

# **Practice, discourse, and dialectics in an organizational consulting firm**

Jason Jay  
May 25, 2006  
15.349 Qualitative Methods  
Professor Susan Silbey

## ***Introduction***

---

In this paper I seek to describe the practice, discourse, and tensions in the work of an organizational consulting firm (hereafter referred to as OCF). In doing so, I have three rhetorical purposes that I should make clear from the outset. First, although I can not make any explicit comparisons to other communities of practice with the data I have gathered (a major limitation of this study), I believe the firm to be somewhat unique in its approach and worthy of depicting in an appreciative light. Second, I believe that the tensions and challenges these consultants experience can illuminate key dialectics in wider conversations about leadership, organizations, and organizational learning and change. Third, in analyzing the discourse and practice firm critically, I hope to seat the firm's work in a sociological context, make some tacit assumptions explicit, and thereby provide feedback to their own ongoing reflective process. To some extent, these three voices will weave together throughout this paper. I have, however, attempted to differentiate them into three sections – appreciative, dialectic, and critical. My hope is that doing so will give the portrayal a readable narrative structure and ensure a degree of balance in my approach.

Although I was an employee of the firm for two years, my analysis and reflections are based on a specific body of qualitative data I have collected and analyzed for the purpose of this study. It includes four interviews with three consultants (one was interviewed a second time) that I conducted this spring of 2006. It also includes participant-observation notes from client engagements that I gathered in 2004 while serving as a note-taker for the firm, which I then coded and analyzed for this paper. I owe tremendous gratitude to the consultants for taking the time for lengthy (1.5-2 hour) interviews and to the director of the firm for allowing me to repurpose my participant-observation notes. I have attempted to remove all recognizable identifiers from the data, including references to individual consultants, the firm as whole, and its clients. The disguised cast of characters is as follows:

- Organizational Consulting Firm (OCF): a for-profit group based in the Boston area, specializing in leadership education, leadership coaching, facilitation, and organizational learning and change consulting.
- Energy Company (EC): a multinational corporation that employs OCF, sending managers to leadership education and coaching programs and using OCF consultants as facilitators for meetings and larger scale organizational change processes. Participant Observation from July, 2004 comes from a meeting between EC representatives and an OCF consulting team.
- Large Retail Bank (LRB): another multinational corporation, who employed OCF for a leadership coaching engagement in 2004. Participant Observation from January, 2004 comes from a videoconference between a director of LRB and an OCF consulting team.
- EN (interviewed 3/20/06): a white, male, retired manager from a major multinational technology corporation who now operates as a board member and organizational development consultant for a number of private sector and non-profit organizations, including OCF, who may employ EN as CEO.

- TH (interviewed 3/10/2006): a Black male activist and educator during the Civil Rights Movement, basketball coach, and leadership coach with a focus on corporate social responsibility and diversity issues within the field of organizational learning.
- HH (interviewed 3/20/2006 and 5/5/2006): a white South African woman who works part time as a leadership coach and dialogue facilitator at OCF, while also conducting women's leadership programs and organizational development training programs in Oregon and South Africa.
- CJ (not interviewed): white, male, founder and partner of OCF, as well as lecturer at a university; contributor of much of the intellectual property of the firm. He was not interviewed for this study because we couldn't find mutually agreeable time, but he is featured in both of the participant-observation sessions.

### ***Appreciating the practice***

---

In this section, I deal with OCF on its own terms, building directly off consultants' descriptions and my observations of their practice. Some of what I describe was already explicit, communicable in prepared language and marketing materials for the firm. Some was more tacit but articulated through the interview process and my own reflections. Following one of the firm's own techniques, I take an "appreciative" stance, focusing on what seems to be both positive and distinctive about the firm. There is an implicit comparison to a "mainstream" form of organizational practice and consulting in their descriptions of their practice and my portrayal; it remains to be seen through a comparative study whether such comparisons are valid.

### **Goals and content of the practice**

The goals of the practice emerged in my inquiry in three ways. First was in response to my questions, "what is the common thread in the projects you work on," "how would you describe what you do to a general audience," or "what do clients think they are paying for when they hire you?" These questions tended to invoke a kind of "elevator pitch." The responses to these questions give a feel for each of my informants. EN's remarks tended to have a visionary, transcendent, and well-prepared feel:

*"[The common thread of my work is] The potential of human beings, working together... Living together. Probably more important than working together. Or as Humberto Maturana would say, really learning how to **live** together." -EN*

*"[What OCF is trying to do is] bringing new capabilities to organizations, helping individuals in their transformational processes, both conscious and unconscious." -EN*

HH was somewhat more concrete, placing herself directly in an imagined encounter with a potential client in order to give a textured description of her practice.

*"If people ask me what I do, I might say broadly I do organizational development work broadly and the particular niche of organizational development I work in is organizational learning and dialogic change. And if they ask me what that is, I talk a little about complexity in the world and what I think is needed to bring about change in organizations nowadays. And then I will frame conversations in*

*that context, and dialogic change and face to face interactions and department to department interactions in that context.... Interactions between individuals, between teams, between organizational departments, mostly face to face interactions of various kinds but also structural interactions of various kinds.” – HH*

*[Whether a client hires me] depends a lot on the first meeting, whether it’s an engagement on the phone or face to face encounter. And what I seek to do is to see whether there is resonance and whether it is possible to shift the discourse with the person... Generally the person I speak to will have some apparent problem that they bring, whether it’s a coaching issue, a reason why they want to be coached, or whether it’s a problem they are having organizationally. When I engage with that person, I will seek to demonstrate in some way in that primary conversation what I think could happen or could shift in the encounter with OCF. So shifting the discourse could mean changing the conversation from having the person feel stuck to having them feel hopeful. Changing the conversation from being about the others out there and what they are doing or not doing to being about the person’s experience in the environment they are in. Or it could be from seeing everything as outside themselves to experiencing something inside themselves. And I would be the agent for allowing that to happen.” –HH*

Through this description we are exposed to some of the basic goals of OCF’s work – to promote reflection, and to shift the style discourse and sensemaking (Weick 1995). From TH we hear another framing.

*“If I’m called there is an assumption that things are not working well, or not working as smoothly as they may once have worked. So there is maybe... in varying degrees some degree of disequilibrium. It could be mild or approaching dysfunctional. So that’s on the one hand. On the other hand, changes in technology or operational conditions require that people make changes to adapt... to adjust the way they work... to change the way they operate as a team, a unit, as an organizational entity, whether that is a school or nonprofit or section of a corporation. The way I would describe my work is that I’m not being called to solve technical problems, but to work with adaptive problems, the human component, how people build structures with one another to serve various organizational functions.” –TH*

*“I think the clients are paying for someone who will help them understand how they work, help them to develop a way of having a better understanding of their impact on the system.” -TH*

If we piece these together, the picture of OCF is one in which client organizations face problems of various kinds – internal disequilibria, external shifts in technology or context – that require that the organization change or adapt. Doing so requires that individuals and teams within the organization make changes to their capabilities, their behavior, their discourse and sensemaking, and perhaps their feelings (becoming more hopeful). The OCF consultants help individuals undertake those changes through their coaching and consulting practice.

