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Professional image under threat: Dealing with learning–credibility tension

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Abstract

How does one learn and build credibility simultaneously? Such is the challenge faced by an increasing number of professionals, who must quickly get to grips with new assignments while displaying sufficient knowledge to be regarded as experts. If they do not, they will be unable to exert influence over the situation. To address this puzzle, we draw on data from 21 months of participant observation during consulting assignments, and interviews with 79 management consultants. Building on Goffman's notion of face, we identify 'learning–credibility tension' – a discrepancy between a newcomer position that requires professionals to learn, and a role-based image that requires credibility – as a salient and costly issue during organizational entry. Specifically, we find that consultants experience threats to their face during interactions with clients. They deal with these threats by performing individual tactics that help them reduce the anxiety associated with learning–credibility tension, and support their relationship with clients. Our study builds theory in socialization by revealing tactics that allow professionals to keep face while seeking the information they require to adjust to new settings. We also contribute to substantive debates on management consulting by relating insights from the sociology of professions to contemporary knowledge workers.

Keywords

credibility, ethnography, impostor syndrome, impression management, information seeking, learning, management consulting, socialization tactics

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We live in a pragmatic, problem solving culture in which knowing things and telling others what we know is valued . . . Having to ask is a sign of weakness or ignorance, so we avoid it as much as possible.

Edgar Schein (2013: 10)

Introduction

Today's professionals often find themselves entering new organizations where they are expected to bring their knowledge to bear on shifting situations (e.g. Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). Entering new settings generates uncertainty because knowledge is socially embedded and context-dependent, such that it may not be possible to simply transfer knowledge developed in a previous context and apply it to a new one (Van Maanen and Schein, 1978). Despite this challenge, professionals must project an image of 'competence and character' (Roberts, 2005) in order to maintain the right to enact their role, and preclude sceptical clients from withdrawing completely (Vough et al., 2013). Faced with an uncertain new setting, they may encounter a conflict between their professional image and their ability to fulfil their role.

Research on how professionals negotiate this tension is scarce. Scholars of socialization have identified tactics that newcomers use to seek information to adjust to new settings (for reviews, see Ashford et al., 2016; Crant, 2000). Relatedly, impression-management scholars have studied tactics that newcomers use to project a desired image to their superiors, colleagues, subordinates and clients (for reviews, see Bolino et al., 2008, 2016). While some have theorized around the connection between information-seeking and image concerns (e.g. Morrison and Bies, 1991), these two streams of research have not been fully integrated. We still know little about how individuals project a professional image while seeking enough information to become effective in new settings (Morrison and Vancouver, 2000). Filling this gap is important, because professionals increasingly move between organizations over the course of their careers (Anteby et al., 2016), entering new settings where they must rapidly adjust while managing image concerns (Alvesson, 2001).

This article addresses this gap by adopting a Goffmanian framework of dramaturgical analysis focused on the performance of face-work (Goffman, 1967). Goffman's ideas have emerged as a promising conceptual framework in management and organization studies, with scholarly contributions focusing on, among others, the diffusion of managerial ideas (Clark, 1995), coordination in temporary organizations (Bechky, 2006), and the mechanisms of identity work (Down and Reveley, 2009). While these studies show the relevance of Goffman's work for understanding interactions in modern forms of organizing, his thinking holds much analytical promise for further empirical study of how professionals manage their face in different contexts (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009).

Based on a 21-month ethnography, we examine how management consultants[2] deal with the competing needs to gain information and manage image during socialization – a challenge we conceptualize as *learning–credibility tension*. We find that consultants experience competency, acceptance and productivity threats to their face, and deal with them by performing three individual tactics: crafting relevance, crafting resonance and crafting substance. These tactics allow them to reduce the anxiety associated with learning–credibility tension, and support their relationship with clients. Our study builds new theory in socialization by bridging information needs and image concerns, revealing tactics that allow professionals to maintain face while seeking the information they require to adjust to new settings. We also contribute to substantive debates on management consulting by relating insights from the sociology of professions to contemporary knowledge workers and overturning the critique of consultants as ‘professionals of persuasion’ (see Clark and Fincham, 2002).

Maintaining face during socialization

Information seeking and impression management

Socialization is the process through which individuals adjust to new settings – that is, ‘learn the ropes’ of their new job and its context during the first days, weeks or months following entry (Louis, 1980). Socialization can be either *institutionalized* – that is, carried on at the organizational level through developmental programmes – or *individualized*, which means that newcomers are left to learn on the job, without clear supporting structures (Jones, 1986). To achieve socialization in the second case, newcomers seek information from interpersonal sources through inquiry or monitoring (Parker and Collins, 2010). The information sought ranges from the technical facets of their job, their new organization’s formal characteristics, the sociopolitical relations among its members, to the tasks expected from them (Morrison, 1993). Socialization allows the newcomer to adapt with regard to work skills and abilities, work groups’ norms and values and appropriate role behaviours (Feldman, 1981). It is a crucial process for both individuals and organizations, since it affects a number of outcomes, including job performance (see Bauer et al., 2007 for a review).

Several socialization tactics have been identified in the literature. Miller and Jablin (1991), for instance, describe six tactics used by newcomers during socialization: overt questions (e.g. soliciting specific information from a primary source), indirect questions (e.g. non-interrogative questions and hinting), involving third parties (e.g. using secondary sources), testing limits (e.g. breaking stated ‘rules’), disguising conversations (e.g. joking, using objects, verbal prompts and self-disclosure), observing (e.g. noting targets’ behaviours in salient situations) and surveillance (e.g. eavesdropping on peers’ conversations). Subsequent empirical studies have mostly investigated the antecedents (e.g. dispositional characteristics) and outcomes (e.g. job performance) of these tactics using survey-based methods (e.g. Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). As a result, the nature of socialization tactics is well established, but how they are carried out in practice remains an open question (Ellis et al., 2015).

Besides, notwithstanding a few exceptions (e.g. Firth et al., 2014), socialization research has been dominated by studies of graduate recruits in traditional work arrangements (e.g. Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). This narrow focus disregards other important boundary crossings that necessitate socialization (Ashforth et al., 2007). Profound changes in the composition of the workforce – fewer full-time employees in well-defined jobs working with more contractors and consultants in temporary assignments (Cappelli and Keller, 2013) – mean that more and more people must negotiate movements between organizations and repeatedly adjust to new settings. That may raise issues beyond information, such as image concerns, to which raw recruits are often oblivious (Gardner, 1992).

We know that professionals, in particular, deal with concerns over their image when entering new settings (Ibarra, 1999). They must maintain a professional image if they are to be perceived as capable of 'meeting the technical and social demands of their job' (Roberts, 2005: 687). Socialization scholars argue that when image concerns are high, information-seeking tactics tend to be defensive (Miller and Jablin, 1991). Furthermore, Morrison and Bies (1991) posit that image concerns influence when, from whom and how (inquiry vs monitoring) people will seek information. There is evidence that people entering new settings can be reluctant to seek information 'for fear of losing face' (Morrison, 2002: 233). This research, however, tells us little about how individuals manage to obtain information while maintaining a professional image, and scholars have invited future research to look further into this phenomenon (e.g. Morrison and Vancouver, 2000).

