The influence of the unconscious on partner dynamics in a downturn

A systems psychodynamic interpretation of group behaviour among the UK partners of a global consulting firm, observed June 2018 - December 2019

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional Doctorate, Advanced Practice and Research
(Consultation and the Organisation)

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and University of Essex
Date of submission for final examination August 2024

Acknowledgements

This thesis owes its completion to the patience, kindness and goodwill of many people whom I would like to thank.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the ex HR Director and the outgoing Head of the UK, both of whom helped me secure access to the research site and who used their influence to help me get underway.

Were it not for the open-mindedness and warm welcome afforded me by the London office, the project would not have got off the ground. I am profoundly grateful to everyone there, especially the Partners, for their willingness to host me for such a prolonged period and let me observe them at work.

I was lucky to have the kind and enduring moral support of a recently-retired US Partner and a senior HR Director who both, out of the goodness of their hearts, read drafts, critically evaluated them and fed back to me. It was of immeasurable help to have their generously-given time and insights.

I want to make particular mention of the incumbent Head of the UK who has become a trusting and steadfast supporter of my work over many years. A more loyal sponsor and thought-partner I could not hope to find.

I hope we fellow students have kept each other reasonably sane. I know for my part, I could not have done this without the humour and solidarity of Karen, Rebecca, Stephanie, Martin and Petros.

I also feel grateful for the existence of the Tavistock Clinic and that the D10D programme was available to me. I am conscious of what we owe to previous generations of thinkers and practitioners but want also to express my deepest thanks to my supervisors, Judith, Simon and especially Britt, who works to the highest standards and who, I believe, has drawn the best out of me.

Neither my mum or my dad got to finish their education as they would have liked and I think of them with love and gratitude when I think about the opportunities I have had and the sacrifices they made.

Above all, though, it is to my current family that I feel most indebted. Jilly, Joe, Freddie and Ruby - I deeply appreciate the love, patience, interest and encouragement that you have shown me over the course of this endeavour.

Thank you.

Abstract

Despite the influence of consulting firms and the increased attention they now receive, little is known about their internal functioning and how group dynamics operate among those who lead them. Systems psychodynamics, attending to the effects of the unconscious on emotions, human relationships and group behaviour, offers an ideal theoretical foundation on which to build a study of this important but under-researched area.

Most of the little research on this topic draws on case notes and interviews intended to inform or justify a developmental intervention. The research reported on in this thesis applied ethnography better to understand the phenomena and this was its only purpose. The thesis is based on field work undertaken in the UK offices of a global management consulting firm, using participant observation, interviewing and reflexive journaling. The whole data set, which took the form of field notes, transcripts and journal entries was subject to Thematic Analysis and the interview data alone to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

The study took place against a backdrop of deteriorating market conditions and examined the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics as the situation evolved. The aim was to add to our understanding of contemporary work organisations by arriving at an experience-near portrayal of group relations among consulting firm leaders under pressure.

Earlier studies had shown management consulting to generate stress and anxiety. This study confirmed these findings, demonstrating that the way work was organised tended to normalise the repression of emotion, giving rise to maladaptations such as over-working, perfectionism and pseudo-invulnerability. Faced with adversity, firm leaders were found to focus on personal survival, unable to identify as a collective leadership team. With anxiety chronically high and containment felt to be unavailable, the effects of the downturn were divisive; it was difficult to exercise leadership authority, organisational learning was resisted and collective adaptation to change, despite there being a crisis, was limited.

The thesis concludes that the pursuit of economic growth was compromised by a lack of corresponding attention to the Partner group's developmental growth. A willingness to

engage with its own shadow, it is believed, would help such a group develop the political maturity needed to navigate difficulties in the knowledge that they were almost certain to recur.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

In 2019, when the field work for this research was conducted, the UK's Management Consulting Association (MCA) estimated the domestic income of the consulting sector at £10.6 billion (www.mca.org.uk, 2019). It was growing at 7%, considerably in excess of the 1.4% growth in the UK's gross domestic product for the period 2018-19 as reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS Press Release, March 2020). In that year, the UK consulting sector, according to the same MCA report, employed over 60,000 people, of whom 1,214 were graduate hires. According to the global business intelligence platform, Statista, the value of the global management consulting market rose from 147 to 160 billion US dollars from 2018 to 2019 (www.statista.com, 2022). A survey of the European market in the same period (FEACO, 2019) found that almost a quarter of consultants' fee income in the UK came from the tax-funded public sector, including the National Health Service.

The size and growth of management consulting firms being established, a vocal lobby of commentators, among them journalists and academics, have publicly questioned whether such large, powerful and unregulated institutions ought to be more transparent in their undertakings and more accountable for their influence over the use of public funds. Bogdanich & Forsythe, investigative reporters for the New York Times, (2022) took issue with one firm in particular: McKinsey, who they accused of complicity with unsavoury clients and of profiting from conflicts of interest. Mazzucato & Collington, academics from University College, London, (2023) alleged that the top 3 global consulting firms[1] and the leading audit firms known as the 'Big Four'[2] had 'weakened our businesses, infantilised our governments and warped our economies'.

A series of scandals lent weight to their claims. According to the financial news platform, Bloomberg (www.bloomberg.com, 2023), PwC Australia was the subject of a criminal investigation, said to have leaked confidential government tax plans to its clients. The same source reported that in 2022, EY's German business was hit with a two year ban from accepting major new audit mandates after failing to uncover fraud at Wirecard AG. McKinsey, they disclosed, had by then paid out in the region of 640 million US dollars to

[1] Mc Kinsey, Bain and Company & Boston Consulting Group

[2] PwC, Deloitte, KPMG and EY

resolve ongoing law suits concerning a conflict of interest arising from simultaneously advising Purdue Pharma on opioid sales and the US Food and Drug Administration. In August 2022, the Guardian reported that Bain and Company were barred from tendering for UK government contracts for 3 years after their role in a corruption scandal involving the government of South Africa (www.guardian.com, 2022). In July of the next year, the same newspaper reported that Deloitte were subject to a US Senate Inquiry over the alleged misuse of proprietary and confidential information (www.guardian.com, 2023).

Despite consulting firms having been subject to this type of scrutiny and censure, comparatively little is known about relations among those who lead and share ownership of them, nor how far big firms are typical of the consulting sector as a whole. It is appropriate to expect them to answer for corrupt and unethical conduct, but perhaps less safe to impute base motives to all management consultants as a type. From my own inquiries, it appears that little is known about the internal functioning of management consulting firms and the privacy they prefer, perhaps borne out of a wish to impress clients, lays them open to the suspicion that they have things to hide. This thesis is an attempt to strengthen our understanding of the leaders of such firms, the conditions in which they operate and the social/psychological pressures that their leaders are subject to.

Compared to the sudden increase in the attention paid to management consulting firms, the emergence of the field of systems psychodynamics and its contribution to our understanding of organisations has been gradual. Combining the seminal work of Freud, Klein and Bion with respect to psychoanalysis and object relations with that of Von Bertalanffy and Lewin with respect to systems thinking and field theory, systems psychodynamics now represents a reputable body of knowledge that helps explain and inform contemporary practice in organisations at a level of depth previously unattainable. The central assumptions of the systems psychodynamic approach[3] are a) that the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of human systems (such as families, work groups and whole societies) are subject to the influence of the dynamic unconscious, including defences against anxiety and b) that such systems possess properties independent of the parts they comprise.