From my own participant-observation, and from stories of success and failure in the practice from my informants, a fuller picture emerged, one in which OCF was simultaneously involved at two levels: people's individual reflection and development; and collective processes of team and organizational sensemaking. A sketch of these client engagements is as follows:

- A major foundation approaches OCF with conflicts around race within the organization. TH and CJ do a combination of site visits, meeting facilitation, and one-on-one coaching. Through this process the executives and employees of the company reflect on the stories they told themselves about racism in the organization, test the assumptions on which these stories are based through dialogue, and learn that some of what they thought were racially motivated actions actually had other causes and reflected a more psychological kind of diversity. This helped heal some of the apparently racial conflicts and encouraged a more reflective interpersonal culture.
- A female executive within Energy Company EC invites HH to facilitate a series of women's dialogues in the organization in an effort to make the organization a more hospitable employer for women. Through this process, some of the women learn that they are actually impeding each other's performance and ability to succeed in the organization. By building a community of women through the dialogues they attempt to change this pattern.
- Earlier in EN's career, he was the head of a major manufacturing facility in a technology company. In that position he changed the way teams were structured and trained so that they focused on the relationships among people and ability to operate collectively, which generated higher levels of performance than during an era of focus on individual performance. Now, as part of OCF (potentially its CEO) he is trying to grow the firm and help it be successful by focusing on the capabilities and relationships among the consultants as a team.
- The technology department within EC has been invited by a group of senior executives to organize a "technology day" that helps the senior executives form their technology strategy. A technology executive who has been through OCF's leadership program invites OCF to help design and facilitate the technology day. OCF and the executive design and conduct a series of engagement workshops with the various technology departments in which they reflect on the role of technology in the company, connect with one another, and develop a coherent vision and set of messages to bring to the senior executives.
- An international development agency asks OCF to facilitate a dialogue between the development agency, the national, state, and local governments in a developing country, and representatives of indigenous peoples in the country.
- HH is invited by an environmental NGO to teach people how to facilitate dialogue among parties in environmental conflicts, because their engagements with governments and corporations have not been as successful as they would like. HH interviews people in the organization and comes to the conclusion

that their troubles are related to a different problem in the way members of the NGO interact with other organizations. She attempts to engage these issues but runs into trouble, which she attributes to her not having been able to properly communicate with the head of the organization.

- A financial services company brings in OCF to do coaching and leadership development. The lower level managers are enthusiastic about the process and see benefit from the coaching, but the process runs into trouble when the CEO and founder enter a prolonged conflict with one another and decline the opportunity to be coached themselves, thus undermining the process.
- A Large Retail Bank (LRB) invites OCF to help managers and teams function in a more collective, team-oriented way instead of focusing on and sternly enforcing individual performance. OCF engages directly with a single manager and his team to set up coaching relationships. In the process they go around LRB's Human Resource department and step on some toes, which results in their losing the client relationship.

Based on these stories, I would label the OCF practice as serving two functions within processes of organizational change. The first is best described through Karl Weick's construct of sensemaking in organizations – people's ongoing production of action, meaning, and identity – that is rooted in the philosophy of Mead and Dewey (Weick 1995). OCF consultants do three things with respect to sensemaking:

- Create contexts for reflection and sensemaking by convening leadership education programs, coaching relationships, dialogues, and systematic series of dialogues.
- Stimulate sensemaking by asking people to systematically reflect on their actions in those contexts.
- Seek to change the style and content of sensemaking by intentionally shifting discourse from blaming others or *structural* explanations to reflexive accounts that incorporate *agency* and opportunities for change.

To the extent that people are open to engaging in these sensemaking processes, and consultants are successful in fostering sensemaking and sense-remaking, OCF practitioners help people change discourse, behavior, culture, and patterns of organizing.

The second function of OCF's work (as they understand it) seems to be community building within organizations. In describing her work on the women's dialogue series, HH states this directly:

*“And I think part of the work OCF does, although not well articulated, is community building. But I don't think that's a well articulated aspect and in fact we're just now talking about what that means and how we go about describing that to clients. So that tends to be the territory I operate in a lot. And engaging in conversation in order to build community is something I tend to do.” –HH (3/20/06:46)*

In the interviews and observations, this motif of community building, and fostering human relationships among people in organizations, runs throughout. These themes are coded as “Community Building” and “Human relationships” in my analysis of the data. For example, TH talks about the race problem as being a kind of fragmentation in the community that requires healing. EN speaks repeatedly of the idea that if you focus on

human relationships, the business results follow, and describes his project at the technology company as one of “community design.” One of the EC technology managers, in talking about the engagement workshops, talks about the purpose as being to create community with the technologists. This aspect of the work complements the sensemaking dimension: the identity that is formed through sensemaking in OCF engagements has a collective aspect; and the process of sense-remaking can have a healing effect that strengthens relationships and collectivity.

These two dimensions seem to combine in what OCF labels as “collective intelligence,” which EN emphasizes as a core objective of his own practice as a manager, of OCF’s engagements with clients, and of a broader community of practice of which OCF is a private-sector-focused component. This basic notion, that groups can be more than the sum of their parts, and that collective intelligence and capability can be actively cultivated, permeates the interview and participant-observation transcripts and is coded “Collective intelligence.”

## **Principles, method, and phenomenology of the practice**

### ***Participatory/Process Consultation***

In describing their approach to work with clients and the reasons for its distinctiveness, the OCF practitioners were careful to point out a few features. First, interactions with clients are jointly designed between client and consultant, with a great deal of “discovery” work up front in which consultants and clients come to jointly understand the nature of the problem. Second, the consultant seeks to develop the capacity of the client to do the sensemaking and community building themselves. This participatory approach is constantly being juxtaposed against a kind of straw man they label as an “expert” approach, in which consultants enter client relationships with preconceived ideas or “templates” that govern the interaction, and then leave without having transferred knowledge or capacity into the client. One of the most frequent codes in my analysis was “Expert,” which includes all references to this contrast. For example:

*“Even working on adaptive problems, one could sort of... take an expert stand and say “this is what I see and this is what it would take to fix it.” But I think they see me as someone who, starting to have some understanding and insights into the problem, to not have any fixed solutions but to co-create a process in which they could come to a deeper understanding of what was going on in the situation. My style is not to stand up in front of the room.” – TH (3/10/06:84)*

It is worth noting that the source of this basic set of principles is mentioned in passing in EN’s interview – the work on Process Consultation by MIT Professor Edgar Schein (Schein 1999), in which “the purchase-of-information or expertise” model is contrasted with the “process consultation” approach. Schein’s work informs many organizational development consultants, and several of the OCF consultants have collegial relationships with Schein.

In the field notes from EC and LRB we can see some of this participatory philosophy in action – while CJ is orchestrating both of these meetings as a facilitator, the ultimate design of the consulting process is emerging collaboratively with the client. In the EC case, CT’s idea to hold engagement workshops with technologists is integrated

and developed in the plan, with input from the small groups. In the LRB case, the manager HI assigns the OCF coaches to his direct reports, effectively structuring the consultant-client interaction.

### ***Holographic Worldview***

Another dimension of the practice that comes through quite strongly in HH and TH's interviews is what HH calls the "holographic worldview." This concept again has its roots in the work of an academic scholar, the physicist David Bohm, who followed up his physics career with an exploration of dialogue, consciousness, and sociological "wholeness." (Bohm 1981; Bohm and Nichol 2004) One of the ideas to emerge from Bohm's work was that social systems operate holographically, in which each part or subsystem contains a microcosm of the whole, so that by inquiring into patterns of behavior and thought through dialogue, groups can gain a window into the collective field of consciousness. For the OCF consultants this principle guides and justifies their work with organizations – by inquiring deeply with individuals and groups within an organization, they seek to gather data and shift discourse in the wider system of which those individuals are part. I have coded this phenomenon as "Microcosm" in my analysis.