Research focusing on impression management helps inform our topic. Scholars in this field have identified more than 30 tactics by which people try to create a desired image or protect their current image to their superiors, colleagues, subordinates and clients (Bolino et al., 2008). Such tactics can be assertive (initiated by the actor) or defensive (used by the actor to respond to threats to their image); they can focus on the actor himself or on a target; and they can aim either at maximizing positive perceptions of oneself or at minimizing negative ones (Gardner and Martinko, 1988). When image concerns are high, tactics of ingratiation (e.g. favours, opinion conformity), self-promotion (e.g. taking credit, boasting) or exemplification (e.g. appearing busy, staying late at work) are used to seek attributions of likability, competence or dedication from the target (Turnley and Bolino, 2001).

Yet, echoing preoccupations expressed in socialization research, scholars contend that this literature remains anchored in a limited number of contexts, such as job interviews or performance appraisals, and too focused on 'understanding the relationships among a few specific variables' (Bolino et al., 2008). Early scholars had revealed benefits associated with impression-management tactics, such as accessing task-related resources (e.g. Schlenker, 1980). Could these resources help professionals facing high normative pressure socialize to new settings? Bozeman and Kacmar (1997) argued for further use of qualitative methodologies to move away from a static understanding of impression-management tactics, because they support feedback loops that trigger their ongoing adjustment. Yet, we still lack such in-depth empirical evidence (Bolino et al., 2016).

The performance of face-work

To account for both information needs and image concerns during socialization, we adopt a Goffmanian framework of dramaturgical analysis focused on the performance of face-work (see Goffman, 1967). Goffman emphasizes the difficulties of maintaining face while adjusting to a new setting in which the requirements may be unclear or overwhelming. He also describes the importance of mastering the 'information game' played during encounters, where actors must sustain interactions and elicit audience responses that suggest how they should act. The notion of face is defined by Goffman as 'an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (Goffman, 1967: 5). During social interactions, actors strive to enact a line of conduct that meets the normative demands of their role, and from which their face is derived. Should they make a blunder, break out of character or convey information that is at odds with audience expectations, they risk seeing their entire repertoire of action collapse – and, ultimately, *losing face*. Actors use 'face-work' – that is, a variety of verbal and non-verbal tactics – to convey information that coheres with their face and counteract incidents that threaten it.

Actors are emotionally attached to their face. If they perform face-work successfully, they 'feel good' and build confidence in their line of behaviour; if they cannot maintain their face, they experience negative reactions such as anxiety and shame (Goffman, 1967: 5). More drastically, the loss of face can imperil the interaction itself, impeding any tasks that were its objectives (see Goffman, 1967: 40). As a result, the audience usually takes care of an actor's face, and finds a cooperative line of behaviour to preserve the interaction. Yet, when both sides struggle to define the situation, or intend to test each other's capacity, face-work can become much more precarious, requiring careful preparation.

In this respect, the notion of face highlights another crucial feature of the Goffmanian dramaturgical framework: the distinction between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' regions in performance (Goffman, 1959). Frontstage is visible to the audience, and is where the 'expressive mask' of the actors must be without flaw in order to convey the right impression. Backstage, meanwhile, is hidden from the audience: 'this is the place where illusions and impressions are openly constructed', for such crafting may contradict the matter at hand if discovered (Goffman, 1959: 112). By definition, face-work occurs frontstage, as it directly targets the audience. Yet, it is backstage where actors prepare their 'scripts' (plots for interaction that define the part played by each participant) and choose the 'props' to sustain their performance. It is here, too, where they hide production processes, do 'dirty work' or conceal errors (Goffman, 1959; see also Hughes, 1962).

The dramaturgical framework – and related symbolic-interactionist approaches – has yielded fascinating insights in accounting for the socialization of professionals, especially of medical students (e.g. Becker et al., 1961). Haas and Shaffir (1977, 1982a, 1982b), for instance, contend that medical students develop a 'protective carapace' against charges of ridicule as they proceed to socialization. They strive to envelop themselves in a 'symbolic cloak of competence' to counteract the anxiety associated with the transition into their new role as a doctor. This includes manipulation of status symbols (white lab coats, medical jargon and surgical tools), interactional skills to control peer evaluation, emotional distancing from patients and death, as well as accelerated learning and imitation tactics. Scholars have since expanded our understanding of the way other professionals control the face they present, and the information they give away in their interactions, by examining the use of rhetorical tactics and generic symbols to enhance the perception of expertise and the management of credibility threats (e.g. Anderson-Gough et al., 1998). This stream of research reveals the need to bridge issues of information and image during socialization. Yet, they mostly focus on the way budding professionals learn their job during training, or carve out a 'domain of jurisdiction' that is distinct from clients' in the context of clearly bounded professions (Abbott, 1988).

This provides the impetus to investigate the subject in the context of contemporary knowledge work.

The case for the study of management consultants

The case of management consultants is particularly interesting to study the tension between information needs and image concerns when adjusting to new settings. While these professionals have to learn the ways of their own consultancy firm (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), they must also repeatedly adjust to their clients' organization, as echoed in practice-oriented literature's concern for tolerance to ambiguity and capacity to adapt (e.g. Block, 2011). This is true both for short-term contracts, where practitioners strive to rapidly acquire a deep understanding of their clients' environment and preferences, and for increasingly common longer-term projects, where consultants are based at their clients' premises. In both cases, consultants are caught in a liminal space (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) where a 'burden of otherness' (Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002) fuels personal constraints of 'legitimacy, efficiency and vulnerability' (Kitay and Wright, 2007).

Practitioners' anxieties over developing social ties with clients beyond a simple visitor role have been well documented through a psychodynamic lens (Sturdy, 1997), and through the lens of occupational identity and rhetoric (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Kitay and Wright, 2007). This literature focuses on the trade-offs through which consultant–client relationships are negotiated (i.e. proximity/distance; control/autonomy) and points to the insecurity of practitioners striving to gain 'a sense of identity and control' over competent, cost-monitoring clients with a strong political agenda (Sturdy, 1997). It also emphasizes the ambivalent insider-outsider status of consultants whose role is never quite clear or stable. They must navigate complex relationships by selecting among a repertoire of roles that temporarily fit their client's expectations and their 'sense of self' in the situation (Kitay and Wright, 2007). This sits well with recent theorization of roles as 'boundary objects' that facilitate the emergence of identities through back-and-forth translation of meaning between actors (Simpson and Carroll, 2008). Our focus on face-work during socialization builds on these literatures, and also complements accounts of consultants' rhetoric and self-appreciation of their roles with an inquiry into their socialization tactics during less visible encounters with clients. In this sense, rather than focusing on consultants' identity as an outcome, we are interested in the tactics through which consultants continuously transition through their ever-changing roles, paying specific attention to the contextual pressures they experience in the process.

Academic debates about consultants' professional image run from appreciation at one extreme to condemnation at the other, reflecting the mutable boundaries of the profession and the long list of roles that scholars have attributed to consultants. Bouwmeester and Stiekema (2015), for instance, propose 15 such roles that can be found in the literature, yet conclude that 'despite huge variety in the construction and perception of consultancy roles, the quality of expertise remains a crucial component in all roles and thus a critical factor in consultants' image' (2015: 2438). They empirically demonstrate that consultants' 'expert image' is widely acknowledged by clients and practitioners themselves, and argue that the recognition of their expert role in providing business solutions is usually the starting point for scholarly discussion – or critique.

