is based on relationships facilitated by social and cultural proximity between consultants and clients (Sturdy, 1997; Kipping, 1999). Whereas a UK consultant is socialized into talking about the customer expecting consultants to be present at their site 'around the clock' (because the



customers' employees are likely to be present too), this is not necessarily the case in Finland, where it is not a sign of consultants' commitment self-evidently to 'hang around' a client site when everyone else has gone home. In sum, our study suggests that the discursive possibilities available in knowledge work such as management consulting are limited when individuals attempt to secure legitimacy in the organization in which they work (see Alvesson, 2001; Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

Our second point is on the alternative discourse, that is, constructing different spheres in an individual's life. In the UK context, management consultant talk on 'work/life balance' may be considered to construct a form of resistance at the level of subjectivity. When viewed in the Finnish context, however, talk on balanced individuals may be an articulation of a societally bound normalizing discourse. The societal and cultural context can thus be said to have an effect on forms of resistance in knowledge work. In general, it is clear that individuals attempt to secure legitimacy not only in the organization in which they work, but also in the society and culture where they have grown up, where they live their lives and where the interview takes place (see Alvesson, 2001; Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

Against this background, the gendered nature of discourses needs to be examined context by context. Gender distinctions and relations vary across societies (Tienari et al., 2002). These distinctions and relations inform societally bound discourses that, in turn, enable or limit the discursive repertoire of individuals as men and women. We argue, therefore, that, in comparing the work experiences of consultants in the UK and Finland, we are presented with significantly different gender orders (Connell, 1987; Fagan, 2001).

In the UK, institutionalized arrangements for men and women to enjoy equal participation in the workforce are based on a voluntarist framework and the self-regulatory capacity of the free market. Underpinning this is the assertion that no group needs special treatment or support. For our study, the implication of this is that the alternative discourse on spheres of life has different consequences for men and women ('family-friendly' policies are in practice policies for *women*; the dominance of the male breadwinner ideology in the UK continues to create problems for gender equity, and men more than women feel it is not legitimate to reduce working hours and spend time at home caring for dependants). Hence, we see a strong sense of individualism in the UK interviews, with an emphasis on the 'adult' and 'mature' relationship between the employer and employee. Aspects of non-work life are a 'problem' for the individual alone, something that they have to manage.

This can be contrasted with Finland where, as in other Nordic societies, there has in recent decades been a privileging of the discourse of state responsibility for the costs of raising a family, ensuring equal participation in the labour market (and home life) for both men and women. The discourse on equality encourages individuals to exercise autonomy to



meet their potential, regardless of gender. In recent years, great emphasis has been placed on being a 'balanced individual', such that work is merely an element of one's life (Hearn, 1998). In the Finnish context, therefore, the alternative discourse has potentially similar consequences for men and women (it is a discourse that can be taken on by both sexes, for example, through the theme of shared parenthood; it does not necessarily clash with the discourse on the 'ideal' consultant). Accordingly, this article illustrates how the constitution of the management consulting professional identity is mediated by wider cultural settings.

Further, it is important to note that, although talk about 'repentance' (denoting a shift towards 'balance') and shared parenthood can be understood to constitute a normalizing discourse in the Finnish context, we are by no means indicating that these cannot be used as resources for resistance. Fundamentally, bringing in such ideas—restoring motherhood (Höpfl, 2002) and fatherhood—in an organization such as a multinational consultancy, which would otherwise perhaps 'deny' it, could be understood as an act of resistance. Our point is that the discourse of balanced individuals can serve both as a normalizing discourse and as a resource for resistance in the Finnish context—and that this is clearly not the case in the UK.

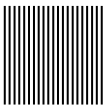
Finally, as pointed out above, society and culture are 'present' in the interview situation in which individuals articulate the meanings they give to notions such as work, career and family. We have presented the talk of British and Finnish consultants and their representations of what is normal and acceptable. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this talk has been constructed within our own cultural understandings, beliefs and conventions as British and Finnish researchers. Understandings emerging from the present study suggest an important avenue for further research. More focus should be given to the societally bound discursive dynamics in social situations such as research interviews.

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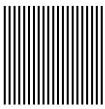
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