*"I really think that... it's sort of part of my model really, and it has to do with changing the discourse, I guess, is that what you do in small also gets done in the large. And that I think is, the only way I can describe it is, whatever you do in the field influences the rest of the field." –HH (3/20/06:240)*

The holographic or microcosm principle also serves to justify intrapersonal reflection – to understand issues inside oneself is to understand (and potentially increase one's ability) to understand the whole.

*"Being sufficiently aware that you can see and name what it is that you are experiencing, and knowing that if you are experiencing it here, the likelihood is you will have data for what's going on in other places as well." –HH (3/20/06:304)*

The downside of this phenomenon in the consultants' experience is that by engaging with a client system, one thereby becomes part of it and begins enacting its patterns, functional or otherwise. In telling a story of the LRB challenges, TH says the following:

*"The system, the very patterns of the system, without labeling them, repeated themselves in us. In other words people with formal power tended under high stress situations to have more influence than people with informal power. So that system entered us, and right away for some reason, we must have been entering in a time of stress, the situation became high stakes for us because it was a significant contract. And we reacted just as that system reacted." –TH (3/10/06:201)*

The degree to which the belief is ingrained can be seen in the phrase "we must have been entering in a time of stress." The holographic principle is not just used as a tool for thinking, but as an absolute guide to the consultant's sensemaking about his own situation.

I was curious to know where this belief had come from and how it came to be justified, and probed this with HH.

*“So reading David Bohm’s work, it seemed to me like a theory that was more convincing than most others that I had read or thought about. So holographic theory... made sense to me. Then, I think what CJ has been doing for years is playing with that theory and then developing other kinds of ways of intervening in organizations, too, and seeking to have it all be coherent. And in my experience it has gone from bits put together to some kind of framework to becoming increasingly coherent...”*

*“So holding an intent inside yourself allows it to manifest outside yourself. And it may not always be directly linkable in terms of cause and effect. But again it’s hard to prove these things, and hard to find data for them, other than that they show up.” -HH (3/20/06:366-378)*

Here we see knowledge emerging and being justified through a combination of authority (a Nobel physicist), coherence, and direct experience – “they show up.”

### ***Embodiment and the sensory experience***

However it may be justified intellectually, this belief system is woven with a sensory and embodied experience for the practitioners. The experience of “the system entered us” can be quite literal for these practitioners, whose language implies feelings and sensations in response to occurrences in the groups and organizations they facilitate. Data that I have coded “senses,” “physicality,” and “emotionality” all point to this phenomenon. In some cases this experience is the simple feeling of discomfort many people might feel when a conversation is interrupted:

*“But I knew that there was probably stuff there... it felt uncomfortable. It felt uncomfortable. And one reason it felt uncomfortable was that no one engaged it. So, people had been talking prior to that, and engaging each other quite freely, and challenging each other quite freely, but no one said anything when he said that.” -HH*

*“Something in the behavior that clearly said that this is... and then when I get a kind of sense, you can smell a rat, you can smell when there is an undiscussable.” -HH*

In other cases there is a more unusual sense of physical response to others’ psychological experiences:

*“It’s as though when something begins to open up or when something begins to open up in somebody else or when somebody hit a particular space in themselves where they had an insight (during the symbols process I’m talking about now)... or when we’re... when something breaks free from being purely rote to happening in the moment real time... what I experience in my body as a sensation is... a sense of calm, opening into calm. Not knowing before that I wasn’t calm or that I was tense, suddenly something shifts inside me and I feel calmer, I feel like something spreads out inside me. [She sits up, elbows out and hands together, forming a circle with her arms to gesture the spreading out.] And I feel an enlarged sense of space around me. And I feel as though... every... my*

*attribution is that everybody experiences that. And when I've tested it it's been so that most have... experienced a shift...*

*"I might become aware of a sudden stillness that lasts for a fraction of a second... maybe it's a moment of awareness rather than a sudden stillness. It feels as though there's... something happens, but it's hard to name exactly what it is. More awareness, or more alertness. And more connectedness." -HH*

TH uses similar language, but his experience extends into the visual domain as well.

*"I work on the level that there is hard data that can be taken in in a cognitive sense but then there is sensing, and being in the place. You can feel some of the changes. This may not work altogether in academic settings." -TH*

*My sense of the way I engage can not adequately charted on a flat surface, because it's multidimensional - it has depth and breadth and something else to it. Yeah, I'm engaging this thing called a system, but I'm also engaging the individual parts in a deep kind of way. And also sensing the energetic forces, the feel of the thing. -TH*

*In the middle of the meeting the indigenous guy was talking about the need to develop capacity and how capacity was growing in the indigenous people and you could only fund and do the aid as people's capacity grew. I suddenly had this visual image of a baby sitting at a large banquet table with the most incredible meal that one could prepare. Good wholesome food, a meal that to an adult, a fully developed adult, would be a great meal. I don't mean just decadent, I mean it was a great meal. And there was a baby sitting in this big oak chair, sort of down in it, a little tiny baby looking up at this table with all this stuff on it. Suddenly I became the baby, and I realized, I don't have the full teeth. And my digestive system, even if I were able to intake this food I can't digest it. It's a perfectly great meal. For the person at the appropriate developmental stage, a really good meal. For this baby, totally inappropriate. So that's the sort of spiritual, energetic level that I bring. So I told the story to the people. Then we got into interpretation and what we reached was, you know what, we need to scale this project down and phase it over time so that the inputs and the level of development we're doing is appropriate to the dev stages. I perhaps could have arrived at it intellectually, and I'm not saying I didn't arrive at it intellectually, but there is this other element. -TH*

TH worries that "this may not work altogether in academic settings." But we find an analogue in contemporary social psychological theory. In his book *How Emotions Work*, Jack Katz (Katz 1999) addresses the experience of "getting pissed off in LA." One of the concepts he develops is that drivers' sense of embodiment actually extends to include the car, the road before and behind them, and the whole trajectory of their journey. When a car pulls in front of them abruptly, the anger that drivers experience is a kind of embodied self reflection, communicating that they have been literally "cut off." One explanation is that a similar phenomenon is at work here – that the consultants' sense of embodiment expands to include aspects of the group with which they are engaged. In doing so, their bodies, their emotions, and their minds amplify what they

perceive in the “field.” This need not be a psychic, mystical, or non-local phenomenon (although the practitioners imply that it is such). It is perhaps a shift in attention so as to be more aware and more affected by subtle signals in the social milieu. This would, in fact, be a fascinating phenomenon to explore through neuroimaging, to see whether social interruption or flow trigger sensorimotor responses.

### ***“Container” as concept and practice***

Without this window into the practitioners’ skulls, we at least have one additional window into their language, which is the use of the term “container” to describe the social space in which they operate. This term is used throughout the organizational learning world to mean a “safe space” in which learning can occur, and is usually discussed in terms of physical comfort, confidentiality, an atmosphere of mutual respect. For the OCF consultants, “building the container” is done by interviewing individuals in the system before engaging in group dialogue or gatherings. In my interview with HH we constructed this process as having three dimensions:

- Data gathering about events, attributions, and feelings among people in the group.
- Getting a sense of how far each person is willing to go in confronting difficult issues or in reflecting publicly.
- Achieving a sense of contract or “permission” to engage topics of conversation and reflection, which may come from the authorities in the social system or from each person individually.

