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Client-consultant interaction: The dynamics of and conflicts in value co-creation and co-destruction

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Abstract

The paper explores how value is co-created and co-destructed in the social interaction between consultants and clients. Prior research on management consultancy as service production has elaborated on the question of how value is co-created in the same context as this paper. However, how value is co-destructed has remained little studied. In this paper, a workshop facilitated by a consultant for a client is studied to conduct a micro-analysis of the dynamics and tensions of co-creation and co-destruction of value. In management consultant services, it is suggested that value and, more specifically, consultant-client relationships can be both co-created and co-destructed through the approach-avoidance motivation of the consultant and the client.

Keywords: Management consulting, consulting practice, service production, consultant-client interaction, co-creation, co-destruction, approach-avoidance motivation, qualitative research, micro-analysis

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine consultant-client interaction (Nikolova et al., 2009; 2012) in a particular management consulting situation through the perspective of value co-creation and co-destruction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Smith 2013). Conducting a micro-analysis of a hands-on quality management workshop, we show how value is both co-created and co-destructed through various expressions of approach-avoidance motivation by workshop participants. Approach-avoidance motivation is a psychological concept indicating the urge of a person to either approach or withdraw from a desired or undesired stimulus, such as a social situation, object or event (Elliot 2006; Feltman and Elliot, 2012).

Management consulting refers to expert services that are rendered to help companies survive, develop, and improve their performance, that is, to produce value. The core elements of management consulting services are client-consultant relationship and interactions. These have been conceptualized through three different models (Nikolova et al., 2009; 2012): the expert model, the critical model and the social learning model. While the roles of and respective power balance between consultants and clients vary in these models, their purpose of producing value to clients’ business remains the same. This is why we approach these models as related and complimentary rather than separate and alternative. Thus, we build our theoretical approach on the idea that in a single consulting project, and even in a particular consulting situation (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), the roles of consultants and clients and their power balance vary rather than remain static.

Our study is also based on the notion that service providers (consultants) and service consumers (clients) aim to co-create value in their interaction (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramírez, 1999; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Thus, value is not only created by the consultant and then consumed by the client, but it is co-created in the service situation. Despite the increasing number of studies on co-creation of value, Echeverri and Skålén (2011) argue that we lack
detailed knowledge on how interactive value creation occurs in particular service situations (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). In a similar manner, Svensson (2010) and Nikolova et al. (2012) suggest that there is a need for micro-analyses in the context of management consulting, including the issue of value creation and co-creation.

Previous research on value co-creation in service contexts has been more conceptual and abstract than empirical. Furthermore, not much empirical research has been directed towards studying the actual micro processes that shape interactive value creation. Another problem in prior research has been the strong emphasis on positive outcomes and connotations associated with the value co-creation concept, which has resulted in the relative lack of negative accounts of interactive value formation associated with the concept of value co-destruction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011).

The paper is structured in the following manner. In the next section, we discuss the three models of consultant-client interaction, two of which form the basis of our study, and the relationship of co-creation and co-destruction with the approach-avoidance motivation. In section three, we explain the methodology of our intensive case study with some aspects of action research. In section four, we describe the context of the consultant-client relationship under study and present a detailed analysis of the particular consulting situation. In section five, we discuss the findings of the analysis and in section six we provide the conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Three models of client-consultant interaction

Nikolova et al. (2009, 2012) introduce three different models outlining client-consultant interaction: the expert model, critical model and social learning model. The expert model, as adopted by popular business books, views consultants as experts who can diagnose problems and provide solutions better than clients themselves. Within this model, consultants are considered dominant actors, whereas clients are providers of company information and implementers of consultants’ recommendations. The expert model dominated the consulting service industry from the 1950s until the mid-1980s (Fincham and Clark, 2002). It presents a less interactive method of value creation in which the service provider produces value, which is then consumed by clients (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011).