[3] related to but distinct from the sociological tradition associated with e.g Durkheim.

1.2 Focus of the research

Given the gaps in our current knowledge identified above, there exists an opportunity for new research to deepen and extend our knowledge of management consulting firms; specifically by paying attention to their internal functioning, including the dynamic moods and relationships among those who share ownership of and responsibility for them. Systems psychodynamics offers an ideal theoretical foundation for such research because it addresses the potential for organisations and their members to be subject to influences that lie outside their collective awareness. Such research can therefore contribute to an understanding of the links between emotions, politics and group relations.

The research described in this thesis is concerned with the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics in the UK unit of a global management consulting firm. This was the original research question to be addressed. However, early on in field work it became clear that market conditions at that time were growing more unfavourable to consultants and that this was having a significant impact on the group dynamic under study. Being opportunistic and taking advantage of this unforeseen aspect, the focus of the study was therefore extended so that it concerned the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics *in the context of a market downturn*.

1.3 Objective of the research

The aim of the research is to add to our understanding of contemporary work organisations by arriving at a comprehensive and evidence-based portrayal of group relations among the Partners in the UK business unit of a global consulting firm. The research used systems psychodynamics as its theoretical foundation and was conducted in such a way as to generate 'thick description', (Ryle, 1968; Geertz, 1993). That is to say, descriptions of behaviour and social interaction are observed and studied in their contexts as understood and interpreted by the actors present and therefore from several points of view. Thus I add 'thick descriptions' of the subjective meanings that those in the context attach to their observable behaviour and social interactions. Assuming that the researcher must influence and be influenced by this context, this was a reflexive study, not pretending to distance or objectivity but instead being able critically to account for how the researcher's subjectivity is arrived at. The principal beneficiaries are expected to be the leaders of this and comparable firms, as well as those who consult to them.

However, both the means of inquiry and the findings will also be of interest to students and scholars.

1.4 Background to the firm studied

The firm in which the research took place is a mid-sized professional partnership providing advisory services to businesses in subjects such as strategy, operations and cost optimisation. Greenwood, Hinings and Brown (1990) propose that this form of governance is distinct in that Partners own and manage the firm as well as being responsible for production. The work is almost all done by professional staff and the working assumption is that a proportion of junior hires will become Partners over time. Authority is vested in the shareholder group rather than 'funnelled' towards the top of a hierarchy.

This global firm is owned by around 350 equity Partners who employ 2300 consultants and 1200 support staff. It hires from elite business schools, in particular from the highest ranked MBA programmes. They operate from 65 offices in over 40 countries. At the time of my fieldwork, the UK office employed c160 consultants and support staff.

The firm was and still is organised into geographic regions made up of a number of business units. Part of the European region, the UK and Ireland unit is headquartered in London. It organises market facing activities in a matrix. Some Partners are so-called 'industry' specialists and are organised into practices focusing on particular sectors such as finance, private equity or healthcare. Others are responsible for 'services' such as procurement, digital transformation or leadership and change. The UK Partner group forms the leadership team for the unit and were led during my fieldwork by an industry Partner from the finance practice. They met monthly for half a day.

It is significant that when fieldwork began, the leader of the UK unit was new in post. Partners elect a global Managing Partner who serves for a fixed term of three years for a maximum of two successive terms. In this instance, a newly elected Managing Partner had, as was the custom, appointed their own senior team, made up of the regional chairs, who then appointed unit leaders to the positions in their jurisdiction. So, as the Managing Partner rotated, as he or she did every three years, so did many other leadership roles in the firm.

The work of a Partner involves establishing and maintaining connections with potential customers, converting prospects into specific opportunities and closing profitable deals.

Winning new business can be a protracted process. The opportunities that are most attractive in size also being the most complex and risky, clients take their time deciding who they want to engage. Once a deal is signed, a Partner will assemble a project team to do the hands-on work but remains accountable for its quality and impact.

Compensation combines a base salary with an annual performance bonus and Partners' targets work January to December. They meet fortnightly to share information about the leads and proposals they are responsible for. New clients are desirable but existing projects also get extended and the same client can want different support. Partners might work up a request for proposal (RFP) through their contacts but sometimes invitations to tender are issued to a number of firms who fit the requirement.

Most consultancies rely on senior people selling work and junior people being 'hands on'. The ratio of one to another in the staffing 'pyramid' has a strong bearing on profitability (Maister, 1993). Partners have therefore to build a 'pipeline' of client opportunities and in parallel, a pipeline of talent. Ensuring that consultants are neither under nor over-utilised is a balancing act. Juniors are conditioned to expect regular promotions or swift exits - a policy referred to as 'up or out' in the industry jargon.

I undertook participant observation in the firm's city centre offices and occasionally in various nearby restaurants, coffee shops and conference venues where I was invited to join in with social events or staff meetings. The offices took one floor of a large, elegant building in an expensive district and they were styled to a very high standard.

As well as the change of Managing Partner having an impact on the atmosphere in the office, two other factors had an influence. The first of these was the aftermath of Brexit - the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Not only did this generate a degree of business uncertainty but its social consequences were profound. Many staff members faced prolonged uncertainty about their rights to live and work in the UK, also experiencing an increasingly legitimised hostility to foreigners in the country as a whole. The second factor was the emergence of the #Me Too movement which called into question the dominance of men in the workplace and began to legitimise ethical resistance to unacceptable abuses of power. The new Managing Partner was male, as were the regional chairs. When I began the fieldwork, the UK had no women among its 16 Partners, a situation which changed with the election of 2 women in the 18 months I was present.

1.5 Scope and limitations of the research

Details of the research strategy are provided in Chapter 3 in which I describe the methodology that I deployed. One aspect of this methodology is ethnography. The ethnographic approach I adopted could be summarised as participant observation involving:

- taking part in the daily life of the office, keeping a record of the experience and generating data for subsequent analysis and interpretation;
- observing and recording Partner interactions, patterns of relating and habitual behaviours;
- recording and reflecting on the psychological properties of the Partner group as a whole, paying attention to moods, atmospheres and cultural conventions;
- observing and reflecting on what seemed missing and what went unsaid in the setting as well as what was manifest;
- observing and recording how the Partner group related to other adjacent groups such as clients, junior consultants, management services staff and competitor organisations;
- recording and reflecting on my own emotional and somatic experience as a researcher and an outsider.

Field work took place between July 2018 and December 2019. Data took the form of field notes, journal entries and digitised sound recordings and a series of semi-structured interviews (using the Free Association Narrative Interview method, FANI, created by Hollway and Jefferson, 2004) were conducted in May 2019. Journal entries recorded how the experiences of data generation and analysis registered in the mind and body of the researcher including dreams, feeling states and physical sensations.

Field notes and journal entries were indexed by categories generated through Thematic Analysis. Interviews were transcribed using software, manually corrected and subjected to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. The research was supervised by a systemic family therapist with a background in anthropology and an organisation consultant with a systems psychodynamic orientation. The researcher was (and remains) in weekly Jungian analysis throughout the field-work and research period.

In respect of limitations, the research was office-based only and no access was afforded to clients or client sites. The focus was on Partners (the most senior staff in this firm), not

on junior consultants, management services staff or the organisation as a whole. Although granted a theoretical 'right to roam' by the Partners at the start of field work, in practice, access to formal and informal or impromptu meetings had to be negotiated on a case by case basis. It felt to me contingent on individual Partners' perception of my trustworthiness and the value they attached to the research.