Problems arise in the practice when this container building is not complete. This can happen because specific people have not been “engaged” in this way, or because permission to engage the necessary topics has not been obtained.

*“He opposed very vigorously, and part of what he opposed was doing the personal work, or bringing the personal into organizational contexts. That was something he thought was a really bad idea, he thought it was something that shouldn’t be expected of people, and he didn’t think we should be doing it in that context. We were working with the heroic modes or something like that. I can’t remember exactly what it was at the time. So he opposed and I knew we didn’t have the container to deal with his opposing online, to engage.” –HH (3/20/06:141)*

*“Because we hadn’t had a chance to speak to the head of the organization, we didn’t have what I would consider a complete container. We had a... sense of some form of resonance and clarity and a sense of permission with the manager, and agreement of what we could and couldn’t do, but we didn’t have it with the head of the organization. Also the other thing we had not done because we didn’t have time to do it, was we hadn’t interviewed everybody that we should have interviewed. We hadn’t done a full enough interview process to really get a clear container.” –HH (3/20/06:179)*

Thus, if we examine the dimensions of “container building,” we find that each is a potential source of interruption in the flow of social experience during dialogue: an unexpected or unknown fact emerges; a person’s boundaries and comfort are violated; a

topic is approached that the consultant does not have the implicit contract to approach. As with Katz's Los Angeles drivers, these interruptions are the generators of emotion when they change something in the embodied practitioner.

What I find interesting, therefore, is the concreteness of the metaphor – a container is thought of as a crate, a can or a box, but the consultants use it to describe these more ephemeral properties of awareness and permission. My theory is that the concreteness of the term both reflects the physical experience of the practitioners and primes that sense of extended embodiment, just as the concrete language of “cut off” has a literal aspect. A worthwhile insight reached by a member of a group leads to a sense of physical opening for HH because the “container” has been literally expanded in her experience. TH experiences *himself* as a baby at a large feast, embodying his understanding or characterization of the system he has engaged.

What I offer, then, is what I hope to be a coherent functional, phenomenological, and epistemological account of the practitioners' experience. The goal or function of their practice in their ecology is to foster sensemaking, community building, and collective intelligence in clients' social systems. Their basic assumption about such systems is that they can be understood by interviewing, dialoguing, and collaborating with people within the system, allowing the system to “enter them” holographically, and then observing their direct experience. Their language includes concrete metaphors for the bounded social spaces they construct in doing so, and their descriptions of their experiences include a profoundly embodied and multisensory dimension that complements that concreteness of language. It remains an open question whether any one of these aspects “causes” any other one – suffice it to say that there they reinforce one another to create a coherent *umwelt* or subjective universe.

Again, the limitation of this study is the absence of explicit comparison. The next phase of this research must be to compare these dimensions of the OCF practice with other consulting firms and other kinds of people attempting to foster sensemaking, community building, and organizational change. But the data here describes an embodied practice and knowledge that on the face of it seems somewhat unique.

### ***Dialectics in the practice***

---

In the first phase of this paper I took what I called an appreciative stance, describing the practice in its own terms and focusing on the aspects that seemed distinctive and positive. The goal was to take a few of the tacit and phenomenological aspects of the work and make them explicit. In this second phase I take one step back to examine the interaction between these practitioners and myself as an outside researcher. I examine how the practitioners depict themselves, how they justify the practice, and the style of their rhetoric and narrative. This more objective, or at least self-reflective stance gives me a space for a kind of cultural critique.

### **OCF practice as a series of dichotomies**

In their interviews with me, the practitioners constructed accounts of their practice and attempted to place themselves in the context of their clients' ecologies and their real or imagined competition in the domain of organizational consulting. In doing so, their most prevalent rhetorical technique was to set up a dichotomy or opposition, placing

themselves on one side of the dichotomy and their imagined client, competitor, or opponent on the other. The table below shows a list of these dichotomies, with the “dominant paradigm” on the left and their own approach on the right.

Fragmentation	Wholeness
Unconsciousness	Awareness
Individual (solo)	Collective (ensemble)
Authority	Democracy
Expert	Partner
Technical	Adaptive
Business Results	Human Relationships
External causes	Internal causes
Apparent	Actual/hidden
Scientific	Metaphysical
Visual	Sensed/embodied
Advocacy	Inquiry
Ego success	Client-centeredness
Transactional	Transformational
Surface-level manifestations	Subtler qualities and causes

We have seen some of these already – the TH quote about technical vs. adaptive work, and the change in discourse from “out there” to “in here” that HH seeks to foster in coaching. For illustration, I include some more examples below. The key feature is that these different dichotomies interweave in the same narratives.

*“The premise was if we developed an appreciative relationship on each team, and we learned how to function as an improvisational ensemble, and we had a diverse enough talent pool in both how we processed, our personalities, as well as our technical skills, and we practiced enough at doing that that it became second nature to use people’s different situations, that there wasn’t the... wasn’t an expert model where we had to rely on a particular expert to deal with a particular problem.” –EN (3/20/06:136)*

*“EN - At OCF we need to do an intervention on ourselves. This is part of what I’m in the process of designing right now. But I’m not an expert in the field. But we’re still going to design it.*

*JJ - Are you designing it by yourself?*

*EN - Of course not. That would be a solo performance. I’m into ensemble work.” (EN 3/20/06:333-337)*

*“The way I would describe my work is that I’m not being called to solve technical problems, but to work with adaptive problems, the human component, how people build structures with one another to serve various organizational functions.” –TH (3/10/06:54)*

*“With NI, we got into problem of transactional company. Interaction is transactional. We don’t necessarily understand what it takes to produce transformation.” –CJ (EC 7/2004:135)*

*“It's something that EC just doesn't get - it's transactional. It wants to get transaction costs across boundaries down. But it's less clear how totality of operation itself is focused around delivery in a surprising and reliable way.” –CJ (EC 7/2004:515)*

*“From things or molecules to customer solutions. From parts to wholes. From silos to interconnection.” –CJ (EC 7/2004:325)*

*“Think of a pyramid as a way of thinking of any discipline. At bottom of pyramid are practices, physical activities that people pursue. How people interact - teller in a branch. Next layer is concepts... Theories, models. At top of pyramid is character, Qualities of being. A lot of management books focus on one of the two bottom layers. 6 sigma is the bottom layer. Strategy theory is the middle layer. Hardly anyone knows how to be rigorous about the capstone of the pyramid. If you get that straight, people discover they're already in agreement. If you get that part right, you have an amazingly powerful thing.” –CJ (LRB 1/2004:41)*

*“The core idea also was that they be... that people would be able to create that experience or evoke it without the help of a bunch of consultants and experts.” –HH (3/20/06:342)*

Analytically, there are a few useful things we could do with this list of dichotomies. The simplest would be to look to map these dichotomies back to the community's own intellectual sources as I did in the first section: the expert vs. process consultation dichotomy in Schein; the wholeness vs. fragmentation dichotomy in Bohm. I would argue that these are strongly orienting concepts and help compose the *umwelt* described above. This approach would say that these dichotomies are real *to the practitioners* in their field of practice. They emerge from a worldview in which fragmentation and separateness are illusions while wholeness and connectedness are realities, so that an emphasis on individual authority and expert consultation only perpetuate an illusory or unhealthy mode of operating.