The critical model, as developed by critical researchers (e.g. Alvesson, 2001; Jackson, 2001), approaches consultants as skilful impression managers and storytellers who dominate the consultant-client relationship with their rhetorical and argumentation skills. In this model, consultant companies are considered ‘systems of persuasion’, which communicate with their clients using a language that enhances their knowledge base and managerial role (Bäcklund and Werr, 2001). Svensson (2010) argues that ‘giving the right impression’ is considered a crucial aspect of value creation and that the use of language and metaphors via exclusion and inclusion of knowledge enhances the value of the consultant to the client.
The social learning model, as developed by process consultants (e.g. Schein 1999; Schön 1987), views consultants as facilitators and coaches who approach their clients as equal experts and contributors to the consulting process. According to this model, consultants and clients jointly diagnose clients’ problems and develop solutions for them; neither party dominates the process. The challenge with this model is that consultants and clients may speak different languages and have difficulties in communicating with each other. Thus, for successful consulting projects, consultants and clients need to ‘...develop a common set of assumptions and a common language’ (Schein, 1999, p. 203). Svensson (2010) also indicates that consultant’s knowledge is not valuable to clients if it does not make any sense to them. Therefore, a common language is needed for knowledge to be recognized and understood by the client.

Following the critical and social learning models, we conceptualize consulting as a set of practices (i.e. ways of doing things), which are collectively and collaboratively performed by consultant and client (Bettencourt et al., 2002). Our study draws from practice-based research (Corradi et al., 2010; Golsorkhi, 2010; Gherardi, 2012) and has a special interest in how things are collectively performed in organizations and among people (Aromaa and Eriksson, 2014). The practice-based perspective enables a description and analysis of how collective social acts of co-creation and co-destruction of values occur within the realm of consultant-client interaction. Thus, we approach value as a social accomplishment in the recurrent interactions between consultants and clients (Svensson, 2010). Hicks et al. (2009) suggest that when consulting is conceptualized as a set of collective practices, it cannot be taken as simple knowledge transfer from the consultant to the client. Instead, consulting must be considered a knowledge-creation process, which is not simple or linear.

2.2. Avoidance-approach motivation in value co-creation and co-destruction

Service research has indicated that co-creation of value as a social accomplishment only occurs when parties influence each other in some kind of joint sphere (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramírez, 1999; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Lambert and Enz, 2012). The joint sphere is typically formed by a particular service situation. Service marketing literature has made efforts to define what can be considered ‘value’ in the service context. Several researchers (e.g. Vargo and Lucsh, 2008; Plé and Chumpitaz, 2010) define value as an improvement in the well-being of either the service provider’s (consultant’s) or client’s system. The term ‘system’ refers to the complexity of the terms ‘service provider’ and ‘customer’. Both terms refer to actors and actions on at least three levels: individual, group and organization.

Apart from co-creation of value, co-destruction of value can also occur in consultant-client interaction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011), most often unintentionally. In co-destruction situations, consultant-client interaction is dysfunctional in a manner that results in a decline in either the consultants’ or clients’ systemic well-being (Plé and Chumpitaz, 2010). Hence, consultant-client interaction can result in both positive and negative outcomes in terms of either party’s well-being. In our study, we are particularly interested in the dynamics of co-creation
and co-destruction of value. Whereas the former is most often actively sought by consultants and clients alike, the latter occurs more or less unintentionally.

Svensson (2010) suggests that consultant-client interactions that lead to value creation are not only practical, but they also comprise mental, emotional and spiritual elements. In a similar manner, Echeverri and Skålén (2011) also indicate that beliefs, values, motivators and experiences attribute to the processes of co-creation and co-destruction. Accordingly, understanding human motivations as the background knowledge for co-creation and co-destruction can enable designing particular practises, methods and interactions to positively affect the possibility of achieving co-creation and avoiding co-destruction.

In our study, we further suggest that it is useful to study the motivational aspects of co-creation and co-destruction through the psychological and figurative concept of approach-avoidance motivation. Approach-avoidance motivation is a psychological concept that indicates the urge of a person to either approach or withdraw from a desired or undesired stimulus, such as another person, social situation, or task at hand (Feltman and Elliot, 2012). To provide a more specific definition, we refer to that given by Elliot (2006, p. 112), according to which approach motivation refers to ‘the energization of behaviour by, or the direction of behaviour toward positive stimuli (objects, events, possibilities)’. In a similar manner, avoidance motivation can be defined as ‘the energization of behaviour by, or the direction of behaviour away from negative stimuli (objects, events, possibilities)’ (ibid.).