1.6 Researcher's personal background and origins of the research

In common with the research participants, I am an organisational consultant and I advise on the topics of leadership, team dynamics and organisational culture. Unlike the participants, I am an independent practitioner working alone not as part of a large organisation. In 2013, working freelance for the executive education department of a business school, I came into contact with the firm studied. My role was to design and facilitate a learning programme for Partners and within 4 years it brought me into contact with around two-thirds of the Partner population. In that time I formed the impression that, whilst the firm was evidently successful, it appeared subject to a certain stuckness that was preventing it from reaching its full potential. I sensed that this was something to do with the way in which members of the organisation dealt with pressure and processed emotions.

Having had contact with Partners in the somewhat artificial setting of a learning programme, I became curious about how they behaved when in their 'natural habitat' as it were. This was at a point in my career when I was motivated to start consulting from my own lived experience more than from theories that others had developed. I was also aware that researching into the working practices of management consultants might represent a point of high leverage because, as I understood it, management consultants' own working practices informed those of their clients. My hope was that the contribution made by the research might have a ripple effect. In addition, I was motivated by the prospect of observing an organisation without being charged with intervening in or attempting to improve how it functioned. I made it clear that the research was not an intervention as such but that I would be happy to share with them the insights that it yielded.

1.7 Organisation of this thesis

Following this introductory chapter, a further five are presented. In **Chapter 2**, I present a critical review of existing literature concerning the research topic i.e. the influence of the unconscious on partner dynamics in a market downturn. This opens with a short overview

of research into management consulting as a profession but the majority of it is devoted to in-depth critical analysis of 6 papers describing research into organisations undertaken from a systems psychodynamic perspective. These papers, it is argued, have a bearing on the research and strengthen the argument for further study. In **Chapter 3**, I explain the ontological and epistemological status of my chosen methodology, going on to detail the research design, how it was enacted and the processes through which findings were analysed and interpreted. **Chapter 4** is organised thematically; features of the setting are described, features that pre-date the downturn, but I then go on to look at how these features exert significant influence in the transition from a period of abundance to one of scarcity. The findings being descriptive in nature, in **Chapter 5**, I present a discussion which steps back from the detail to explore their underlying meaning and how they compare to what is already known about the topic as identified from the literature review. The final chapter, **Chapter 6** draws the threads of the argument together into a conclusion covering the implications for the firm studied, recommendations for practice, how others may be able to replicate the research design and lastly, potential avenues for further study.

Chapter 2: Critical Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with group dynamics among Partners in a management consulting firm. It focuses on emotions and relationships among leaders who share ownership of a global business. In this chapter, I intend to review what is already known about the topics identified and build a case for further investigation into this area.

2.2 Content and structure of the chapter

Presenting a critical review of the available literature will involve:

- providing descriptions of published knowledge on the topic;
- demonstrating an understanding of the ideas and arguments presented;
- analysing and critically evaluating the strengths and limitations of different studies;
- identifying gaps in and potentially beneficial additions to the existing literature;
- assessing whether further original research in this area would be justified.

By the end of the chapter, I aim to have demonstrated that answering my research questions will augment and extend the available literature on the chosen topic. The chapter opens with an explanation of the search strategy and selection criteria. There follows a brief introduction to the literature which provides an overview of the field.

The focus is then on a detailed critical review of the 6 qualitative studies I believe to be of most relevance. 5 are written from a systems psychodynamic perspective and in the other, unconscious group dynamics are strongly implied if not explicitly identified. The selected papers are organised thematically and sequenced so that the reader can best appreciate the case I make for selecting an alternative approach.

2.3 Search strategy and selection criteria

The following question was asked of the literature:

What is known about group dynamics among Partners in professional service firms?

I used two UK libraries to conduct preliminary searches: those of a mental health trust and a business school. The trust library offered access to 22 databases with an accent on

psychology; the business school library offered access to 108 databases across a range of business-related disciplines. I began with simple search terms such as ‘management consulting’ and related terms including ‘consultant’, ‘consultants’, ‘consultancy’, ‘consulting firm’, ‘partner’, ‘professional services’ and ‘expert consultancy’. I then used Boolean searches to combine the primary terms with secondary terms such as ‘emotion’, ‘relationships’, ‘group dynamics’, ‘group behaviour’, ‘organisational behaviour’, ‘psychological health’, ‘welfare’, ‘stress’ and ‘anxiety’. In addition, I entered five tertiary terms: ‘systems psychodynamics’, ‘object relations’, ‘psychoanalysis’, ‘group relations’ and ‘psycho-social’, combining those with the above in response to a paucity of relevant material.

My preliminary searches were limited to primary data that appeared in peer-reviewed journals and the references cited in these articles yielded additional material. I did not set a limit on the date or geographical origin of publications because I wanted to see how academics from different regions viewed the profession and how that changed over time. Understanding management consulting to exist at an intersection between various academic disciplines (e.g. business administration, sociology, economics, psychology), I did not narrow searches to certain journal titles or academic disciplines. However, only able to read and write in English, I limited searches to chapters and articles written in or translated into English.

My practice was to read titles and abstracts, selecting papers and articles of interest to read in full. Of most relevance in my first sorting was research into global strategy consultancies working with corporations. Professional services firms in fields other than management consulting (e.g. law, accountancy) were of interest, especially if they had partnership structures. Sole traders, small-scale or boutique consulting firms, firms working predominantly with the non-profit and public sectors as well as human resources or organisation development consultancies were of lowest interest. In a second sorting to get from a long to a shortlist, I prioritised systems psychodynamic studies of consulting or corporate leadership above all others.

2.4 Overview of the field of management consulting

The subject of consulting was well represented in academic literature but studies of group dynamics, emotions and interpersonal relationships in consulting were few. None were found directly to investigate my topic of interest: the influence of the unconscious mind on Partner dynamics in a consulting firm. The studies selected for detailed review draw on

systems psychodynamic theory for their methods of data generation, analysis or interpretation of findings. Before that however, I will offer a brief introduction to the field of management consulting by summarising a small number of studies that adopt a broadly social constructionist perspective. These concern the topics of a) stress & anxiety; b) structural inequality and c) power relations.

2.4.1 Stress and anxiety

In a qualitative study of management consultants of mixed seniority, Von Humboldt et al. (2013) found stress to be perceived as intellectual disturbance and an impairment to performance that manifested in physical symptoms such as back pain. Cooper & Cartwright (1997) found that out-sourced solutions such as assistance programmes or helplines were the most popular organisational responses.

Mülhaus and Bouwmeester (2016) studied the effects of self-categorisation on stress and the role of social support in coping. Categorising themselves as an in-group of high-performing professionals helped consultants cope and produced corresponding feelings of social inclusion. However, if too many stressors worked on an individual simultaneously, challenges were perceived as threats, coping strategies altered and the individual no longer conformed to the standards of the in-group, leading to a reduction in the social support that had originally helped them cope.

Alvesson and Robertson (2006) looked at how consulting firms aspired to an elite identity. This offered them ontological security suitable for client environments characterised by uncertainty and scepticism. Gill (2015) also looked at elite identity. Perceiving themselves to be of high-status, consultants felt pressure to conceal evidence to the contrary and it was common to worry about loss of standing, finding failure (e.g. to achieve promotion or receiving negative feedback) disproportionately upsetting. Haslam et al. (2005) found anxiety in management consulting to be stigmatised; discussing it openly was thought to be 'career-limiting'.