A second approach would be to map the dichotomies to other realms of theoretical discourse, perhaps in an attempt to reduce or categorize them along “known” lines and thereby validate these categories. For example we might take a spiritual approach, appeal to Taoist philosophy, and say that the left column is Yang while the right column is Yin. Or we might employ a philosophical or sociological perspective and say that OCF's emphasis is on the collective instead of the individual, or on systemic explanations over methodological individualism. From there we can question why OCF places itself on one side of the line, and either praise them for restoring balance or critique them for missing a necessary synthesis.

In focusing on these dichotomies as rhetorical devices in the interaction between the OCF practitioners and me, I will take a third approach. Instead of evaluating these dichotomies as truth claims, I will examine how the practitioners *use* them in their own projects of sensemaking, identity construction, and attainment of power and status.

## **Dialectics as the basis of narrative**

In my data, I observed four different uses of the dichotomies in constructing narratives of practice and identity. To describe these I employ a rudimentary form of

narrative analysis, examining the characters, stage, motives, and actions that practitioners portray (Czarniawska-Joerges 1997). In doing so I will take some poetic liberty in order to emphasize the performative character of these narratives.

### ***Motif 1: Hero vs. Expert***

This style of narrative is usually abstract, and amounts to a straw man comparison of the practitioners own work with “experts” who enter organizations with “templates,” design their interventions as “solo performances,” and leave without having developed the capacities of the clients to lead change themselves. I have already included some quotes of this type before. The stage here is the marketplace of clients and consultants. The characters are the clients as damsel in distress, OCF as the hero, and a mythical horde of expert-based competitors as the adversary. The OCF practitioner wants to teach the damsel to rescue herself and become a hero in her own right, while the adversary would rather pull her out of trouble forcefully and dramatically only to leave her defenseless and ready to fall into another trap. This framing places the practitioner in a contest for moral righteousness as well as professional efficacy.

One of the interesting dimensions of this trope is that practitioners position themselves relative to one another in this landscape. This occurred with both TH and EN:

*“JJ - What is the process by which... what I’m interested in understanding is what is the process by which you are working with OCF, and how is it the same or different from the processes they undertake with clients?”*

*EN - Um, it’s not an expert-based model, mine isn’t, which is a significant shift.*

*JJ - Yours is not an expert-based model.*

*EN - Mine is not an expert-based model.*

*JJ - And you’re saying that theirs is.*

*EN - I am, yes, I believe it is. In the intervention area, not so much in the program development and training piece. But I think in the intervention area it is very much an expert base. But I believe that’s very much an artifact of CJ and CJ’s personality, where he’s coming from.” (EN 3/20/06:100-110)*

*“But I think they see me as someone who, starting to have some understanding and insights into the problem, to not have any fixed solutions but to co-create a process in which they could come to a deeper understanding of what was going on in the situation. My style is not to stand up in front of the room. **It’s a bit of a balance of others here.**” -TH 3/20/06:84)*

The explicit or implicit comparison is to CJ, the founder and president of the firm. And to some extent their critique might be valid. Using the “Word Cruncher” feature in Atlas, I was able to count the number of times CJ spoke in the two client interactions compared to others in the room. In the EC meeting, CJ spoke 174 times while the primary client CT spoke 86 times, and the other participants from EC spoke 73, 44, and down from there. TH, present at the same meeting, only spoke 2 times. To the extent that speaking frequency is an indicator of consultation approach (foreground vs. background; expert vs. partner), CJ may have an expert style. Alternatively, this prominence in the EC meeting may have been a feature of the meeting itself, in which CJ was bringing perspective from

the Group Vice Presidents to the group and had to speak frequently in order to so. If we do a similar analysis on the LRB meeting, we find a more equal balance, with CJ speaking 33 times and the client HI speaking 31 times.

Putting this evaluation aside, however, it is important to examine the power structure and the rhetorical purposes in these characterizations: CJ is the current authority in the firm, while TH is a rising senior practitioner and EN is a recently entrant, potential CEO who might assume CJ's management responsibilities. To what extent does this rhetorical device and narrative structure advance the political objectives of the narrators, paradoxically asserting their expertise and authority at not being an expert authority? Through this narrative we see the same individual vs. collective, expert vs. partner dichotomies playing out within the organization itself.

### ***Motif 2: Fellowship of the Ring: The triumph of wholeness and collectivity***

The second narrative motif is used to articulate the practitioners' success stories. In these stories, the practitioners are portrayed as embodying one side of the dichotomy (wholeness and collectivity) and triumphing over the other (fragmentation and individualism). Because the hero is a collective, however, the success is always a story of collective success, a "fellowship of the ring" rather than an individual hero. The most dramatically presented of these was EN's story of his managing a factory within a major technology company. He uses deliberately evocative language to describe the heroic quest:

*We had been trying ever more complex organizational practices because we had stumbled on something that surprised all of us about 10 years earlier, which was the impact a group of not your a-team, not your starting squad could do when the team chemistry really clicked. They could actually outperform the superstars in the company. How could that be? That defied traditional thinking in that environment? How could you take a group of second or third string people and actually have a facility whose rate of improvement exceeded the best in the network and the top talent without ever being seen? How could you do that? It was thought to be impossible.*

And again he invokes the other side of the dichotomy as a kind of opponent or obstacle:

*It's not that different from the current venture capital model, where if you were successful in 1 of your 10 invested startups, and that successful liquidation event got you a 20x payout, you would always use that CEO in all other startups from then on because he was a proven quantity, whether he had anything to do with the outcome or not, it didn't matter. It's akin to a baseball player who wins an award or a difficult game and from that point on will never wash those socks. It's sort of the same thinking process. Within a company like (technology company) you had the same mentality - I know this person, I resonate with their personality, they through my careful guidance have always performed really well, they are the ones to choose to get the best performance in the factory system. Au contraire. That basically propagated conventional thinking and wisdom.*

In the description of the victory over this “conventional thinking” we see several of the tropes being invoked – ensemble, collective intelligence, relationships and community, the transformation of authority:

*So what we did in one big experiment was change our starting assumption. Instead of thinking about incremental improvement we said what if what we did is that other lesson we learned around the capability of a **team** that can really click together in its performance, what if we took that and scaled that from 13 people to 5000 people? The premise was if we developed an **appreciative relationship** on each team, and we learned how to function as an **improvisational ensemble**, and we had a **diverse enough talent pool** in both how we processed, our personalities, as well as our technical skills, and we practiced enough at doing that that it became second nature to use people’s different situations, that there wasn’t the... **wasn’t an expert model** where we had to rely on a particular expert to deal with a particular problem. And from that then begin to look at and explore a whole new model of what a factory is. What is an organization within a factory? We then began to realize that we had to pay attention to the **relationship of employees and their families, the relationship of the employees and the network at large, the relationship between the employees and their management at another location.** And not only to achieve the performance expectations but create a factory and environment that wouldn’t have the issues that other factories had as they matured, so that they were able to adapt to new technologies, adapt the configuration of the factory without having to shut down. **SO it would be organic as opposed to be blocks** would be stopped and converted into something else. How would we be able to do this continuously?*

*The other question was how do we tap the **collective intelligence** that exists in the entire organization? That had two ramifications. As we worked with these teams that began to develop very quickly, the **traditional supervisor role had to get thrown out** the window immediately. The supervisors could not change their leadership style fast enough to keep up with the growth rate and maturation process of the teams. It completely changed the constraint of decision making and information flow and adaptation to a very dynamic environment. All of a sudden the supervisors and the managers had to quickly rethink their role in a scheme that was so dynamic. And there were a number of people who had to go through a lot of personal transformations because they had a tendency to want to be **control freaks and micromanaging** because they are very insecure, how to let go and trust the capabilities of the team. And to redefine what the team needed in terms of their manager. **Instead of being command and control** situation you would typically see in a startup, a person who represented the needs of the team - got resources for them, tried to keep a couple steps ahead of them in terms of what they needed to improve their capabilities. A very different kind of role. More external than being directive.*

Although his rhetorical style is less dramatic and performative, we see similar structure in TH’s narrative of the diversity challenge in a foundation. At first the system is portrayed as fragmented, conflicting, or inhospitable. The consultants-as-heroes must first seek out the root cause beneath layers of illusion.