The approach-avoidance motivation is an interesting construct in the context of co-creation and co-destruction, because it is currently considered as a fundamental and basic factor in various motivational analyses (Elliot, 2006; Feltman and Elliot, 2012). Furthermore, while we are using the very basic idea of this construct in our analysis, it has good potential to provide ground for more advanced, detailed and multifaceted studies on co-creation and co-destruction of value in the future.

3. Methodology

The study follows intensive case study methodology (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 113-136; see also Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2010) in which a deep understanding of the phenomenon at hand is searched for combined with some aspects of action research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 193-200). Action research refers to a situation in which the researchers are involved in making an intervention into the organization under study. In our study, all three authors have been involved with the design of the development project at the consultant’s client organization. In addition, one of the authors also worked as the consultant in the development project that the study concerns.

The data collection for the study utilized three different data sources. First, video data was collected from the development workshops organized by the consultant. Second, for each workshop, the client company’s employees were asked to write down their expectations before and after the workshop. Third, the researcher-consultant wrote a self-reflective diary in which
she reflected and explored the developing project as a whole and the seven workshops that she
organized from the consultant’s viewpoint.

To conduct a micro-analysis of a particular consulting event (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), we
chose a workshop that could be used to illustrate the dynamics of co-creation and co-
destruction. The Design Workshop was suitable for this purpose, because it provides the most
explicit indication of co-destruction. Despite the fact that all workshops could be used to study
the dynamics of co-creation and co-destruction, the Design Workshop provided the richest data
for this purpose. In the analysis phase, a four-hour video tape from the Design Workshop was
first transcribed into text and then analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method
(Duriau et al., 2007). The analysis focused on the dynamics of value co-creation and co-
destruction through the figurative approach-avoidance motivation construct.

4. The Design Workshop in its context

4.1. Talentree-POK relationship as the context of the Design Workshop

The management consultant company Talentree Ltd. (hereafter Talentree) offers consulting,
training and outsourcing services for its clients. Talentree’s business idea is not only to provide
expertise, but also extra hands for busy entrepreneurs and leaders. Talentree Consultants
believe that clients have the best knowledge of their business and that their consultants’ task is
to engage in a dialogue which enables clients to not only consider alternative perspectives but
also synthesise their business.

As a process-oriented consulting company, Talentree is not specialized in any specific industry,
but specified its target segment as ‘companies that are willing to grow’. The POK Group Ltd.
(hereafter POK) is a family firm that offers electricity distribution solutions for domestic
business-to-business and consumer markets. The company merged with a smaller competitor
and has ambitious growth objectives. POK was Talentree’s client for a couple of years before
beginning a quality management project that provides the context of our study.

Prior to the quality management project (hereafter QMP), Talentree cooperated with POK to
develop POK’s business strategy. During this process, quality management was diagnosed as
one of POK’s development objectives. The QMP project was developed according to the ISO
9001:2008 standard. According to this standard, company operations are understood as
processes, which need to be made explicit for managers and employees alike.

Some consultant companies follow the ‘waterfall’ metaphor, according to which QMP’s are
first worked out with managers and thereafter introduced to employees. However, Talentree
Consultants did not believe that this was appropriate at POK. During the strategy project, they
made some effort to convince the CEO of POK that making space for employees to participate
in the QMP would improve the business. Although participative leadership was not much
practiced at POK, the CEO and other managers agreed to take this route.
The QMP began with a planning phase in Autumn 2013. A Talentree Consultant and POK managers wrote down a need specification, planned the working methods to be used (e.g. business development days, mind storming and performance appraisals) and prepared a detailed project plan. The QMP was focused on the identification and improvement of POK’s key processes. In the first phase, the Consultant and POK managers produced a general process map visualizing key operations and processes of the company. In the second phase, the Consultant and POK’s personnel worked together in a series of workshops to describe current processes and identify solutions for their improvement.

The Consultant planned the workshops to include objectives, methods and exercises to be used and facilitate them. In the workshops, the Consultant’s role was to give instructions, facilitate conversations, consistently apply the chosen method, encourage and challenge the participants and ensure that the quality management perspective was taken into account throughout each workshop. In addition to describing company processes as they are, the Consultant’s aim was to encourage employees to produce innovative ideas for the improvement of each process. Employees from different levels of the company were involved in the workshops.

The design workshop that we describe and analyze in the following sections was one of the seven hands-on workshops of the QMP. Numerous participants in this workshop had already attended other workshops of the QMP and were familiar with the Consultant and her ways of working.