Anderson-Gough et al. (2000) studied the socialisation of trainee accountants, finding that the construct of 'the demanding client' was used to exert discipline. Trainees understood clients to be the cause of their long working hours because they set demanding deadlines. However, the role of firm managers in striking agreements with clients and allocating resources to ensure maximum profit was under-played. Continued use of a 'sovereign client' discourse was thought to be the most effective way to divert attention and displace alternative claims on trainees' time.

Sturdy (1997) found power and authority between consultants and clients to be more contested. He argued that earlier studies portraying clients as the 'passive victims of confident consultants' neglected the active role of managers and the feelings of insecurity that consultants were subject to. If managers felt the presence of consultants cast doubt on their competence, consultants felt that clients and their own superiors doubted theirs. Anxiety, he proposed, was intrinsic to the relationship.

2.4.2 Gender relations/structural inequalities

In some settings, a consultant unable to cope with stress might be thought unlikely to 'make it', an extension of the view that only a certain type is 'cut out' for a consulting career. But such a narrative overlooks questions about who makes it and why. Meriläinen et al. (2004) compared the discursive resources available to male and female consultants from Finland and the UK as they constructed their professional identities. The researchers concluded that the ideal consultant posited in the dominant discourse favoured competitive masculine norms and that career advantages would therefore automatically accrue to the already advantaged. A study of promotion to Partner by Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) also identified that women in consulting were subject to structural inequalities. They too concluded that the template for success within the firm studied was organised around male attributes.

A further study (Anderson, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2010) looked into the attrition of female Partners. These women continued to feel loyalty towards the firm and its clients, but had wanted more influence over their assignments at certain life stages. Instead of being able to integrate paid work and unpaid work, women in the study felt presented with a 'forced and extreme choice', the firm felt to expect 'all or nothing'. Padavic, Ely & Reid (2020), commissioned by a consulting firm to investigate 'women's stalled advancement', concluded that the commission represented a substitute problem when 24/7 working and how it affected men and women differently was the issue. The authors argued that men's split off emotions were projected into and identified with by women who carried them on the system's behalf.

2.4.3 Power relations

Karreman and Alvesson (2009) explored the topics of consent, obedience and resistance in a global consultancy finding that consultants wanted to work hard, were committed to delivery and incentivised by the prospect of promotion. However, they also found that, although the material rewards and status of the job ought to be offering them the freedom

to live healthy, balanced lives, in practice this was difficult to accomplish. Consultants were aware of senior management decisions that put them under excessive strain, but tended to attribute difficulties to the nature of the profession and their own enthusiasm. A felt need to prove themselves neutralised resistance to exploitation even if it appeared to put the good life out of reach.

Complementary to this study is that of Costas and Fleming (2009) in which they distinguish between *dis-identification*, whereby employees create a defensive separation between their work and non-work selves and *self-alienation*, whereby an individual who is over-identified with their work grows increasingly estranged from the self they used to be at some cost to identity, relationships and attractiveness to others.

2.5 Papers selected for detailed critical analysis

There now follows a critical review of 6 published articles describing research studies which approach the topic of organisational dynamics from a systems psychodynamic perspective. I will describe the structure and focus of each article and the research design. I will consider the findings and/or the conceptual argument pursued and the contribution that it makes to the existing literature. Next I will present what I believe to the strengths and limitations of the paper in question. I will close the chapter with a justification of the need for further research and propose a question.

2.5.1 Consulting to a 'hurt' or 'upset' organisation

Beeby et al. (1998) was co-authored by a 5 person consulting team from a UK business school. It offers a reflection on the emotional experience of consulting to a public sector organisation following a significant re-structure. The purpose of the intervention was to discover how staff felt about the restructuring process and outcomes. The team were tasked with feeding back to the senior management to generate 'organisational learning that could be converted into effective action'. The purpose of the subsequent article was to make sense, from a psychodynamic perspective, of what happened in respect of how the team interacted with subsets of the client group (staff, middle and senior management) and also to its own dynamic.

The design for the consultancy, essentially an action research project, combined quantitative and qualitative methods involving interviews, focus groups and a staff survey. Roughly 30% of middle managers were interviewed, 20% of staff were represented in focus groups and 50% of staff responded to an all staff survey request. The 12 month assignment was organised around 3 questions: what had worked well or better as a result

of the restructuring? what had worked less well or worse? how could the organisation develop or improve? The consulting team's goal was 'to enable the senior management to learn from their experience of the change process'. Data from a qualitative phase were fed back first and the senior management then co-designed an all staff survey with the consultants. The same questions formed the basis of the survey, though space was available for open comment.

From the interviews and focus groups, the consulting team learned that the senior management team 'remained convinced about their analysis of the need for change'. The middle managers confirmed their commitment to the service that the organisation provided but reported that they experienced difficulty leading demotivated teams and reporting to a leadership team that they considered to be inadequate. They had found the change process frustrating and hurtful and struggled to see the benefits it had brought. Staff focus groups reported that they had found restructuring very stressful and that it had lead to anger and cynicism. They had little trust in the senior management team nor respect for them as professionals.

From the survey it emerged that nearly three quarters of staff found the new structure to inhibit their effectiveness; 20% felt neutral in response to this and 5% thought it helped. Just over half responded that relationships with colleagues had improved but only a quarter thought that the quality of service for users had got better. Just under half thought that communications and the availability of information had improved. A minority wanted a return to the old structure but almost a third were of the view that management's style and relationship to staff needed to change.

As well as reporting on the design and outcomes of the consultancy, the paper also describes how an unconscious process of transference informed the role that the consulting team took up. They identified with the anger that middle managers and staff felt towards senior management and correspondingly, the management team came to see the consultants as 'siding' with what they saw as an over-emotional staff group. All parties were hurt and upset - either because of how changes were managed, because of the negative feedback this had engendered or, in the consultants' case, because they felt trapped. Staff relied on them to convey their emotions faithfully, but the senior management also depended on them to help manage the feedback impartially and not merely to join in with those demonising them.

In retrospect it was clear that the dynamics within the consulting team and the client system were subject to mutual influence. Two women on the team were not full-time university employees, only brought into the assignment after two of the men, one of whom 'owned' the client relationship, had presented their approach. Complex questions about status and equality that arose within the team mirrored those active within the client system. The consulting team thought it possible that, defending against their own fear and anger, they had upheld a pretence of rationality and objectivity working with the management team when it might have been better to put their emotions and experience of unconscious processes at the project's disposal.

However, this may be a matter of degree because the consulting team were able to name reflexive practices that had helped them maintain perspective and preserve their 'sanity'. These involved a) attention to the gestalt of the system and the interaction of sub-systems; b) setting aside time for dialogue and the exploration of shared or differing assumptions and c) asking a colleague outside the team to facilitate supervision.

In my view, this was an open and reflexive self-appraisal. The authors were consulting to an organisation in which feelings were running high and while providing containment, became implicated in complex processes of transference, projection and projective identification. They acknowledged that, with hindsight, it could have been possible to contract with the senior management team to allow their own emotional experience to have been data that would have informed the intervention.

I noticed that, while the reflection in the paper appeared psychodynamically oriented, the design of the intervention was more orthodox by comparison. This led me to speculate about the authorship of the one compared to the other, the timing of events and the relative power of team members to shape or influence the approach. How was the article written and does its publication speak about unfinished business in the consulting team? The consultancy commission was to conduct 'an independent review', but the article reflecting on it seemed to take up a position in respect of public services, managerialism and cost-cutting measures from government. In this sense, the consulting team as represented in the paper, appeared to have a prior agenda, which went unexamined, despite their claim to be 'reflective practitioners'. From my perspective, this cast doubt on the impartiality of the research.