Indeed, emphasizing the symbolic nature of consultants' expertise, critical scholars have studied the rhetorical tactics (e.g. reliance on jargon, authority arguments, storytelling, management fads, etc.) used by practitioners to control clients' perception of their knowledge and value (e.g. Clark and Salaman, 1998). Along these lines, Clark (1995) convincingly applies the Goffmanian framework to show that executive search consultants sustain their 'good image' via the use of props and scripted behaviours, and that gurus sell their ideas through emotional displays of passion and danger. While critical scholars have greatly advanced our understanding of the 'persuasive' nature of consultants' work, concerns have been voiced that this research is too focused on the manipulative use of impression management to sell more advice, and tends to portray clients as relatively passive and gullible (Collins, 2004). This may overlook the crucial role of impression-management tactics as enablers of socialization in new settings.

To summarize, research in organizational behaviour and the sociology of professions has contributed a great deal to our understanding of socialization. The former mostly focuses on newcomers' information needs, while the latter informs us on their image concerns. Both have considered the linkages between the two, but neither has yet fully grappled with this pivotal challenge for an increasing number of professionals. Therefore, we ask: how do management consultants adjust to their clients' organizations while maintaining face?

Method

In line with our Goffmanian dramaturgical framework, we adopted an ethnographic approach based on participant observation and developed an original insider-outsider research design (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). The first author worked for a consulting firm in the context of a research programme managed by the French government, during which he could collect data for academic purposes while performing professional tasks as a full-time consultant. The firm's partners and clients were aware of the first author's academic activity but none had any influence in its outcome. The second author remained completely outside the field and had no contact with informants. This method allowed the research team to keep the balance between 'personal involvement and professional distance' that is salutary for ethnographic research (Anteby, 2013) and fosters theory-building from the analysis of micro-interactions.

Data collection

We conducted our research in a top-tier French consulting firm, 'ConsultCorp' (a pseudonym), founded in 1999. In 2013, the firm had approximately 130 consultants and a turnover of 25 million euros. It represented an interesting milieu for our study since, as a partner explained, 'The value proposition of ConsultCorp services is to support the circulation of information and the integration of change in the client organisation.' This type of service – for example, post-merger integration, reorganization, change implementation – aims at developing intimate, on-site knowledge of the client organization's internal processes and interpersonal relations. In terms of Schein's (1969) classification, ConsultCorp is engaged in a type of 'process consulting' that favours the co-production of tailored knowledge in close collaboration with clients. That being said, we observed that, despite their ostensible process orientation, ConsultCorp consultants would claim content expertise in project management, business transformation and strategy, as well as deep functional and sectorial knowledge, when contracting with their clients (see Block, 2011; Maister et al., 2000).

Management consultants serve as an extreme case for studying socialization issues, which should facilitate theory-building (Eisenhardt, 1989). The pressures faced by professionals likely differentiate the way they adjust to new settings in comparison to traditional recruits. Whereas new recruits are given time for socialization, and granted some trial-and-error leeway in the process (Van Maanen and Schein, 1977), hiring managers expect consultants to hit the ground running (Kunda et al., 2002). High fees are likely to make managers impatient with any overt upscaling efforts – what Barley and Kunda (2006) call the 'sink or swim' philosophy of hiring managers. There is heightened pressure on consultants to deliver exceptional performance from the beginning of their assignments (Ibarra, 1999). Besides, image is crucial for consultants, as the intangibility of their services forces clients to rely on limited information to evaluate them (Clark, 1995). A bad professional image might lead clients to reconsider the decision to hire a particular consultant, whereas a good image tends to have the exact opposite effect (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003).

From the autumn of 2009 to the winter of 2012 – a period of 21 months – the first author gathered data during three main consultancy assignments. The assignments varied in terms of the sector, the content of the service provided, the size of the client organizations, and the number of consultants involved on site. They were typical assignments for the firm in terms of type, size and duration of assignments, as well as seniority of the consulting team. We did not perceive any unusual gap between the consultancy offer and the ability of the consultants to provide it, which might influence the service. Also, the three assignments were successful insofar that follow-up mandates were contracted with the same client in each case. Table 1 presents detailed information about the three assignments (anonymized).

Observation data was collected through regular, hands-on participation in the full range of formal and informal settings that populate consulting practice (meetings with clients and colleagues, work sessions, everyday assignments, coaching appointments), thereby providing access to encounters with clients that are under-studied in the literature (Sturdy et al., 2009). Field notes were taken concurrently during the course of the observations, or shortly after, as appropriate. The first author kept a diary throughout the participant-observation period, which resulted in over 1100 pages of field notes, classified chronologically in eight notebooks and thereafter organized thematically. Field notes were sent to the second author every week via email. During the first three months of data collection, field notes covered life as a management consultant in rather general terms, but when socialization and professional image challenges were identified as an interesting phenomenon, the first author attended more carefully to the events and experiences that were related to it.

As a full-time practitioner for over 21 months, the first author had access to hundreds of informal conversations with informants, which could be seen as open-ended, unstructured interviews. These were, for the most part, friendly conversations that blended easygoing

Table 1. Details of the assignments.

	Client	Assignment
A-Company	Parapublic organization Revenue: USD 4000+ m 6300 employees	Client: Strategy division head Assignment: Strategic project management in a diversification context Duration: 6 months Number of consultants: 2 to 4
B-Company	Private multinational firm Revenue: USD 5000+ m 14000 employees	Client: Management systems head Assignment: Management systems design and implementation in a post-merger context Duration: 9 months Number of consultants: 2 to 4
C-Company	Private national firm Revenue: USD 300+ m 600 employees	Client: General manager Assignment: Corporate restructuring in an acquisition context Duration: 6 months Number of consultants: 1 to 3

m = millions.

chat with descriptive, structural and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). They took place with 52 different colleagues covering multiple levels of ConsultCorp – consultants, managers and partners – who were willing to comment on gaining information while maintaining their image during encounters with clients. The documents that consultants crafted in the course of their activities (emails, reports, *PowerPoint* presentations) were another source of first-hand data collected throughout the assignments and, once anonymized, discussed with the second author.

Data analysis

The process of data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) insofar that we regularly compared and contrasted our data in order to identify significant themes. When we felt we had discovered a valuable theme, we fleshed it out by summarizing consistent units of field notes and formulated a working definition that reflected our informants' perception (Miles and Huberman, 1994). More specifically, our attention was drawn to consultants' references to perennial 'impostor syndrome' (Kets de Vries, 1990), which the first author had also felt deeply on several occasions. We were puzzled by the fact that consultants were aware of the phenomenon, yet did not approach it negatively, as illustrated by a managing partner:

> Impostor syndrome is widespread among consultants. But we do nothing to combat it. In fact, we even cultivate it . . . We know that consultants who have this feeling will be highly productive and observant, and do everything they can to satisfy their clients. They are the hard workers. (Interview, other firm)

When we investigated the contextual conditions of our phenomenon, we realized that regardless of consultants' 'insecure overachiever' personalities (Kets de Vries, 2005), the features of consulting (e.g. knowledge-intensive, ever-changing settings and high-pressure conditions) fuelled impostor syndrome in work practices. We coined a first theoretical construct to reflect our findings – 'expert-novice paradox' – and investigated the cognitive activities through which consultants could quickly 'ramp up' on new assignments.

As we continued collecting and analysing data, we realized that our construct was only partly adequate, since impostor syndrome was tightly linked to mastering interactions with clients beyond backstage cognitive concerns. It pointed us towards a recurrent challenge faced by consultants who had to seek information to learn about and adjust to their clients' organization while projecting a professional image for the sake of credibility. We therefore shifted our focus to the literature on socialization and impression management, and derived the construct of 'learning–credibility tension', which better captured the experience of our informants. We then engaged in more systematic axial and selective coding of the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to better understand the complexities of our phenomenon. Although the first author collected data from three different assignments, our aim was not to provide a variance-type analysis, but rather to understand the common threads emerging across all the assignments. In the process, we abstracted first- and second-order labels to flesh out our constructs and support analytical generalization (Yin, 2003).