4.2. The Design Workshop

Participants:

- The Consultant
- HR Manager
- Production Managers (two, one of which also served as head of design)
- Warehouse Manager
- Sales Manager
- Designers (seven)

*Introduction and warm up*

1) The workshop began at 8.20 am, and the Consultant asks the participants to write down their expectations for the workshop. The Managers are sitting silently in the front of the long table and some of them are engaged in writing. The Designers sitting together at the back of the table are chatting with each other. ‘Do write down something, everybody. If you do not have any expectations, you can write that down’, the Consultant laughs. ‘Mrs. Chairperson, are we supposed to write down something?’ asks one of the Designers. ‘Your thoughts and expectations concerning the workshop’, replies the Consultant and smiles.
2) Then the Consultant asks participants to come and sit at the front portion of the table. She introduces herself and the goals for the quality management project. ‘During this spring, we will build together a shared understanding of the POK way of doing things’, she informs. Then, she explains that they will use a method called ROSA in the workshop and that the letters signify Reality, Objectives, Solutions and Action. She explains that they will work both in groups and solo, and she will give more instructions at every phase of the method.

3) Before proceeding to the Reality phase of the method, the Consultant asks everybody to take one picture card from the table in front of them. The picture that they choose should reflect their feelings this morning. Then she asks everybody, one by one, to show their card and tell the others why they chose it and what it brings into their mind. The first person shows a picture depicting spring and sunshine. The second person shows a picture of a landscape. ‘You seem to have dark shades there’, the Consultant comments. ‘No’, the person replies. ‘Is it the sunrise?’ the consultant asks. ‘No, it is the sunset. The most beautiful moment of the evening’, the person replies. ‘Do you have a nice weekend trip waiting?’ the Consultant offers and smiles. ‘Yes, the person replies and turns his back to place the picture in front of the window. The rest of the participants talk about picture images such as ‘sunrise and bear’, ‘open mind’, ‘storm and boiling brains’ and so on. ‘So wonderful that you have expectations’, quips the Consultant. She asks everybody to bring the cards back to the table. When people start walking to the back of the room, she exclaims: ‘Hey, don’t run away!’

**Reality: Describing the design process as it is**

4) The Consultant asks the participants to form two groups and produce descriptions of the current state of the design process. She provides detailed instructions on how to work and write each phase of the process on post-it notes, which can then be easily re-arranged. She explains that there should be no critique or talk about problems at this stage, those will come along subsequently. A lot of people join the group at the back of the room. Both groups start working. Some of the managers stand around; one of them stands silently by the window. Then he goes to the first group, then to the second, and back to the window again.

5) The Consultant asks the first group to present their description of the process. She reminds them that they are the best experts to do this. The groups give their presentations, and the Consultant and one of the managers ask clarifying questions. The Consultant comments on several questions and answers by saying: ‘Good’. The Consultant moves some post-it notes from the first flipchart to the second. The first group sits silently at the back of the room while the Consultant communicates with the second group. Then the Consultant questions, ‘What do you say, you are the experts, are you satisfied with the outcome of your work?’ Somebody asks a clarifying question and somebody else answers it. The Consultant goes through the descriptions once more, pointing at each of the post-it notes with her finger. ‘Ok, let’s have a ten minute break now’, she says. She and one of the managers take photographs of the process
descriptions. One of the participants indicates that there are some differences among them. ‘Maybe we can survive those’, the Consultant says.