My motivation for selecting the study derived from the title and the interesting idea that consultants can experience vicariously the identities and emotions they encounter in the

client system. The article highlights the challenges presented for consultants when trying to stay with uncertainty and confusion given the pressure they are under to diagnose and prescribe. I can appreciate that writing and publishing the paper may have been part of a process of working through and reparation for the consulting team, though this is conjecture. Were such a process to have been involved, I believe it would have been benefited the article to have described it.

2.5.2 Collective leadership dynamics among professional peers

Whereas the case study by Beeby et al. (1998) was concerned with the client-facing aspect of consulting, an article by Empson L. and Alvehus J., (2020) has the internal functioning of the consulting firm as its focus. It attends to the dynamics among professional peers responsible for collective leadership in professional service firms (PSFs).

The study sets out to address two related questions:

Q1. how is collective leadership co-constructed among professional peers?

Q2. how do changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and de-stabilise collective leadership dynamics over time?

To position their work, the authors identify gaps in the existing literature on PSFs. To paraphrase, these are:

- a focus on governance in the abstract but little attention to leadership;
- an un-problematised view of power relations and
- the assumption that leader-follower relations are dichotomous and stable.

Their research, by contrast, takes as its premise the observation that PSFs are 'characterised by *contingent* and *contested* power relations among an extended group of professional peers'. 'Contingent' in the sense that whether peers follow a leader may depend on their own interests and 'contested' in that peers may confer a leader identity on an individual without accepting that they have authority over them. Conventional leadership studies predicated on clearly defined roles and unambiguously hierarchical relationships fail, in these authors' opinion, to capture the complexity of power relations and the dynamic, collective leadership found in PSFs.

The research design involved two stages: an interview-based approach to address Q1 and a longitudinal case study which addresses Q2. Given the research objective: to ask

how leadership is ‘co-constructed’, I infer a social constructionist approach concerned with identifying the different ways of constructing reality that are available. This implies multiple ways of knowing rather than one superordinate knowledge.

From data arising out of Q1 a model was generated which was then tested and validated using case material from Q2. The authors’ approach ‘drew on current developments in grounded theory’ in that interview questions evolved as data was gathered, interpretations were then developed and a conceptual model began to take shape. The first author conducted 105 interviews in 15 countries with staff from 3 mid-scale firms representing accountancy, law and management consulting. Details of the countries and the language(s) used for interviewing were not given and therefore the vulnerability of the study to cultural bias was not explored. Roughly equal numbers (approx. 30+/-) from each of the three firms and professions took part.

Sampling employed the ‘snowball method’ using interviewees’ recommendations to identify further participants. The process ended when the same names came up and it was clear that the researcher had exhausted the potential sample group. Interviews lasted around 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed ready for analysis.

The interview data was subject to cross-sectional analysis following a 3 stage process of theoretically-informed coding. Stage 1 involved focused codes, Stage 2 involved theoretical codes and Stage 3 organised the data into aggregate dimensions. After some trial and error, coding focused on interactions between peers and identified 3 relational processes that satisfactorily addressed the research question (Q1):

- *legitimising*: whereby professionals develop a leader identity by succeeding in the market and from which peers infer leadership ability;
- *negotiating*: whereby professionals assert control in tension with colleagues exercising autonomy. The interaction occurs overtly and involves professionals in contesting manifestations of formal authority;
- *manoeuvring*: describing a more covert political process whereby professionals exert informal influence over peers while encouraging them to believe that they act with integrity.

The model was offered to illustrate how professional peers act and react to each other when claiming and/or granting leadership and followership among themselves. As noted earlier, according to the model, it is possible to be granted leadership identity

(*legitimising*) without having authority (achieved via *negotiating* and *manoeuvring*). The case analysis demonstrated that leadership dynamics in the firm studied represented an un-steady state and that stability could 'never be more than temporary':

> *… leadership dynamics are in perpetual flux, moving through periods of destabilisation and stabilisation but never achieving a stable equilibrium…* (p.24)

Concerning the longitudinal case study, the firm in question, a partnership, had elected 3 new Managing Partners in the space of 5 years. The authors looked to understand how fluctuating power relations had served to stabilise and de-stabilise collective leadership dynamics over this extended period. They created a timeline based on interviews and other documentation then plotted onto it the interplay of relational processes from the conceptual model and were thereby able to test its validity.

The paper highlights what the authors call 'the inherently political nature of collective leadership' and demonstrates the mutually constitutive nature of leading and following in PSFs where authority is linked to legitimacy and subject to negotiation. It shows that the granting and withholding of followership is subtle and complex.

The authors point to 2 implications of their study that could give grounds for concern:

- difficulties attributing responsibility for inappropriate action to individuals and thereby holding powerful leaders to account;
- the rise and elevation of professionals who are good at selling but not leading, (the authors insert an adage about being good at campaigning but not at governing).

From my perspective, this paper offered a clear and transparent description of the research process and I could follow the authors' progress from data generation to testing. The mixed method approach (extensive interviewing and innovative use of case material) aligned well to the research questions and I understood clearly the contribution the paper makes to the field: it fills gaps in our knowledge arising from literature on PSFs overlooking leadership and literature on leadership overlooking PSFs.

Not a reflexive paper by design, the psychological investment of the researcher is concealed and, while of significant relevance in relation to my area of interest, the paper is not specifically concerned with emotions and politics generated by access to market opportunities. Though the authors talk in terms of overt and covert relational processes, the role of anxiety and social defences does not feature. It is not made explicit what

theories about group or organisational behaviour the authors are drawing upon though French and Raven's conceptualisation of power (1959) is applied.

In sum, the study is original and does justice to the complexity of relationships within a Partner group, conveying much about the intensity of emotions that they can experience. From it I take a more rounded picture of Partners' responsibilities and, bringing the first two papers together, understand Partners simultaneously to be a) engaged in navigating volatile market conditions, b) processing (or defending against) emotions arising out of contact with client systems and, c) as this study demonstrates, attempting to exercise collective leadership in an 'unstable equilibrium'.

2.5.3 The unwanted self - projective identification in leaders' identity work

The first two articles were selected on the basis that they speak to outward and inward-facing aspects of the Partner role. The third is concerned with unconscious identity work that business leaders undertake to fulfil others' expectations of their roles.

Petriglieri and Stein (2012), also published in *Organization Studies*, is a conceptual paper, conceived and written from a systems psychodynamic perspective. It concerns how leaders craft a professional identity and particularly the part played by the process of projective identification. It looks at how 'unwanted' aspects of the self, those aspects discordant with a fashioned ideal, may unconsciously be projected into others and with what consequences for social relations. Case material used to strengthen the argument is drawn from accounts of the Gucci family business (described as a 'global fashion powerhouse') in the last quarter of the 20th century.