At this stage, the second author interviewed 27 management consultants from six different consulting firms to triangulate our data. These firms comprised three of the world's largest consulting firms by revenue and three boutique consulting firms. Our aim was less to gather additional material than to evaluate the transferability of our findings to more strongly branded consulting firms, and to 'product-based' consulting practice (Schein, 1969). These interviews made us confident about the robustness of our findings and helped us identify boundary conditions for learning–credibility tension.

The Goffmanian framework was adopted as a guiding theoretical construct in the last stages of the research process, as we considered it could support our theoretical contribution at the crossroads of the socialization and impression-management literatures. It also gave us a clear structure to present our findings, focusing on (1) the threats to consultants' face; (2) their individual tactics to perform face-work and (3) the outcomes of the tactic at the individual and interactional levels. See Appendix 1 (available online as supplementary material) for additional evidence.

We are mindful of the importance of the writing process in our research, as it is central to the validity of an ethnographic approach (Van Maanen, 1988). The account we give below is, inevitably, a partial reduction of the variety of events over the 21 months, seen through the eyes of the consultants. Some of our data are presented as author-saturated narratives (Geertz, 1973) in the form of short field-note vignettes that were written by the first author in the field (referred to as 'field notes'). We also present data gathered during informal conversations with consultants at ConsultCorp (cited as 'Interview, ConsultCorp') as well as interview data gathered with informants in other companies ('Interview, other firm').

Maintaining face during socialization: Dealing with learning–credibility tension

Consultants must seek information to become effective in new settings while also projecting a professional image from day one. They experience this as what we call *learning–credibility tension*. Consultants hint at learning–credibility tension through characterizations such as a ‘constant impostor syndrome’, the need for continuous ‘tightrope walking’ or ‘a culture of stress’. It revolves around three core threats to their face that consultants perceive during encounters with clients: competency threat, acceptance threat and productivity threat.

Competency, acceptance and productivity threats to face during socialization

Although hired to provide professional services in business transformation, project management and strategy, as well as expected to show strong business acumen on their clients’ functional issues, consultants are routinely called upon to learn the specifics of their assignment, complement their existing skillset, and adapt to their clients’ expectations. This exposes them to *competency threats*. As Patrick, one of ConsultCorp’s partners, remarked, ‘Consultants always have to learn on the job, no matter what their experience, but they can’t show it too much because clients think it is teething troubles and they don’t like that.’ Practitioners point to the constant risk of ‘tripping over a subject’ or ‘putting their foot in it’ on a technical issue that could erode their image as competent professionals. This is exacerbated by the fact that clients often carry the most relevant information about their problems, by dint of their internal position and contextual experience. Consultants, therefore, depend on gleaning such information to craft their advice, yet must still prove competent in their own right. As Andrew, a senior consultant, explained to the first author during a team meeting:

> We are supposed to be the one telling them [insiders] what to do, yet often you will see that it’s the other way around . . . It’s a very tricky position . . . If we ask too many questions and we act like recording machines, we won’t get far either. But if we show ignorance, they may stop taking us seriously. Either way we are in trouble. [Laughs] (Field notes, B-Company)

In other words, clients could interpret direct inquiry as incompetence, so consultants must strike a delicate balance between dependence on insiders and autonomy.

To stand as professionals and see their advice put into practice, consultants also emphasize the need to ‘be accepted’ and adjust to the social context of their clients’ organization. This requires an understanding of insiders’ patterns of interaction through time and is inconsistent with a newcomer position, creating *acceptance threats*. Robert, a senior consultant, expanded on this theme:

> You always run the risk of being antagonised by clients because your comments seem out of place . . . You know, maybe you haven’t used the proper word or taken into account someone’s sensitivity on a subject, and they cut you down to size . . . Like … ‘It won’t work; it’s not how we do things here.’ (Interview, ConsultCorp)

Although acceptance threats are often related to competence, practitioners refer to this issue in terms of mastery of insiders' social codes, with the goal of developing a 'positive relationship with them'. It requires consultants to be extremely observant, in order to grasp approval cues that illuminate the sociopolitical context of clients' organization.

Finally, since consulting services are usually expensive, clients' concern for 'value for money' is acute. While they expect consultants to demonstrate their contribution from day one, it takes them a while to deliver their highest-value output, which raises *productivity threats*. Walter, a consultant, elaborated further:

> Clients often think you cost too much. Their budgets are tight and they have a clock ticking in their heads from the first day of the assignment. They want to know . . . what's your value, what have you done today to justify your fee? (Interview, ConsultCorp)

Whereas most recruits are granted a learning curve, the high cost of consulting services ratchets up clients' expectations with respect to practitioners' productivity. As Roger, a senior consultant, explained:

> They send you to work alone at the front line on a topic that you do not know . . . I mean, sometimes it's something that you really don't know anything about . . . in a business that you discover as time goes by . . . with a client who's always on your back because you cost him 1500 euros a day, and he expects you to spend all your time producing. (Interview, ConsultCorp)

Consequently, consultants strive to develop props that will demonstrate their productivity and, as Tony, a consultant, put it, 'help [us] understand what's going on before we produce more significant deliverables' (Interview, ConsultCorp).

Consultants perceive competency, acceptance and productivity threats not as clear-cut, but rather as additive layers of pressure. The need to be smart, engage with a sense of belonging, and add significant value in a context that only unfolds gradually culminates in an ongoing tension. As Bernard, a senior consultant, remarked:

> It's exhausting, you know, day after day, to always have to be right, to be the good guy and to create value for the client . . . Clients expect you to know everything about everything, but it's impossible, I mean *physically* impossible. This is why many consultants give up . . . You feel a tension that is always there with you on the job. (Interview, ConsultCorp)

Although learning–credibility tension was consistent throughout our findings, we observed that it has boundary conditions. Its intensity could vary depending upon consultants' profile, clients' profile and assignment features. 'Newbies' certainly feel a lack of credibility more acutely than experienced practitioners. Yet consultants with seniority also mentioned the continuous need to adjust their skills, enquire about the client's context, and find ways to gain acceptance. As Kevin, a manager, remarked, clients' expectations towards senior practitioners are higher, and 'they are less protected in case of failures' (Interview, ConsultCorp). In the same vein, we found that consultants working for larger and stronger-branded consulting firms may start out with more credibility, but still face learning–credibility tension owing to higher expectations – and higher fees.

Clients' own knowledge and experience in buying consulting services also drive the level of information-seeking they tolerate from consultants during socialization. Several practitioners remarked that clients should be permissive and participative during the early phases of an assignment, so as to reap greater benefits from consultants later on. This is directly linked to the time clients have available for managing assignments, as it implies showing consultants what to do, sharing information with them, and clearly formulating their expectations.

Finally, when assignments are clearly bounded and can be treated purely as replications of past projects, maintaining face during socialization was described as less demanding. When it involves a novel problem and requires a solution that is mindful of idiosyncratic clients' needs, or complex coordination among a variety of functional areas and executive managers, things are different. Interdependency often comes with 'political exposure' that piles more pressure on consultants during client interactions.