Objectives: Describing an ideal process

6) ‘If we could all sit by the same table, that would be great’, says the Consultant. Then, she explains that now they should start describing an ideal design process: What would it be like if everything functioned extremely well in the design process of this company? The Consultant explains that now they will work with cards that have adjectives on them. Everybody should choose one or more cards, which in their mind describe the ideal process. When everybody has chosen their cards, the Consultant begins a round during which everybody reveals their adjectives. She asks one of the Designers to begin. His adjectives are ‘practical’ and ‘perfectionist’. ‘What do you mean by those?’ asks the Consultant and smiles. ‘Well, just that’, the designer replies. ‘Can you give a concrete example?’ asks the Consultant. ‘Just that everybody wants to strive for perfection’. A very short discussion ensues. The Consultant continues with the round and the participants give adjectives such as ‘intuitive’, ‘tough’, ‘poignant’ and ‘minimalistic’. The Consultant asks one or two clarifying questions from the presenters and repeatedly says: ‘Good’. One of the managers says that he has three adjectives: ‘inclusive’, ‘experimental’ and ‘precise’. He talks for two-and-a-half minutes; nobody asks any questions. The Consultant continues with the round, and adjectives such as ‘steady’, ‘decisive’, ‘speedy’ and ‘relaxed’ are mentioned. The Consultant asks a clarifying question about ‘relaxed’ and the presenter indicates that the Designers work in a relaxed atmosphere, but that the other departments make their life difficult. The Consultant comments that a good atmosphere is really important. Two of the managers talk longer about their adjectives, which are ‘systematic’, ‘innovative’ and ‘goal-oriented’. Simultaneously, designers begin talking to each other at the back of the table.

7) The Consultant introduces a new exercise and asks the participants to spontaneously write down things that prevent the company from moving to the ideal design process. She gives everybody a piece of paper and asks them to individually write down what comes to their mind. Then, they are to pass the piece of paper to the person sitting next to them. There is some confusion regarding what the participants should do and the Consultant repeats the instructions. The Designers sitting at the back of the table look at each other and smile. When they read what others have written on the paper, they laugh. During round five, around half of the participants write down something. During round seven, most of the participants just read what others have written and laugh.

8) The Consultant introduces one more exercise with the purpose of giving the participants something else to think about instead of the ideal process and the factors inhibiting it. The exercise is a Sudoku game and the Consultant explains to everybody how to play it. Most of the participants concentrate on their Sudoku, but some are busy laughing at something. After a while the Consultant says that they will move on to the Solution phase of the workshop.
9) The Consultant distributes pieces of paper that have challenges and inhibiting factors written on them to everybody and asks them to write down solutions to these—just one solution on each piece of paper. Then, they are to give the paper to the person next to them. After some confusion about how to work, everybody begins to work in silence. The papers move around and everybody writes something on them. After several rounds, the Consultant divides the participants into three groups. She joins the first group in the front of the room. The purpose is that the groups prepare oral presentations on their solutions. After approximately half an hour, the Consultant says, ‘We have had a lot of good buzz and there also seems to be good solution-orientation in all groups, but time is running’. Then, she asks her own group to begin their presentation. One of the managers in the group gives a well-organized presentation that lasts for eight minutes. The Consultant praises the solutions presented and puts post-it notes that she has written during the presentation on the flipchart.

10) The Consultant asks the second group to present their solutions, but nobody from the group is willing to present. ‘Don’t be shy, you have discussed these together, somebody...’ says the Consultant. ‘Well then, I guess I must. I cannot see from here...’, says one of the group members. ‘Come to the front, come on now’, says the Consultant. Finally, one of the group members walks to the front and starts talking, ‘What did we write here...’. Then, he discusses lack of materials needed for design, lack of time for design work and lack of training provided to the Designers. He uses lively and slightly harsh everyday language. The Consultant and one of the Managers ask several clarifying questions. Other members of the group answer them and make jokes about training with drinking. Nobody asks any further questions. ‘Well done, good points’, says the Consultant.

11) The Consultant asks the third group to present their solutions. She calls the group with a special name and the presenter says that they are ‘a different type of group’. ‘You walk your own paths’, says the Consultant and the presenter replies ‘Yes’. He continues, ‘Well, if I try to make some sense of this..., we would need more resources and more training’. The presenter begins discussing the problems that they have in the design function and how their solutions are related to these problems. Soon, he begins accusing the Managers of interfering in the work of the Designers. One of the Managers asks clarifying questions: ‘What do you mean by that?’ The Manager wants to have names of the people who are being accused. He also wants to know if he is one of them. The presenter and the Manager continue to argue about the relationship between designers and managers for a while. Then, the presenter takes up the problematic email practices of the company. Emails tend to be long, harsh and full of accusations. The HR manager says that these are definitely something that they will need to discuss and that the email etiquette must be improved. The presenter continues to address problematic issues. The Consultant asks clarifying questions in order to calm down the situation and obtain some solutions to the problems. The conversation is unfocused and no new solutions are presented.