*“The presenting problem or symptom was a severe diversity problem. Particularly between higher level white executives and some high or not so high black execs. The whites were concentrated in very high or medium high levels. Blacks had one in the high level and several in the medium and the middle management levels. The presenting symptom was one of “we have a real problem with race or diversity.” We went in, I did a lot of discovery, but we went in as a team... When you broke it down, it turned out that it so happened that actors might be white or black but there were clashes that would have occurred regardless of race.” –TH (3/10/06:80)*

Equipped with this understanding, the team of heroes enters with a sword and mirrored shield, displaying people’s actions and illusions back to them. Like Medusa, slain by the gaze of her own reflection, the problems dissolve when confronted skillfully.

*“And so we got them to start looking at what part of this problem is racial. First of all we gave them a common language, a common way of looking at problems, a set of different framework so they could talk in a different way about the problem and start to isolate elements of the problem to determine what were just interpersonal dynamics. What part were interpersonal versus what aspects were racial? You found that there were repeating patterns where there would be a clash between certain executives regardless of sort of race or gender or sexual orientation, but just because of the way people were wired. And so once we shifted that we could shift the way people communicated with one another and get them to think differently about how they operated and how they engaged with each other.” –TH (3/10/06:80)*

Unlike the story of the individual hero Perseus, however, this narrative again depicts a collective accomplishment:

*“Although day to day there is still room for improvement, people don’t work from their stories and assumptions about the data but try to listen and understand. People learn that they weren’t really working from the data or what the person was saying but from their assumptions or beliefs or conclusions about the data or from the stories they told themselves about somebody else. I think that’s shifted... it’s still moving to be better. People have an awareness that they may actually create a story about an incident, and then actually be engaging others or planning based on the story they told themselves rather than on what actually happened.” –TH (3/10/06:99)*

The paradox, of course, is that these two practitioners did have significant roles to play in these processes. When I asked EN about his role in the process, we had the following interchange:

*“JJ - So in this system and process you described, what was your role, what were you doing?*

*EN - I invited people to explore the possibilities...*

*JJ - First of all, what was your organizational responsibility?*

*EN - I ran the whole thing.*

JJ - *You ran the whole thing.*

EN - *I was accountable for the performance of that facility.*

JJ - *You were the big manager for the whole facility.*

EN - *El Jaffe.*" (EN 3/20/06:142-156)

His language here betrays the importance of his own formal authority and his own individual control of the situation. While the story is a collective or systemic one, it unavoidably features his own contribution. Similarly, TH wrestles with the importance of his role:

*"I'm sure it can happen without me being involved. I can only understand it from how I participated in it. Yeah, someone who works in a similar way could have made it happen, but that's all I can say about it. I can only talk about how it worked as a result of me working in it. **But it would have required a similar kind of approach.** It's possible that you could have given them a template or script from which to act, but if a problem showed up that was not at all like what the script was written for, I would question their ability to deal with a new problem, or an aspect of the problem that manifested itself in a different way. Could it have been done without me? Yeah... someone using a similar kind of methodology or who engaged them in a similar kind of way. I know people who work that way... I can only speak to how I do it. I think that in the particular case of this place, now that you raise it, it may force me to focus on it... I think the solution to this place requires that people not accept... That people be really willing to examine whether the presenting symptom was really the problem or not. It's like don't accept things at face value, but go in and really try to... to understand the underlying patterns, not what appears on the surface. Also not to draw conclusions. Someone who doesn't try to make the problem in that place look like a problem in another place and provide a standard template or answer."*  
–TH (3/10/06:115-117)

Here we see the melding of the Fellowship of the Ring motif with the Hero vs. Expert motif, and the same conflict of self-presentation. TH is more self-conscious and self-effacing about it than EN, perhaps, but the paradox remains – how can an individual practitioner justify and advocate for his own practice while serving a collective process? From this deeper dive, we see that the rhetorical project of placing oneself on the “collective” side of the dichotomy unravels, as the practitioners must engage the dialectic in their own work and self-portrayal.

### ***Motif 3: The Empire Strikes Back***

This third motif showed up once, in EN's description of a client engagement gone awry. In this case the client is a financial services firm. Again, OCF is positioned as being on one side of a dichotomy – fostering personal growth and awareness in the client organization. Here the dramatic tension comes from two characters in the story who oppose the OCF work, preferring to remain in the darkness of their “shadows” rather than come into the light of self-aware community.

*“With the change in CEO there, and the dynamics between the CEO and one of the founders, they really don’t want OCF involved - those two individuals - because of the risk of having to deal with their shadows to use OCF terminology. But on the other hand there is a dilemma because the coaching processes are going and the people involved in the coaching love the personal growth and development they are experiencing being coached by TH and HH and QD. And they want more. They want to go down this path even further. And both the CEO and founder are going the opposite direction. So you have this collision that is beginning to form in terms of expectation and willingness to grow. And a desire and expectation that the CEO is going to sponsor this work or at least allow it to happen as opposed to becoming an impediment. And as they become more and more self-aware, the individuals going through coaching, and the CEO is digging in his heels more and more and more, we’re actually creating a problem culturally for the client in the leadership ranks.*

*And I think we have to be truthful in our assessment in what we see right now with the CEO and board and founder. We have to either disengage or they change their position. If it keeps going down the path it’s going, that is going to be a really toxic environment. The tension between those two individuals. The tension already exists between the two, let alone their collective dance and the leadership of the rest of the company.”*

This narrative stands in limbo – either “Darth Vader” will be transformed and redeemed, allowing the “rebel alliance” to flourish, or our heroes will be forced to retreat lest they be drawn to the dark side.

*“And what’s our responsibility? Seeing this, what is our responsibility in doing something about it? I think part of the problem is we have to make a business decision. We also have a set of implied ethical standards we have to conduct ourselves by. As the situation devolves, when do we say I will no longer support this codependence - I will continue to help you but not go down that spiral with you.”*

If the latter scenario comes to pass, and OCF removes themselves, what sense will be made of the engagement? Will the practitioners hold the CEO responsible for the demise of the situation, allowing them to say “we told you so” and hold their righteous position on the “light side of the force?” Or will they hold themselves responsible for not being able to appropriately engage or transform these two leaders, recovering their heroism through the redemption of self-reflection? For indications of this we move to the last motif.