Crafting relevance, resonance and substance: Tactics to deal with learning–credibility tension

While consultants emphasize the 'pressure' and 'insecurity' of learning–credibility tension, they also use three tactics to mitigate it: (1) *crafting relevance*, (2) *crafting resonance* and (3) *crafting substance*. All three involve both front- and backstage activities, and different amounts of information-seeking and impression management, but together they contribute to a relative balance. These tactics do not always work: consultants run the constant risk of 'breaking out of character' (Goffman, 1961) if they cannot deal with competence, acceptance or productivity threats. When this happens, consultants fall back on brief, reactive recovery moves that help them preserve the interaction. In what follows, we elaborate the three tactics and their associated recovery moves.

Crafting relevance. Crafting relevance encompasses a set of activities by which consultants *leverage available knowledge resources in order to appear competent while seeking information in new settings*. As Louise, a senior consultant, remarked: 'the point is not necessarily to know everything, but to be relevant in front of clients. You must show that you have the necessary business acumen so that they take you seriously and want to keep working with you' (Interview, ConsultCorp). Thus, to maintain face during socialization, consultants find ways to evoke a minimal level of technical information and experience, which sustain interaction with clients and allow them to augment their information pool. In order to craft relevance, consultants (a) shape cognitive landmarks and (b) approximate past experiences.

Shaping cognitive landmarks. Consultants collect information about the new setting that they selectively present to clients during encounters. Such information includes up-to-date market ratios, general knowledge of the industry and other technical facts about the client's activities and organization. At ConsultCorp, shaping cognitive landmarks required backstage preparation, which could be done in one of two ways. For repeat business, consultants would use preparatory documents called 'welcome kits', which embodied a form of ready-made thinking that relied on pre-chewed, easily reusable information synthesized from past assignments. When welcome kits were not available, consultants would ‘skim through’ large amounts of documentation drawn from market studies and corporate literature, found on the Internet or in the client’s internal documents. This excerpt illustrates this activity:

> I found documents that I could use to familiarise myself with the subjects: [training material] from the Tools and Methods department used by HVAC engineering technicians . . . Given the length, several hundred pages, and complexity of the documents, I just skimmed through them so I could recall some issues once in the field. I mainly focused on the types of boilers and their functioning with regard to the various services of the business. (Field notes, C-Company)

Consultants will not ‘know’ fields such as energy efficiency or HVAC engineering in the traditional sense after a few days reading welcome kits or skim-reading other materials. However, they will acquire enough information to develop a technical vocabulary and cultivate retrieval cues, which, as one consultant, Charles, put it, ‘are useful for establishing connections between the scattered information that comes from clients’ (Interview, ConsultCorp). Besides, such landmarks allow consultants to maintain face during interaction with clients, therefore allowing them to reap additional technical information, as the field notes from this same assignment further show:

> I used this information mostly to inform my discussion with the company quality engineer. He told me that my mastery of the issues impressed him. He took the time to help me better understand critical aspects of the technicalities. I have to admit, I didn’t catch it all, but my questions were informed and he took me seriously. (Field notes, C-Company)

Although clients are not naïve about consultants’ capacity to become knowledgeable on fields that are new to them, they appreciate that practitioners ‘have done their homework’, as consultants put it, and repay them by helping them to grasp additional information.

Approximating past experiences. To keep face during interactions with clients, consultants devote considerable effort to telling stories about their past experiences that have similarities with the context or problem at hand. Backstage, they prepare themselves by searching their own track record for previous assignments comparable to the present one, refreshing their understanding of technical details, listing similarities and scripting possible ways to present them. In the absence of individual past experiences, consultants may turn to ‘available references’: previous consulting jobs that colleagues have documented in the firm’s knowledge base. Because this course involves endorsing experiences they have not personally lived, consultants may find it more difficult to follow. Michael, a manager, explained to his team during a meeting at ConsultCorp’s office:

> You say, for instance: ‘At ConsultCorp, we’ve done that before . . . we have experience and achievements we can build on,’ so this shows that we are the ones they should be working with on the issue. Act like we are a collective person sharing one big pool of experience. (Field notes, ConsultCorp)

Practitioners then 'frame' – in their own words – these past experiences so that they approximate the new setting or the tasks expected from them. Issues of self-promotion are also at stake: consultants specifically underline the reasons for success and the extent of their contribution. Approximating past experiences relies on solid sources of information since, as Kevin, a manager, posited, practitioners cannot 'invent experience out of the blue without being found out by clients'. However, Antoine, a consultant, also admitted 'twisting [them] a bit in order to look more pertinent' (Interview, ConsultCorp).

Approximating past experiences allows consultants to defend their face while safely eliciting feedback about the technical facets of their client's organization and problems. This excerpt expands further:

> I told my manager I had no clue about the procurement process at [client] and that I was afraid the client would see through me. He said, 'Instead of asking 'How does the procurement process work for you?' tell him what we've done elsewhere and see how he reacts. Prepare yourself like that . . . It reassures clients.' (Field notes, ConsultCorp)

By leading the conversation and recollecting events, practitioners can appear 'in control' while using their past experiences to drop hints and question clients indirectly, thereby seeking additional information about the new setting.

Hunkering down to recover from relevance breakdowns. When consultants' face is threatened while crafting relevance, they may fall back on a recovery move we call 'hunkering down'. As a classic avoidance process, it consists in diverting interaction with clients in order to limit exposure to competency threats. The predicament is illustrated in this excerpt describing arrival at C-Company:

> Rapidly, a technical discussion on plant operation methods and production monitoring tools began between Denis and Jacques [clients] . . . I realised I couldn't understand a word of what my interlocutors were saying, as if all the effort I had put into my preparation had been in vain. I could barely understand half the acronyms. I was so much in the dark that I had difficulty hearing what was said. (Field notes, C-Company)

In this case, the conversation goes completely over the consultant's head, and his lack of cognitive landmarks puts him at risk of losing face. In order to repair this breakdown, the consultant did the following:

> I kept my mouth shut during the meeting to avoid tripping up. I stayed extremely focused on my notes, looking the person who was talking in the eyes and nodding discreetly when remarks seemed broadly shared . . . Anyhow, they kept addressing me as if I was a technical expert. I used my notes afterward to come back with a clear head about what had been said. (Field notes, C-Company)

Remaining silent while detecting and following approval cues is a common defensive move for consultants worried about revealing a lack of competence. As Henry, a manager, put it during a coaching meeting: 'It's much easier to look stupid when you talk than when you shut up' (Field notes, ConsultCorp). The practice of writing is also interesting, as it brings a backstage space that will remain hidden from the audience into the face-to-face interaction. As Will, a manager at ConsultCorp, explained: ‘Never show your notes to your clients. They are always messy, partly wrong, plus you don’t want to show your thought process’ (Interview, ConsultCorp). And while maintaining their face, focusing on notes also affords practitioners the opportunity to engage in the role of memory cells, storing information for the purpose of subsequent correction.

Crafting resonance. Crafting resonance encompasses a set of activities through which consultants *recycle insider knowledge in order to show for acceptance while seeking information in new settings*. As Trent, a senior consultant, pointed out: ‘It’s one thing to know your clients’ business; it’s another to understand how to influence them by reusing inside information in the right way’ (Interview, ConsultCorp). We observed that consultants tend to imitate their clients during interactions, borrowing their words and ideas so as to build an information repertoire that is sensible to the new setting and fosters acceptance. In doing so, they develop a sort of *sympathetic mind* with their clients. They come to ‘vibrate at the same frequency’, as John, a ConsultCorp manager, put it during an interview – hence the term ‘resonance’, with its sense of sympathetic acoustic vibration. Crafting resonance can be broken down into two activities: (a) developing language proximity and (b) borrowing internal insights.