The authors acknowledge that their paper is at odds with the established genres in academic writing in that it is neither wholly a theory paper, where the application is left to the reader, nor an outright empirical paper, where 'data is the ground from which theory is developed and tested'. Rather, they intend their paper to 'get a conversation going':

> *… our main heuristic instrument is interpretation which is always provisional and intended to provoke and open up understanding - rather than to capture essential truths and draw definitive conclusions.* (p.1224)

The paper was arrived at via a collaborative process between the two authors working separately and together to select and analyse relevant literature for their argument that leaders' identity work can involve the use of unconscious defences. The structure is such that the authors look first at the significance of identity work in leader development; next

they consider how the concept of projective identification can be applied to the process of shaping and sustaining leaders' identities. Finally, they present a case of a family business as viewed through the conceptual prism of projective identification.

For the case, the authors consulted 5 books published between 1989 and 2008 on the fortunes of the Gucci business. One of these, (Forden, 2000), was based on primary data: the author is said to have conducted 'over 100 interviews with family members and associates'. They supplemented the review of books with material from newspaper articles in Italian and English. Working separately to study these texts, they selected vignettes that demonstrate how projective identification was used to develop and maintain leaders' identities. They then worked together to create a joint long list over 2 days which they narrowed with a second round of reviewing.

The authors position their own paper among those moving away from a 'static, hierarchical conception of leadership and towards a more dynamic, social and relational conception of the leadership development process'. They note Freud's assertion that groups confer leadership on those who most represent the group members' ego ideal - and point to 2 themes that repeat in systems psychodynamic scholarship (e.g. Roberts, 1994): that a) leaders operate at the boundary between their own and external groups and b) leaders' identities and activities are symbolic in nature.

Talking about trends in leadership studies, they argue that, since the early part of the 21st century, identity work has been considered part of the process of leader development: the internalisation of a leader identity within an individual's self-concept and the validation of this via social interaction. This interpersonal aspect involves followers granting claims to leadership based on a consistency with what they think leaders should be and do. In the authors' view, it has been established that internalising and enacting a leader identity involves psychological work aimed at achieving a congruence between role and person. Their suggestion is of an iterative process involving crafting an identity, experimenting with interaction and storying the self.

This leads the authors to a question: what happens to those elements omitted from the self that is presented in interaction? Their working assumption is that some elements may be consciously discarded while others may be the subject of unconscious identity work. They hope to build on earlier work (Kreiner et al., 2016) that implicates projective identification in this process and predicate their argument on the idea of self as dynamic and made up of multiple identities, real and potential, that are activated in social

exchange. The authors reject the view of earlier social theorists (e.g van Knippenberg et al., 2004) that only one version of a leaders' self may be in play at a time in favour of the idea that, while one self may be consciously active, other versions may be operating at the unconscious level simultaneously. In other words, that wanted and unwanted selves may co-exist. Reporting Ogilvie's findings (1987) that unwanted selves are more likely than wanted selves to be based on embarrassing past experiences, they propose that leaders feel better when at a distance from their unwanted selves, more than when in proximity to their wanted selves.

This takes the authors to the substance of their argument: that one way of dealing with unwanted selves, those inconsistent with role and identity, would be to split them off and project them into other people who may unconsciously identify with the projections.

An explanation of projective identification and its origins in infant development is given i.e. it is a form of unconscious dyadic communication wherein feelings are pushed out of the infant and taken inwards by the carer in such a way as to put the carer in charge of containing those feelings so that the infant is not overwhelmed by them. The role of projective identification in organisations is also introduced to explain how followers protect themselves from anxiety by demonising and idealising leaders.

The reader of their paper is reminded that this is an *unconscious* process i.e. it takes place out of awareness. Several factors may give rise to the operation of this defence: as a way to avoid unbearable feelings, as a way to dominate others, as a way of overcoming envy (in that, if despicable characteristics are located in the other, leaders are relieved from the feelings of inferiority that accompany envying them). Of most importance to the paper is the use of projective identification to reject those qualities and attributes in the self that are inconsistent with the self desired.

And there is a paradox in that, while leaders are unlikely to want to collaborate with other individuals who embody the characteristics of their unwanted selves, they nonetheless may want to keep those individuals close to them and under their control precisely so that they can continue to deny, attack and try to destroy what they hate in themselves but which, through projective identification, is manifest in others. This, the authors contend, is how organisations develop so-called 'toxic' environments:

> *Since leaders function as sources of meaning making, the unconscious use of others as recipients of unwanted aspects of the self may become a collective*

modus operandi that damages the organization and may even cause its destruction. (p.1223)

The authors go on to offer examples of projective identification from accounts of the Gucci family's fashion business in the 80s and 90s. They show how prominent family members disowned aspects of their identities that were inconsistent with their self-concepts, instead projecting these into others. They also show how unwanted projections were returned to source leading to the irrational escalation of bitter disputes involving multiple law suits, imprisonment and multi-million-dollar fraud.

A contagion of destructive behaviour extended across the generations, beyond family members and engulfed the whole organisation. The authors accept that the situation is open to alternative interpretations and they suggest sibling rivalry and Oedipal conflict among these possibilities but point out that the main actors chose to remain in the circle fighting rather than leave it in search of peace, rather as though their identities had come to depend on taking up roles in a destructive, expensive and multi-generational cycle of conflict.

In the discussion section of the paper, the authors summarise 4 areas in which they believe it to make a significant contribution:

a) identity work

The authors make an argument that projection identification is in operation at times when leaders are unconsciously crafting a wanted self and discarding unwanted selves.

b) identification

They propose that, in crafting a desired identity, leaders are likely to develop problematic relationships with those who embody their unwanted selves. Further, that over-identification with an idealised version of the organisation may require the unintended manipulation of other people to lessen the gap between the real and the ideal.

c) psychodynamics of leadership

They make a specific claim that leaders' psychological work to craft a desired identity is intrinsically linked to the potential for denigration of their professional counterparts.

d) leader development

Finally, the authors suggest that attempts to seek coherence between different aspects of the self may generate inner conflicts.

A problem with this paper lies with the provenance of the data and therefore its claims to truth. This is less the case with respect to the authors' review of the existing literature on identity work in leader development and the concept of projective identification. These two 'positioning' arguments draw on published and peer-reviewed academic studies. However, concerning the case study presented, used in the paper to validate the conceptual argument, we know too little about the source material and the methods used to acquire it. We are told that the authors consulted 'books based on primary data' and that the author of one 'interviewed approximately 100 family members and associates' but, given that they supplemented this material with newspaper accounts, the impression conveyed is that they draw on journalism and insider accounts of a scandal more than academic research. Despite a rigorous selection for the vignettes, the authors do not account for the ontological status of the data nor how what is presented constitutes knowledge.

2.5.4 That unwanted feeling - a psychodynamic study of disappointment

The first two papers I reviewed spoke to two fundamental elements of the Partner role: consulting to clients and leading the firm. The third paper addressed how they might consciously and unconsciously fashion an identity to fit with that role. The fourth paper addresses a third element: developing new business. Partners involved in seeking new opportunities might themselves experience hope and expectation, as well as encouraging these emotions in their teams, however, there is always the possibility of rejection and the frustration of desire. The next paper inquires into the neglected topic of disappointment, which could be expected to follow such rejection.

The paper, by Clancy, Gabriel and Vince (2011), looks into the overlooked emotion of disappointment in organisational life - how to confront failure and imperfection in institutional contexts that emphasise positive emotion in pursuit of an organisational ideal.

To position their argument, the authors point out that, with some exceptions, much of the existing literature in organisation studies frames disappointment as potentially harmful to organisational confidence and results. This, they propose, does not do justice to the complexity of disappointment and leaves unanswered questions about its potential contribution to organisational learning and creativity. To address this gap, the paper,

which is based on object relations theory, develops a conceptual framework in which disappointment is organised in one of 3 ways; 2 of these are orthodox responses to this emotion and the third identifies the potential for disappointment to act as an integrating emotion that offers a way of moving past blame and towards organisational learning which, when applied, is a source of creativity.