12) The Consultant ends the workshop and explains that they did not have time for the Action part of the method. ‘This will be followed through during the spring time’, she says. She thanks
all the participants and asks for feedback on the workshop. Most of the participants write down something and hand over a sheet of paper to her.

Co-creation and co-destruction from the perspective of approach-avoidance motivation

The Design Workshop could be analyzed in many ways, but our interest lies in three issues. First, how does approach motivation, as expressed by the consultant and workshop participants, serve as a basis for co-creation? Second, how does avoidance motivation, as expressed by the consultant and workshop participants, serve as a basis for co-destruction? Third, how do the dynamics of co-creation and co-destruction evolve during the consultation situation at hand?

Here, approach motivation refers to ‘the energization of behaviour by, or the direction of behaviour toward positive stimuli (objects, events, possibilities)’ (Elliot, 2006, p. 112). Throughout the Design Workshop, the Consultant makes a constant effort to provide various types of positive stimuli to the participants. One example of positive stimuli is her message regarding the joint development of the POK way of doing things (1). Further, throughout the workshop, she invites everybody to participate in the provision of descriptions (4), analysis and diagnosis (7) and solutions to current problems (9). To enable participation, she has planned the workshop according to various types of participatory methods and alternates between group and individual work (2).

Another example of positive stimuli is her reference to the participants (and not herself) as experts of the design function (5) and the positive feedback that she provides the participants with comments such as ‘Good’, ‘Good points’, ‘Good Buzz’, and ‘Good solution-orientation’. Moreover, she shows an interest in what the presenters are saying by asking clarifying questions to the presenters. In addition to positive verbal stimuli, the Consultant uses a lot of non-verbal positive stimuli such as smiling, nodding, looking into the eyes of the participants and energetic body moves and tones in her voice. Overall, the Consultant makes a constant effort to maintain her own approach motivation as well as that of participants to achieve co-creation of value in the consultant-client interaction.

Further, some of the participants in the Design Workshop clearly make an effort to provide positive stimuli that could increase others’ and their own approach motivation. Until the end of the workshop, most of the participants are engaged in doing what the Consultant asks for and presenting the results of their group work (5, 9). They attempt to understand and follow instructions; some explain their thoughts in detail and some ask clarifying but friendly questions from other presenters. They look at the audience and at the Consultant when they talk. On some occasions, they engage in supportive and understanding conversations with other participants who are worried or upset (10, 11).

Both the Consultant and many of the participants provide a lot of positive stimuli, which help to maintain their own and others’ approach motivation until the Solutions phase of the workshop (10–12). During the Reality and Objectives phases (1–9), the approach motivation of the participants helps co-creation to continue in a manner that the tasks given by the
Consultant are completed. However, simultaneously, the avoidance motivation of some of the participants increased to a level that caused two groups to have difficulties in delivering what was asked of them at the end of the workshop (10–12).

Here, avoidance motivation refers to ‘...the energization of behaviour by, or the direction of behaviour away from negative stimuli (objects, events, possibilities)' (Elliot, 2006, p. 112). The question of which stimuli are defined as positive or negative in different contexts and by different audiences becomes very explicit in the analysis of the workshop. Clearly, much of what the Consultant intended to be positive stimuli—and which also worked for many of the participants as positive stimuli—may have been interpreted by others as negative stimuli, which increased their avoidance motivation. For example, in the context of long-term problems among the design function, production and sales, the inclusion of an outsider Consultant to participate in the analysis and diagnosis of these problems may not have sounded very inviting to the Designers.

Further, both parties produced stimuli that could be interpreted as either positive or negative by others. The first example of this is in the beginning of the workshop when one of the participants referred to the Consultant as ‘Mrs. Chairperson’ (1), possibly indicating that despite the intended participatory nature of the workshop, she was still in charge of it. Soon thereafter, the Consultant commented that the picture chosen by one of the participants had ‘rather dark shades’ (2). What the Consultant may have intended as a friendly comment, initiated a short episode of arguing about how the message of the picture should be interpreted. Throughout the workshop, some of the participants showed their reluctance towards participation. They produced negative stimuli by laughing at things that were done in the workshop (7, 8), sitting at the back of the room (4, 6), chatting with each other when they were supposed to work (6) and finally refusing to present the group work that they had done (10–12). This increased their avoidance motivation, thereby leading to an episode of value co-destruction at the end of the workshop (10–12). This episode was infused with negative stimuli, although the Consultant and some of the participants made efforts to inject some positive stimuli into the situation. The Consultant provided positive feedback to the first (9) and second groups (10) and acknowledged the special nature of the third group (11). Some of the Managers also made efforts to take the two last presentations (10, 11) seriously and initiate less emotional conversation around them.