Developing language proximity. During encounters, consultants attest to paying particularly close attention to physical approval cues – smiling, eyes wide, alert posture – and the verbal expressions associated with such cues. They reuse these verbal cues during encounters to evoke a sense of belonging far beyond their actual immersion and trigger a positive emotional reaction from their clients. Thomas, a consultant, explained:

> My colleague and I realised that [client] responded positively to the expression ‘frontrunner’. We had borrowed the expression from our first meeting with the managing partner . . . We could literally see his eyes and face light up when we reused it. It was like he was jubilant inside, laughing and saying, ‘That’s right, that’s what we need; we need to become frontrunners!’ . . . He became more engaged in what we were trying to do. (Interview, ConsultCorp)

In the above-mentioned setting, the term ‘frontrunner’ carried a specific meaning for the client in that subsidiaries were publicly listed as either ‘frontrunners’ or ‘laggards’ with respect to their earnings. Competition between subsidiaries was embodied in these expressions, which were reused by the consultants to showcase their understanding of the sociopolitical context of the client firm. This would encourage clients to relax critical scrutiny of their face, and entrust them with more intimate information.

Whereas shaping cognitive landmarks focuses on contributory vocabulary, developing language proximity targets expressions that embody clients’ social codes, usually discovered on their premises. Yet, we observed consultants scripting and rehearsing these expressions backstage before employing them during interactions with clients. Sebastian, a consultant, recalled an assignment at a major law firm in which the use of Latin expressions was part of the client’s professional culture:

> We prepared as many Latin expressions as we could, dropping phrases like '*intuitu personae*' into the conversation to show the client that we knew our Latin, too . . . My colleague and I would use the expression 'organisations are *personagio*-dependent' because one lawyer had used it. I was not sure it was proper Latin . . . but people responded to it very positively . . . The client started to repeat the word, and pointed it out to one of his colleagues who had the reputation of being a terrible manager. (Interview, ConsultCorp)

Although extreme, this example shows how consultants may address acceptance threats to their face by imitating the language repertoire of their clients to show empathy with their professional culture, and 'fit in' despite being newcomers.

Borrowing internal insights. Consultants also 'borrow' clients' insights into the problem at hand and re-present them as their own with other insiders. This involves reproducing more than words and expressions; entire corpuses of ideas drawn from within the client organization are recycled. Consultants feel safe reusing these insights because, as Daniel, a manager, observed, 'they come from the source, and it is a shortcut for us since they already make sense internally, one way or another' (Interview, ConsultCorp). Tony, a senior consultant, added more on this point:

> My only anchor was my client. I had to imitate him all the time . . . I would actually steal his ideas and judgements on people to look good with [other insiders involved in the project], like I knew exactly what was going on. (Interview, ConsultCorp)

By 'stealing' judgements, consultants can testify to locally embedded interpretations of the setting despite their lack of immersion. This kind of activity is often interpreted critically, as in the famous saying that consultants 'borrow your watch to tell you the time, then walk off with the watch'. Yet, consultants see real value in this activity, because it entails information seeking. Sonja, a manager, put it this way: 'Good consultants realise what opinions are broadly shared, where they come from, who is against whom, who will be antagonised if you support a particular idea, and so on' (Interview, other firm). In this respect, consultants argue that they can 'test' insights borrowed from one insider on the next when adjusting to new settings, understanding in the process which ideas and people are peripheral and which are pivotal. Instead of attending to cues, testing borrowed insights allows consultants to gradually understand the sociopolitical consequences of certain ideas that have the potential to accrue collective support, and eventually choose to amplify them.

Voicing feelings to recover from resonance breakdowns. When breakdowns occur while crafting resonance, consultants maintain face by taking a step back from insiders, verbalizing their feelings and conceding that there are boundaries to their acceptance. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

> I came back to the office after a rough day and met with my manager. I told him I felt out of place at the client's, and that I thought the people I was with that day felt it, too. I had said a few things that I knew were iffy, and they had got me some dirty looks, like they did not make sense. He responded: 'These are times when it is okay to be authentic . . . to admit that you are new to the client's context.' (Field notes, A-Company)

Voicing feelings is a form of self-disclosure, whereby consultants provide supplementary information to their audience about how to interpret their own behaviour. They make a plea for disqualifying some of the expressive features of the situation as face-defining. Many consultants made comments regarding the need to be authentic to counteract acceptance threats. For instance, Lydia, a senior consultant, suggested that consultants should ‘not force it, and admit the tough position you are in. [Clients] readily acknowledge that their organization is unique. They actually like to hear it’ (Interview, ConsultCorp).

Crafting substance. Crafting substance represents a set of activities by which consultants *produce knowledge objects in order to display productivity while seeking information in new settings.* We use the notion of ‘substance’ in its most basic sense: the actual physical matter of which a thing is composed, and which has a tangible, solid presence. Paradoxically, productivity in an industry that provides intangible services often means producing tangible documents in the form of deliverables. Because consultants, as David, a manager, put it, ‘are required to prove worthy of their cost from the get-go,’ they have developed a ‘formal capacity that supports a specific type of credibility’ (Interview, ConsultCorp). At the same time, this formal capacity allows them to construct their understanding of the new setting, and create a formal space to elicit feedback on their tasks. In order to craft substance, consultants (a) manufacture *PowerPoint* figures and (b) provide activity proofs.

Manufacturing PowerPoint figures. *PowerPoint* figures distributed to clients are one means by which consultants protect their face as productive professionals while following a learning curve. As this field note excerpt explains, this material has a powerful effect on clients:

> Any time we meet with [client], we prepare a short presentation of a few slides that frames our meeting and builds on what has been said before. I asked a senior colleague about it, and he said: ‘The client loves it, and he asks for it . . . There is always a “wow effect” because the documents are clear and well presented. And it forces us to be concrete, and to be clear on [the assignment].’ (Field notes, B-Company)

Backstage, consultants at ConsultCorp have developed routines to manufacture these props in record time, drawing from a library of hundreds of templates. Practitioners can thus capitalize on a readily available, adaptable and cumulative formal lexicon, in order to produce evidence of their productivity despite their newcomer position. In this respect, Benoit, a manager, remarked that *PowerPoint* figures can testify to consultants’ contribution, ‘as most clients don’t have the formal capacity and the habit of producing such deliverables; therefore it is very distinctive’.

PowerPoint figures also serve as prompts through which consultants construct their knowledge of the new setting, and elicit feedback about the technical facets of clients’ organization and problems. As Matthew, a senior consultant, explained:

> I produced multiple diagrams for auto-pedagogy reasons, and because the company had none. And to make sure that I understood the context and the objectives of the assignment, with the

> idea in mind that what is clearly conceived is clearly enunciated or formalised, I was trying to hasten the production of figures. They would then support meetings with my clients, who reacted with, 'No, that's wrong,' 'It's too simple,' 'It's misrepresented,' 'Who told you that?' etc. I'd return to my office and make changes. Little by little, I realised that my figures were making a great impression, and were being used by clients in their own presentations. (Field notes, A-Company)

Here, feedback is elicited indirectly, but also with the relative comfort afforded by the externality of the object. As Thomas, a consultant, notes, 'It's easier to have one of your presentations criticised than to be attacked directly over the value of your contribution.'