#### ***Motif 4: The heroic flaw***

In my data I have two other stories of tragedy or unsuccessful outcome in the client relationship. The first is TH’s narrative about the Large Retail Bank (LRB), a scene from which is captured in my field notes from a videoconference. The second is HH’s story about her attempts to intervene in an environmental NGO. In both cases, OCF attempted to embody one side of the dichotomy and encountered a foe that defeated

their efforts. In their sensemaking about the experiences, however, they construct a narrative as a kind of Shakespearean tragedy in which their own heroic flaws were the cause of their defeat. Through doing so, the tragedy is transformed by reflection, self-transformation, and ultimately redemption through the telling of the story itself. As they undertake this process for themselves, we get a window into the work they do with clients.

The LRB story that TH presents is one in which members of the LRB human resources department invited OCF to help shift a dominant mode of working in the company: from individualistic and results-focused – “if the numbers go down, whip chariots until you get the numbers up” – to one that was more relationship-oriented, in which results emerged as a byproduct of a healthy social system. OCF attempted to do so by engaging with a director of the company and setting up coaching relationships with each of his regional managers. In doing so, they bypassed and excluded the HR department, who subsequently terminated their contract.

This story could easily have been framed as a kind of Empire Strikes Back story, in which the HR group would be portrayed as self-interested and unwilling to get on board with the light side of the force. When we look at TH’s narrative, however, we see just the opposite – an account of the failure of OCF to engage and develop the capacity of the HR group, as their “process consultation” model would dictate. Even more damning is the assertion that the OCF consultants allowed themselves to be pulled to the other side of the core dichotomy, enacting the exact opposite pattern from the one they intended:

*“The interesting thing is, it had been there in the back of my mind... you’ve gotten me to see that we entered the system and the system entered us. But the part of the system that entered us was not the espoused rule, the rule they wanted, but the old rule, the rule in use. You know, find the best people who are in the most powerful people, and assume they can make the change happen, work through them to the exclusion of developing others or integrating them into broader or more diversified social network.” –TH (3/10/06:176)*

TH further describes the cause of this seduction as being in their own character and ego:

*TH - The systematic problem is... you know, the story started to be about us rather than about the client. About me rather than about the client needs. Like I need for this to be a friggin success. No! I had experienced some success with two people in the system. So I now wanted to work that magic on all the rest of the people I was going to engage as a coach. And as a consultant, I wanted to achieve the same, I wanted to see the same kind of magical results I had seen with people I had coached. So when I started coaching them I was thinking about them, not about me. I was really thinking about them. It worked because it never became about ME. But somehow when we started to engage the larger system it became a little bit about me. And I felt that it became about us. So we lost awareness of... how we were reacting. I don’t think we were reflective about how we were reacting... I think it was our ego. My ego. My desire to want to be seen as the person who...*

*JJ - Made the thing happen.*

*TH - Which I think is a danger that consultants can run into. "I'm a change agent." Boy, look at this change that I effected. I'm going to live my life to help people in the world. Well, shit, if you really examine that statement, that requires people to be less fortunate than you, always. You know?" (TH 3/10/06:203-207)*

Here we see several phases in the narrative formation or sensemaking process. First, the consultants see themselves ejected from the system, which might be attributable to fickle HR people. Second, they realize that something in their own stance may have contributed to their not engaging those people. Third, an introspection process reveals that their own ego and desire to succeed individually interacted with the client's own tendency to focus on individual expertise. Fourth, this reflective process leads to a kind of transcendence and redemption, eliding the tragedy into the Fellowship of the Ring success story:

*"What was in me was, I want to work magic with these guys. I want to do the perfect intervention. That was my shadow in that particular incident. Whereas, I actually carried learning from this situation into the foundation. And was pretty firm that this was not about me. If these guys are going to turn this place around, they have to be actively engaged in it. And it will only turn around if there is greater capacity in these stakeholders and actors." –TH (3/10/06:211)*

This narrative turn allows the practitioner to recover his professional identity as someone who practices what he preaches, reflecting on his experience and undergoing learning and self-transformation. In so doing he makes the failure a success.

In part, the accuracy of this account is born out in the data when we examine a critical meeting with the LRB director. First, we see evidence of the consultants' being seduced by the charisma and resonance of the director, who they believe is on their side of the dichotomies:

*CJ – [Talking about HI's approaches to developing his subordinates] These are all quite sophisticated. I spend years trying to teach people to think the way you do. Different models and how to align them. Where did you come from?*

*HI - Mars*

*CJ - direct line Mars to [UK].*

This is amplified at the end of the meeting:

*CJ - good way to start the new year. I think we should tape our conversations. We may say things that we might want to have if we wanted to write up. Sayings of chairman HI - your white book.*

*HI - I'm not a great man for writing books.*

*CJ - A lot is here. Could be useful 6-8 months from now. We're beginning a process quite deliberately here. So we've begun to push the boat in the water for your team, what about the rest of the system?*

*[CALL HANGS UP]*

*CJ - aspirations. I want to write down the entry cycle. He's going to have to teach other people what he did. I want him to have practical guidebook.*

We even see a reference to the director as a kind of Chairman Mao, a profoundly authoritarian leader... in retrospect, and in the context of TH's narrative, this metaphor seems ironic.

Second, during the entire conversation, the HR collaborators are not present, nor are they mentioned once until the very end, when one of them is paired with me (a very junior assistant/apprentice) to simply schedule the coaching engagements (LRB 1/2/2004:77-81). The process of designing coaching interactions and matching coaches to regional managers occurs entirely between the director and CJ, leaving the heuristics for doing so tacit, embedded, and unavailable to the HR department for critique or as a source of learning.

There is, however, a kind of inaccuracy in one moment of TH's account of the interaction with HI:

*“So for me the whole thing was not to tell him how to run the business or anything but to have a greater understanding of himself and how he was operating in the system and to develop a way of reflecting so he could start to understand how he could start to shift. How he could alter his behavior and shift the way he behaved and help him to reflect on that and to gain an understanding of how to engage those 3-4 people who really introduced us into the system so that they could become... and they could facilitate the change. I think **what we started to do is start telling him what he could do rather than teaching him how to reflect on how he could do it.**” –TH (3/10/06:194)*

It may be that this “telling him what he could do” emerged after the videoconference I have documented. But the dynamic of that conversation seems rather different – HI is already underway with a process with his team, which CJ, TH, and the other coach simply join. What is TH doing, then, with this narrative? Again, I believe that the framing of the story in terms of his own character and reflexivity allows him to justify himself as a valid practitioner with integrity in his practice. This slightly inaccurate amplification of his own failure enhances his self-portrayal and his project of identity construction and self presentation in our interview.

With HH we see a narrative of similar character. She starts by framing the story with the self-reflective outcome.