Discussion: The dynamics of co-creation and co-destruction

Our interpretation of the Design Workshop is that both co-creation and co-destruction occurred through alternating levels of approach-avoidance motivation of the Consultant and workshop participants. This reveals the dynamic nature of co-creation and co-destruction of value. A close examination using micro-analysis reveals that the seeds of both co-creation and co-destruction are present, even though either one dominates the consultant-client relationship at a certain time. This is a much more dynamic picture of the value co-creation and co-destruction
processes than that which has often been presented in service management and consulting literatures.

Furthermore, our study illustrates how attention to the motivational aspects of co-creation and co-construction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Svensson, 2010) can reveal the dynamic perspective. We do not claim that focusing on the approach-avoidance motivation would be the only route to take, but we suggest that it is an interesting route because of the fundamental background of this approach in human evolution (Elliott, 2006; Feltman and Elliot, 2012).

What are the implications of our study to the consultant-client relationship and interaction in particular consulting situations? How and why did co-construction turn into co-destruction in the workshop that we analysed? In the first parts (1–9) of the workshop, the Consultant—with the help of several participants—was able to continuously produce positive stimuli and keep the participants’ attention on these stimuli, thereby enhancing approach motivation to the degree that co-creation of value was possible.

This does not imply that everything was positive and harmonious in the beginning of the workshop and that no negative stimuli were present. Some of the participants produced negative stimuli throughout the workshop, which increased their avoidance motivation, particularly towards the end of the workshop when the episode of co-destruction clearly occurred. Therefore, the conflict between positive and negative stimuli, approach and avoidance motivation and co-creation and co-destruction was present throughout the workshop.

Our interpretation of the change from co-creation to co-destruction was related to both the content and the methods of working in the workshop. The first phase of the ROSA method, describing the current state of the design process was the easiest part of the work (4, 5). Working in groups combined with the social pressure to follow instructions in the beginning of the workshop did not give much space for individual imagination at this phase. With regard to the production of negative stimuli, the triggering event was the phase in which the participants worked alone writing down factors that inhibited the adoption of the ideal process (7).

Until the phase of individual work, the Consultant was better able to control what was discussed in the workshop and she was able to guide attention away from some of the negative stimuli. However, when the participants were working alone, she had no access to what was written down in the sheets of paper which were then supposed to be used as background information for the search of solutions. As it turned out, only one group (in which the Consultant participated herself) actually produced concrete solutions. The other two groups were more or less stuck with the current problems of the design process, which served as negative stimuli and distracted them from the search of concrete solutions to the problems.
Conclusion

In this paper, our aim was to contribute to the knowledge of the consultant-client relationship from the perspective of co-creation and co-destruction of value. For this purpose, we focused on the accomplishment of value as an interactional and motivational practice involving several actors (individuals, groups and companies) from the consultant’s and client’s service systems. Our study aims required the micro-analysis of one particular consulting situation, that is, one of the seven workshops of a quality management project. The micro-analysis that we conducted illustrated how value is actually co-created and co-destructed, within a consultant-client relationship, in a service situation.

The contribution of our paper to existing literature is twofold. First, our study provides new evidence of the dynamic relationship between co-creation and co-construction of value in consulting. Our findings indicate that this relationship can be unpredictable and conflicted in a manner that neither consultant nor client is in control of what is happening. The findings also imply that the adoption of participatory methods and aims, and pre-planning process consulting situations accordingly, does not automatically guarantee co-creation of value. Thus, both the consultants and clients would benefit from being more aware of this possibility. In addition, they could pay attention to learning competences that can enable them to cope with conflicting consulting situations.

Second, our study has shown the potential of motivational constructs, such as the approach-avoidance motivation in the study of value co-creation and co-destruction. The motivational background of consultant-client relationships as well as value creating and destructing interaction has been relatively little studied but is important for service researchers. Further, our study shows that one way to proceed in this task is to focus on the micro-analyses of particular consulting situations, as we have done in our study.

References