Tendering activity proofs. Consultants also use knowledge objects to bring otherwise 'invisible' activities to their clients' attention. Although they may appear trivial, timesheets and workload schedules are great 'proofs of value' and 'protection tools', according to Teresa, a senior consultant. 'Sometimes,' she added, 'you have been working your butt off but there is simply no trace of it, no proof of it. You need tools to reassure your client, emphasise what you've done from the first day and even before the beginning of the assignment' (Interview, ConsultCorp).

Activity proofs also give the impression that consultants remain in control of the idiosyncratic process they are engaged in, despite their newcomer position. This involves being aware of, and expressing assurance about, what has been accomplished so far in an assignment and what activities are coming up. As John, a manager, remarked to the first author during a coaching meeting at ConsultCorp: 'You should always be up to date, show that you are on top of things . . . The timesheets send a message of rigour and professionalism . . . Your client wants a signal of activity, and material for conversation' (Field notes, ConsultCorp).

These tools also, as noted above, create a formal space in which clients' expectations can be clarified and where consultants can indirectly elicit feedback on priorities. As Amy, a consultant, put it: 'Validating timesheets and workload schedules is necessary to know what your client really wants from you in terms of outcome' (Interview, ConsultCorp). Consultants often remark that clients' expectations are 'moving targets'. The use of such verbal prompts allows practitioners to discover and construct a reality whereby their efforts are better channelled towards a particular goal expected by their clients.

Downplaying products to recover from substance breakdowns. Breakdowns can also occur in the tactic of crafting substance. Clients may, for example, voice dissatisfaction with the materials consultants produce, or pointedly question their productivity while contemplating their timesheets. In these cases, consultants strive to maintain their face by downplaying the importance of their knowledge products or the time required to craft them, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> I had sent the documents before the meeting with [client], and had not heard from him since then. When I walked into his office, I could sense that something was off. He basically said that

> my work was useless . . . I understood that he wasn't happy with the memo, so I stressed that it was just a necessary step along the way. We ended up putting it away and working on the charts he wanted me to produce. (Field notes, A-Company)

When threatened with losing face, we observed that consultants dissociate themselves from the knowledge object under fire, and tone down its significance by presenting it as 'work in progress' or as a step along the way. They acknowledge the incident, but do not respond to it as a threat to their face. Will, a senior consultant, recalled an instance when his workload schedule angered his client, who questioned its accuracy and contested forecast fees: 'I said it was just a first draft to signal the risks of the assignment, and suggested that he shouldn't pay too much attention to the details at this stage' (Interview, ConsultCorp). Consultants do not hesitate to disown their knowledge objects to avoid losing face in front of clients.

Positive outcomes of successfully performing the tactics

Using these tactics successfully led to positive emotions for consultants, as well as a stronger consultant–client relationship. As Denis, a manager, explained: 'You'll always have a knot in your stomach before the first meeting with a new client. But if you walk in with something to show and remain observant, the tension slowly dissipates' (Interview, ConsultCorp). Several practitioners also mentioned growing feelings of confidence and assurance, as they could demonstrate the value of their work a short time into their assignment. When we presented our findings to ConsultCorp partners, one of them remarked: 'After spending some time at a client's, you know how to avoid exposure. These tactics make you feel less vulnerable in front of clients' (Field notes, ConsultCorp).

Maintaining face is a condition of the interaction, not its ultimate objective. Every situated interaction serves functional ends related, for instance, to the transmission of information, the solving of specific problems or the achievement of longer-term goals. In this respect, consultants reported that the tactics aided collaboration and the sharing of relevant insights with clients. This was illustrated by Sylvia, who recalled how a client's demeanour was transformed after she accidentally revealed her ignorance of a business process during a meeting. 'The client kept me somewhat out of the loop afterwards . . . He stopped taking me to meetings' (Interview, other firm). Conversely, others mentioned being 'systematically consulted' or 'upgraded to more value-added tasks' if they were successful in performing the tactics. They mentioned their 'growing influence' as they were given more autonomy on certain tasks, and enjoyed full participation from their clients on others. Consultants also reported that successfully performing the tactics helped sustain productive meetings with clients and secure further contractual arrangements. They often pointed to the importance of a 'good fit' with clients from the beginning, as this would determine the client's willingness to keep working with them. In the same vein, some consultants who could not deal with learning–credibility tension found that clients tended to denigrate the impact or quality of their work in relation to billable hours, or dispute their fees, therefore impeding commercial imperatives in the longer run.

Discussion and conclusion

Our ethnographic study accounts for an underexplored phenomenon during socialization: learning–credibility tension. We find that professionals have the difficult task of maintaining their professional image while adjusting to new settings; in the process, they experience competency, acceptance and productivity threats to their face. They deal with these by performing individual tactics – crafting relevance, resonance and substance – that allow them to maintain face while seeking the information they need. If performed successfully, the tactics allow consultants to reduce the anxiety associated with learning–credibility tension, and support their relationship with clients. These findings contribute to the literatures on both socialization and management consulting, and offer practical implications for a variety of workers, not just consultants, who repeatedly negotiate shifting settings.

While scholars in socialization literature have theorized around the connection between information seeking and impression management (Morrison and Bies, 1991), the Goffmanian framework sheds new light on the subject. First, it helps show how consultants, by defending their face, can sustain an interaction with clients that will augment their information pool. Indeed, encounters are driven by a communicative dance based on reciprocity: 'people perform, respond, perform, respond and thus they symbolize' (Manning, 2008). The information garnered from clients is not only useful for the adjustment of consultants' self-presentation, but also for understanding clients' technical and sociopolitical context. This is almost tautological, but the point is relevant. It is not a case of alternating between information seeking and impression management; the *exact same interaction* supports both purposes.

The literature on socialization has hinted at the fact that when image concerns are high, newcomers use defensive tactics such as indirect questioning, hinting and surveillance to seek information about the technical facets of their job and their new organization, the sociopolitical relations among its members, and the tasks expected of them (Miller and Jablin, 1991). Impression-management literature suggests that tactics of self-promotion, ingratiation or exemplification are performed to seek attributions of competence, likability and dedication from the audience (Turnley and Bolino, 2001). In our findings, the tactic of crafting relevance uses self-promotion in the approximation of past experiences and the shaping of cognitive landmarks that sustain an image of competence. It also elicits technical information through hinting and indirect questioning. Crafting resonance has a component of ingratiation, as language proximity and the borrowing of internal insights are opinion conformity mechanisms that provoke attributions of likability and facilitate acceptance. Using this tactic also generates information about the clients' sociopolitical context, through the monitoring of approval cues and the 'testing' for collective support of particular insights. Crafting substance comes closer to exemplification, as it projects an image of dedication through well-crafted deliverables and activity proofs. This tactic helps gather information about the technical facets of the client's organization, but also their expectations in terms of consultants' tasks and priorities. Together, the three tactics we found can be understood as a cumulative process running through both back- and frontstage activities, each tactic facilitating the deployment of the next.

Bozeman and Kacmar (1997) developed a communication-oriented model that foregrounds feedback loops between actors and targets as a means of adjusting to a new situation. They posited that information gathered from the target of an impression-management tactic serves to indicate whether the tactic had the intended effect, which in turn informs the use of further impression-management tactics. We extend this by showing that impression-management tactics can generate information offering wider benefits. Consultants use tactics to 'get clients talking' and lay the foundations for a productive dialogue through which they can access the information they need to adjust to new settings. Overall, socialization research may need to better account for the intertwining of information- and image-based challenges in the study of effective tactics; tactics may seem to deal with only one of these two challenges, but truly effective ones may trigger the resolution of the other at the same time. We suggest persevering with this dualistic examination of socialization to yield tactics that offer additional empirical relevance in the face of work that involves regular boundary crossings.