*“I noticed that I was nervous particularly to confront senior male executive types, when I had men that I thought might be resistant to being coached by a woman, or think that I was too soft or whatever I made up about how they might experience me, I was obviously much less effective in confronting them, opposing and confronting them when I needed to. So what I did was I went and got some coaching from Cliff Barry, **I spent three days with him looking more deeply into what there was in me that prevented me from being able to confront.** So I learned some things about myself and saw some things about my own history, my personal history that really helped me. He set up some situations, psychodrama situations that enabled me to catch the pattern as it was happening, which in turn allowed me to notice what happened inside me, and notice avoidant behavior*

*inside me. What I came to understand about myself was that I could often see if someone was somewhat insecure or behaving in ways that were self-protective, and what I did in situations like that was become compassionate rather than confrontive, when sometimes being confrontive was what was needed. And so what I began noticing in myself, was when I began engaging in that kind of avoidant behavior when I was coaching. Or, not just coaching, but engaging with other clients too.” –HH (3/20/06:67)*

She later goes on to give the details of the story that triggered this self reflection, which occurred during an engagement with a UK-based environmental NGO:

*We got to do the three-day. And sure enough what showed up in that conversation during the three day process was a... quite a messy encounter with a particular person who was part of the organization who was involved in sort of a stand off battle with the head of the organization who we couldn't get access to... So, when he opposed very vigorously, and part of what he opposed was doing the personal work, or bringing the personal into organizational contexts. That was something he thought was a really bad idea, he thought it was something that shouldn't be expected of people, and he didn't think we should be doing it in that context. We were working with the heroic modes or something like that. [HEROIC MODES IS A FRAMEWORK FOR A KIND OF PSYCHOANALYTIC ARCHETYPING - SURVIVOR, FIXER, AND PROTECTOR AS THREE HEROIC MODES THAT HAVE LIGHT AND SHADOW SIDES] I can't remember exactly what it was at the time.*

Again, we have an opponent of HH's approach with the retreat group, who could be framed as obstinate, closed, defensive, etc. As the narrative continues, we instead see that her description involves her own psychology and character:

*“So he opposed and I knew we didn't have the container to deal with his opposing online, to engage. We could bypass or name but we didn't have the container to engage. So I bypassed... And also I was scared. I got triggered. And what I noticed also was all in a flash I knew he was exactly the kind of person that was challenging for me to stand up to, particularly in the context of everyone looking and being aware of what was going on... And I was unable to hold him into the next engagement that we had. He just didn't want to come to any other program that we ran because he was so upset that we were bringing the personal in.” –HH (3/120/06:141)*

For this story, we do not have participant observation data for triangulation of the story. We also do not get an account of another interaction with a high-power male in which she overcomes her psychological tendency. In that sense, we see the same narrative arc as that in TH's story, but in the middle of its construction. The rhetorical purpose or function is the same, however, which is to convey a sense of reflexivity and integrity on the part of the practitioner.

## ***Critiquing the practice and rhetoric***

---

In examining these narratives and connecting them to the central dichotomies in the OCF discourse, we can see a few obvious critiques of the practice and rhetoric. First is the tension between their collective model of action and their individual needs to present themselves as capable professionals. In this sense they can not reside fully on one side of the dichotomy and must constantly engage the dialectic and conflict. Parallel with this we see references to “tools” and “models” (coded as Tools in the data) that guide the practice and underlie their capabilities:

*“I have been presented to them as someone who understands and has some degree of mastery with the set of tools and models that OCF uses. It’s not cold calls, we are a known commodity.” –TH (3/10/06:58)*

This kind of language seems to contradict the exhortations against “templates” and makes it unclear how one distinguishes between the two. The truth, of course, is that any professional develops a body of knowledge that is generalizable across client contexts, even if that knowledge is about how to uniquely design change processes in partnership with clients. That generalizable knowledge serves as both asset and justification for the professionals’ success. This is an inherent tension in the discourse and practice of OCF.

A more profound critique emerges from stepping back and questioning their narrative construction process, particularly the “Heroic flaw” motif. The Heroic flaw motif has a peculiar feature: it explains the failure of client engagements in terms of the consultants’ failure to enact their own philosophy of practice. In so doing, the narrative serves to actually reinforce that philosophy while emphasizing the practitioner’s ability to enact it. What it ignores, however, is the possibility that the very philosophy may be problematic – it does not allow real critique. I will attempt one such critique here.

In all three of the failure stories – the financial services company that EN describes, the LRB engagement in TH’s narrative, and HH’s story about the environmental organization – there is a common thread. In all three cases the “coaching” process invites managers of an organization to undertake deep personal reflection in a somewhat public context. The theory is that by doing so, they will bring “more of themselves” to the task of organizational leadership and thereby become more successful. In particular, if they can work through the psychological issues that prevent their relationships, collaboration, and community building with others in the organization, then the collective potential of the organization will be released. In two of the cases, this basic philosophy and practice by OCF encountered resistance, whether from the CEO of the financial company or the male manager of the environmental NGO. If we look at the LRB narrative, we see signs that the director, whose philosophy mirrors that of OCF, has run into the same kind of resistance:

*HI - Jack Black asked standard set of questions. OD started talking about father, etc. E completely opened up. I was watching eye movements, body language of everyone. Some guys around the table were not ready for it. They saw it as a religious experience. Give me a bit of that, but not too much because i don't know where you're coming from. Jack Black moved on quickly. Later on at the bar, some people went up to E, picked the conversation back up. If Pete and E came*

*out quickly, other people will back off. You don't want 50% of people opening up all the way.*

In CJ's response we see a certain self-criticality of this "opening":

*CJ – Inclusivity means inclusivity. Letting people be where they are. It gets cultic and weird if we say we're all like this, why aren't you? There's a very deep respect and lack of judgment that needs to be combined with idea that we're trying to achieve something.*

*HI – E showed a lack of judgment in going too far for peer group. He doesn't know how to release, draw back.*

*CJ - I think that's right.*

The basic principle of asking people to open up and bridge the personal and professional, however, is not questioned. They are merely discussing the right technique and pacing for doing so.

This lack of a deeper self-criticality causes me to wonder about the broader sociological picture of the OCF work: how appropriate is it for people to psychologically self-disclose in professional contexts? Even if greater "collective intelligence" and business performance could be achieved, is this not a kind of colonization of the psyche and spirit of employees for capitalist ends? The assumption of the "Heroic flaw" narrative is that the philosophy and practice are unquestionable, and self-critique is to happen within the context of that philosophy – this makes introspection a mandatory task. The difference between the professionals and the managers they consult, however, is that these professionals are relatively autonomous and own their own company. For managers who are employees in a corporation, this kind of autonomy and choice to self-disclose may not be available.

## ***Reflections and conclusions***

---

In this paper I have attempted to take three different stances – one appreciative, one objective and descriptive, and one that is more distanced and critical. The length of these sections shows that my bias is towards the former two, and that gaining critical distance from this community is a challenge for me. Gaining this distance will, in part, require further research. First, it would be essential to engage in similar inquiry with another organizational consulting firm to see the extent to which OCF's framing of their opponents as "experts" is accurate and the extent to which it is self-serving and self-justifying. Second, it would be valuable to examine the practice of other people performing the same function of encouraging sensemaking and community building in organizations. Examples might be executives or human resource professionals internal to the client organizations. This latter comparison would allow me to see how the practice and discourse are shaped by the structure of the client interaction – that they are external to the organization and that they need to justify their professional competence in a competitive landscape.

My insider status to the organization has been both an asset and a liability in conducting this research – being an insider gave me a great deal of context and understanding of the language, as well as a baseline of trust with my informants. The

liability is the lack of critical distance. Another way to enhance my analysis and inquiry would be to partner with others who are outside the OCF community. Hopefully this paper will allow such dialogue to occur.

## **References**

---

- Bohm, David. 1981. *Wholeness and the implicate order*. London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bohm, David, and Lee Nichol. 2004. *On dialogue*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara. 1997. *Narrating the organization : dramas of institutional identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Katz, Jack. 1999. *How emotions work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schein, Edgar H. 1999. *Process consultation revisited : building the helping relationship*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Weick, Karl E. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.