The paper draws on an extensive literature review and combines this data with findings from in-depth interviews with 12 respondents (5 women, 7 men) from different organisational contexts: 4 from the arts, 2 from academia, 3 self-employed business consultants, 1 from an equality organisation, 2 unspecified, possibly corporate. Respondents were aged between 37 and 60. The sampling method is not stated. The aim of the interviews was to 'explore their experience of and response to disappointments encountered in their working lives'. An ethnographic study of one or more workplaces was considered but the eventual decision was that the individual experience should be the unit of analysis. Though ethnography was not the core method, the interviews were said to have been conducted according to ethnographic principles i.e. aiming to access the world views of interviewees and look at how much the emotion of disappointment formed a significant part of these views.

Interview transcripts were coded according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) 'but using psychodynamic theory as a basis for interpretation'. Three rounds of coding took place: the first open coding created a conceptual map, a second coding focused on emotions and organised the data into a smaller number of categories and a final round identified key issues for theory-making. Coding was reported to have been accompanied by *'mind-mapping, dialogue, writing and re-writing notes, listening to recordings of the interviews, day-dreaming and fantasising about the data'* (p. 523).

In their introduction, the authors put forward a 'suggestive theory' in summary form about the organisation of disappointment. This sets the stage for the detailed argument that follows. In its simple form, disappointment is organised in one of 3 ways:

- as failure of the self, i.e. you are disappointed in me, I do not live up to your expectations;
- as failure of the other, i.e. you are disappointing, others do not live up to my expectations;
- as loss, i.e. I and others inevitably disappoint but we can tolerate it, disappointment offers valuable information about the gap between fantasy and reality.

Drawing on extant literature, the authors offer a summary of what distinguishes psychoanalytic, psychodynamic and object relations perspectives on organisations from mainstream orthodox interpretations; that is, the attention to emotions, an acknowledgement of unconscious processes including defences against anxiety and the role of fantasy or unconscious wishes behind so-called 'rational' action and decisions. They note Freud's assertion (1984) that when hopes and desires are unavailable in consciousness, fantasy offers a way to protect them should they come into contact with reality. Fantasy is a necessary part of life in organisations, the authors claim. Organisations should be understood as possessing the potential to be creative and hopeful on one hand and simultaneously as sources of fear and anxiety on the other.

The authors go on to remind us of Klein's (1940) formulation of 2 development positions and how they influence the infant's response to frustrated desires and loss. The integration of good and bad internal objects in the depressive position strengthens the infant's ability to tolerate ambivalence. On this basis, disappointment can be viewed as central to the depressive position. It represents an effort to assimilate conflicting emotions and thereby move beyond the perceived failure of the self or the need to blame others. In other words, it recognises loss but signals a wish to reject the primitive simplicity of the paranoid-schizoid position in favour of something more mature. To work well with disappointment is to appreciate the importance and complexity of the relationship between fantasy and reality, thereby to minimise the potentially destructive aspects of an organisation's defensive impulses.

The interview schedule was not included in the article, so a critique of the approach is not possible. The authors claim that, although disappointment was widespread in organisations, there existed an assumption that, unlike anger, fear or envy, it was not urgent or significant enough to justify acknowledgement or represent a problem. It was said to be prevalent but thought to be of little or no consequence. The authors found that disappointment did not arise in isolation but was '*always connected to a set of internalised expectations developed in relationships with others*' (p.524). Because mutual expectations inevitably vary, compete and are mediated in a political environment, power relations were involved. By expressing such relations e.g. of dominance/submission or control/resistance, individuals managing disappointment were performing an emotional task on behalf of the whole system.

The data generated enabled them to identify 3 core aspects to disappointment in organisations. To paraphrase:

- Disappointment is commonly processed before it is publicly discussed. It is typically constructed as an *individual* experience that can threaten to disrupt the organisation.
- Disappointment is publicly exhibited when it is converted into anger (i.e. blaming other people) or withdrawal and ambivalence (i.e. blaming oneself). Such conversions of disappointment account for so-called 'blame cultures' and/or cultures in which individuals withhold their feelings about mistakes, failures and setbacks.
- Disappointment arises when an anticipated/hoped for positive outcome does not materialise. This raises the question of how to engage with inevitable failures whilst still being able to maintain positive feelings about the organisation in service of an ideal.

The literature review and the interview data enable the authors to put forward an elaborated version of the 'suggestive model' they offered earlier in the article. Again, to paraphrase:

Position 1 (I am disappointing) describes a subjectively perceived failure of the self e.g. feeling that one has let others down, that one is unhappy with one's own performance. Unconsciously, the stability of the organisation and the pursuit of the organisation ideal is protected as long as disappointment is located in the individual.

Position 2 (I am disappointed) concerns the perceived failure of other people e.g. a failure to achieve a promotion might be blamed on a withholding organisation. Position 1 involves protecting a good external object from damage by a bad internal object whereas Position 2 involves protecting an internal good object from an external bad object.

Position 3 (you and I disappoint) is concerned with reframing disappointment as loss not failure. The unhelpful fantasy of an organisation that never disappoints or is disappointed is discarded and members are able to cope with tension between reality and fantasy.

In the elaborated model, the authors offer a deeper understanding of 'blame cultures' which can be understood not just as individuals acting in self-defence but rather as a collective inability to integrate failure to the point where it becomes available as a source of learning. The idealisation of the organisation means that failure has to be located in individuals. Disappointment, where understood only as failure of the self or others, perpetuates the unhelpful illusion of a stable and satisfying object. When organisations engage with disappointment as loss, learning is possible.

From a research design perspective, the paper presents a number of problems that affect its status. The first of these concerns the sample and the absence of an explanation for

how the sample was arrived at and what it might be representative of. The second problem relates to missing detail when it comes to the interview process. We are told that interviews began with the same framing question and then each 'conversation took its own course' which makes it difficult to compare data from each; also that contemporaneous notes were kept and 'used to document the non-verbal and sub-textural content', though whether the interviewer's experience was recorded is unclear. The difficulty arises from a lack of reflexivity, so we cannot know the interviewer's prior investment, their influence on the conversation nor, because the notes are not shared, can we understand the generation of data in the interviews as a physical and relational event with its own dynamic. The third problem is an unexplained tendency to assume a general finding from a particular instance without explaining why the authors think the results would be reproduced in a different setting. For example, they state (p. 525) that 'we think that the experience of respondent 9 represents a common feeling of being disappointed with and within organisations' without justifying how or on what basis they arrive at that assertion.

Beyond problems with method are some with the broader design. The decision to focus on individual experience as the unit of analysis is limiting because, in my view, important relational and group dynamic elements of disappointment are missing from the picture. Were they included, it might be possible to elaborate a thicker description of the politics of disappointment and their consequences. While the authors gained useful access to a range of individual experiences, for my interests, it would have been even better to get a sense of the organisational events that gave rise to the emotion and therefore a deeper understanding of how it affected relationships. From a data analysis perspective, at first I had reservations about the use of theory-building analysis when object relations already represents a theoretical base, but later appreciated how the model added depth to existing theory.