Second, the Goffmanian framework also highlights how face-work reassures consultants who strive to maintain their professional image while transiting into their role. Through scripts and props carefully prepared backstage, consultants embody personas that meet the normative rules they reckon clients expect from them. Rather than postulating a list of roles based on a priori debates on expertise or professionals, it is worthwhile exploring how practitioners perceive, and interactionally shape, their own role through the performance of face-work. Our research thus contributes to the literature on contemporary knowledge workers, and more particularly management consultants. The tactics used by consultants are different from those of members of traditional professions, who envelop themselves in a 'cloak of competence' through the control of a specific body of knowledge, the differentiation of status symbols (for instance white lab coat, surgical tools, jargon), and emotional detachment from clients (Haas and Shaffir, 1977, 1982a, 1982b). Consultants, by contrast, acknowledge their knowledge dependency on clients, adopt their symbolic repertoire, and display strong emotional attachment to their client. This is coherent with the fuzzy contours of their profession and with the indistinctive nature of consultancy expertise. Because consultants' 'expressive setting' is often shared with their clients (i.e. consultants often work from clients' premises) and their 'expressive equipment' remains quite simple (Goffman, 1959), consultants cannot easily create their own domain of jurisdiction through the manipulation of status symbols. Rather, they strive to show their credibility within their clients' domain of jurisdiction – for instance, by espousing the client's vocabulary rather than pushing managerial jargon (see also Bourgoin and Muniesa, 2016). Our findings put further emphasis on the need to adapt insights from the sociology of professions to the context of contemporary service economies (Gorman and Sandefur, 2011), especially during encounters with clients, which remain largely overlooked. In line with calls for greater personal involvement in the field (Anteby, 2013), and for more studies focusing on the micro-interactions that compose knowledge episodes (Kuhn and Jackson, 2008), we believe that our methodological choice is at the core of our contribution and should be explored further in the literature.

From this contribution also emerges an original analysis of the 'persuasive nature' of consulting work (Clark, 1995; Clark and Fincham, 2002) that rethinks the critical agenda depicting consulting as being 'smoke and mirrors' intended to oversell more or less valuable solutions. Interestingly, although impostor syndrome is well known and acknowledged among consultants, they do not interpret it negatively. Rather, they see it as a necessary 'condition' of their work (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), derived from its features and fuelling a positive stance towards adaptability. Arguably, this tension cannot, and should not, be completely eliminated. If the tactics we describe assuage consultants' anxieties, they are also the very sites where such feelings arise. It is precisely while skimming through large amounts of data, packaging their experiences, borrowing ideas and insights from clients or displaying well-crafted deliverables that consultants are most insecure about their face, but also keenest to attend to clients' needs and geared towards adjustment. In other words, if consultants are somehow 'faking' expertise to sustain their professional image, they are certainly 'faking in good faith' or, more precisely, they *fake it so they can make it*. An interesting way to interpret this contradictory condition without resorting to critique is, as researchers adopting a psychodynamic lens have done, to establish humility and ignorance as prerequisites for consulting (Schein, 2013, 2016), or to make 'authenticity' – which is the exact opposite of imposture – the cornerstone of the notion of *good* consulting (Block, 2011). Client organizations may already know the answers to their problems at some level, but still not know how to articulate them. In our view, this articulation takes expertise, and this expertise largely takes the form of a performance that allows navigating a mutual dependency in revealing the organization. Our findings therefore answer calls to relax the critical stance towards consultants (Bourgoin, 2015) and rebuild our understanding of consulting expertise on the foundations laid down by critical scholars.

Our argument, in this sense, provides some support for Goffman's general theory of social life – or, at least, counterbalances the critiques that have been advanced by its fiercest opponents. These critics point to the moral deceit of sanctifying appearances and reducing the mechanics of social order to the mere manipulation of symbolic devices (see Williams, 1986 for a review). In this vein, Cuzzort (1969) excoriates the conception of 'humanity as a big con', while Gouldner disdains Goffman's new bourgeois ideology of a world 'inhabited by anxious other-directed men with sweaty palms, who live in constant fear of exposure by others and of inadvertent self-betrayal' (1970: 383). Only one who has nothing serious *to do*, and is suffering from a deficit of true character and virtue, they argue, can become so obsessed with what they are supposed *to be* – that is, a merchant of morality. Granted, one of Goffman's most fecund theoretical metaphors – beyond those of the theatrical actor and the gamer – is that of the con artist (Goffman, 1952). Moreover, Goffman does entertain a subtle ambivalence about the realness and morality of the social practices he describes. This is particularly true in the case of service workers who are, on many occasions, presented as 'specialists in the verbal front' (1959: 157) whose task is merely to produce opportunistic arguments. In this article, however, through our methodological stance and empathy with the actors,[3] we show not only the sincerity of consultants' behaviour, but also its effects in facilitating socialization and adaptation to clients. This is not to suggest that the tactics we describe exhaust consulting practice, or what consulting expertise is, or should be. Yet, we believe that crafting relevance, resonance and substance is a necessary medium for exercising such expertise – and that these tactics are far more than just conjuring phony impressions.

Finally, the ability to use the tactics we describe is vital to those who must enter many different settings and negotiate new, boundary-spanning relationships. This concerns more and more practitioners, who global executives believe will be in high demand for years to come (World Economic Forum, 2016). As work is becoming more contingent, an increasing number of managers have become ‘consultant managers’ focused on functional integrations, projects and internal clients (Sturdy et al., 2015). They must cope with flatter hierarchies, lateral careers and the fragmentation of relationships in project-oriented and cross-functional knowledge teams (Edmondson and Harvey, 2017). Collaborating effectively under such circumstances requires a recognition of specific skills. As Barley and Kunda (2006) suggest, a particular finesse in interviewing and connecting is necessary to succeed in today’s workplace. Such skills should not be left untouched but given due attention by scholars, as they are crucial for professionals who must negotiate shifting settings. In this spirit, more attention could be given to the relational foundation of expertise (Edwards, 2010), or its interactional (Collins and Evans, 2015) and communicative components (Kuhn and Rennstam, 2016; Treem, 2012). By uncovering the tactics with which consultants maintain face during socialization, our study takes a step in this direction.

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Notes

1 The ordering of authors is alphabetical, reflecting roughly equal contributions.

2 We acknowledge the vivid debate in the sociology of professions over what constitutes a ‘professional’ (see Gorman and Sandefur, 2011, for a review), and that consultants do not usually qualify as such. Indeed, they are not governed by formal licensing and clear ethical rules (Greiner and Ennsfellner, 2010); they do not draw on standardized education, training and qualifications as the foundation of their status (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003); their expertise has been described as ‘weak’ and their technical autonomy contested (Clark and Fincham, 2002) – all these being essential attributes of professions such as law or medicine (Abbott, 1988). In scholarly literature, management consulting has rather been considered an ‘occupation’ (Kitay and Wright, 2007), a ‘quasi-profession’ (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002) or a ‘neo-profession’ (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). In this article, we find it handy to use the term ‘professionals’ to describe consultants, since we focus on major firms’ employees and

believe that updating the sociology of professions' perspectives to contemporary knowledge work can be beneficial.

3 For Goffman, because the same behaviour can occur for opposite reasons, its sincerity cannot be detected from outside. By making the sincerity of behaviour fundamentally subjective, he certainly discards essentialist views of morality, but also underlines the significance of performances.

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