2.5.5 The impact of emotion on organisational learning

In different ways, all the papers reviewed so far are concerned with emotions in organisations: how they are managed, the role of politics, the part that defences play in keeping anxiety from consciousness and the cost to organisational effectiveness. The previous paper imagined a generative relationship between organisations and the emotion of disappointment. The final two under review continue in this vein. The first of these addresses the question: how can organisational learning be perceived and understood from an approach that includes emotion? Whereas emotion can constitute or represent

‘uncomfortable knowledge’ in business and therefore be overlooked, in the penultimate article, Vince (2002) argues that as a vital element in the theory and practice of organisational learning, it is critical to an organisation’s capacity to adapt, evolve and grow.

This paper is a contribution to theory that draws on literature and case material. In it, two avenues of inquiry are proposed. The first explores the assertion that organisational learning is ‘more than a product of organisational responses to individual learning’. The second is concerned with demonstrating that learning at the enterprise level is unattainable if emotions and politics are not available for consideration. The case material is taken from an action research project undertaken with a large private sector company, though whether by the author or the business school or both is not stated, a lack of attention to detail that undermines the paper’s authority. The project was focused on the topics of learning and change and was designed to surface examples of ‘issues, meanings, relations and politics’ that were ‘characteristic of the organisation studied’, revealing what might otherwise (were it not for the study) have been concealed, overlooked or not mentioned.

In the study, data were generated from 28 unstructured interviews with 7 senior managers which were ‘recorded and transcribed’. It is problematic that the author does not explain how data was generated and compared in more detail, including some consideration of his own influence on it, because this inhibits critical review. In a vague description, initial data analysis is said to have ‘involved coding and categorisation’. A subsequent stage of analysis that involved ‘checking back’ with respondents and asking them to comment then gave rise to broader interpretations of the data. The action research is said to have generated ‘a substantial report’ though it is not stated in the article who the audience was or the timing of its publication. To summarise, details of who undertook the research, how, why and to what effect are missing, as are explanations concerning the author’s theories of knowledge.

The author opens his argument with a number of propositions linking emotion to organisational learning. To paraphrase:

- that organisational learning means and expresses more that the sum or aggregate of individual learning;
- that the process of organising generates and constrains learning because it has the potential to bring about change *and* mobilise unconscious defences which prevent it;

- that the ‘internal establishment’ (Hoggett, 1992) and ‘the organisation in the mind’ (Armstrong, 1991) are concepts that illustrate how organisational dynamics find expression in individual and collective behaviour.

The author notes that the topic of emotion in organisations has an established literature, comprising work undertaken from social constructionist and psychodynamic perspectives. Social constructionist studies, paying attention to language and discourse have revealed a tendency for organisations to, according to Fineman, (1993) ‘de-emotionalise emotions’ and represent organisation members as ‘emotionally anorexic’ e.g. by avoiding direct terms such as *anger*, *fear*, *envy* and *shame,* replacing them with such as *dissatisfaction*, *stress*, *preferences* and *interests*. The psychodynamic approach focuses on the unconscious mind and the forces that drive people outside their conscious awareness. Emotional experience, the author observes, is usually relational in nature. Psychodynamic theory is concerned with the links between emotions and the development of social systems,_especially how social systems create unconscious defences against feelings of anxiety. Power relations are an intrinsic part of this, even if unconscious patterns of behaviour have evolved to avoid addressing the influence of these patterns on learning.

The company in the study has, he reports, ‘reached the point that many organisations come to’ (p. 77) having developed processes oriented to individual learning without giving adequate weight or consideration to the emotional and political dynamics that this engenders in the system as a whole. Consequently therefore, fears arising from individual learning (e.g. of the consequences of taking action, of the risks of speaking out, of being vulnerable) inhibit its application to the wider context. To emphasise the point, the author proposes a model to show how the experience of anxiety can represent a stepping-off point for movement in one of two opposite directions: a) wherein anxiety can be contained and worked through to generate insight and b) where it can be ignored and avoided, contributing to a ‘wilful blindness’ in the system as a whole. The avoidance of emotion thus has strategic implications.

To show how such dynamics operate, the author includes a vignette from the case study. A successful manager is over-extended, stressed and communicating his anxiety to those around him. In his performance evaluation he is recommended to address stress management as ‘a personal development need’. The author, however, offers an alternative interpretation of this, arguing that it can be seen as burden-shifting from the

organisation to the individual i.e. that the manager is enacting an organisational dynamic, in this case, a collective impatience for profitability.

As the organisation has few mechanisms for reflecting on its current state, systemic issues can find their form of expression through individuals without this being seen as a pattern or representative of a wider organisational dynamic. Emotionally detached processes such as creating corporate values or brand identities, do not, in the author's view, reach sufficiently deeply into the emotional experience of employees. Rather, it is the quality of relating that is the 'crucial component', maintaining the organisation in its current form. In the example, organisation-wide concerns about failure and profit were located in an individual. Relatedness is thus political.

To recap, the author's main claims in this paper are a) that individual learning, itself an expression of power relations, can limit organisational learning and b) that where processes of reflection are missing and where intense emotion is routinely avoided, this can lead individuals to act out systemic problems. Politics are unconsciously mobilised to defend the organisation against the disruptive prospect of learning and change.

Though not all reproduced here, the three vignettes from the case study showed the implications and consequences of constructing emotion as 'uncomfortable knowledge'. The author concludes that many organisations are reluctant to engage with 'uncomfortable knowledge' for fear of the threat to existing authority structures and power relations. That this knowledge is 'uncomfortable' is evidenced by a) an inability to reflect on institutionalised defence mechanisms and avoidance strategies and b) a cultural norm for communications that are 'de-emotionalised'. He recommends:

- that individual learning be informed by organisational analysis, especially of collective emotions and the power structures that give rise to them;
- that better use is made of defensive reactions, conscious and unconscious, to understand organisational dynamics and
- that leaders should forego the idea of communications as without emotion and instead design processes that contain emotion enough to make it available as a resource.

This paper makes a valuable contribution to the literature. It offers an expanded view of organisational learning, taking the system as a whole rather than individual experience or an aggregation of individual experiences as the unit of analysis, unlike the earlier paper on disappointment. Such an expanded view highlights the connections between the

emotional, the political and the systemic dimensions of organisational learning, demonstrating that power relations and organisational structures are always shaping and being shaped by collective emotional experience. It is, however, unfortunate that details of the methodology and the context are missing because it opens the paper to the claim that the conceptual argument is 'pre-baked' and the case material selectively deployed to substantiate its claims rather than that the argument advanced is consistent with the totality of the case including, as one would expect with qualitative data, its contradictions, paradoxes and mysteries.

2.5.6 Leadership and negative capability

The final article for review concerns organisational leadership. It introduces and explores the concept of 'negative capability', conceived by the poet John Keats in 1817 and used in one of a sequence of efforts to describe the essential qualities of a genius. In a family letter, Keats describes negative capability as a state in which a person:

> … *is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.*
>
> (Keats, 1970:43)

The article's authors (Simpson, French and Hardy, 2002) describe 'positive capability' as the capacity for decisive action and 'negative capability' as the power to resist such action on the grounds that it will undermine or distract from accomplishment of the task should the real (if unconscious) purpose be to defend against anxiety. Negative capability involves 'staying with' difficult emotions and making conscious choices to avoid precipitate action, so as to hold open space for reflection. When leading at the limits of one's powers, negative capability is said to offer support for thinking under pressure. However, in cultures where control and performativity are highly valued, the status of negative capability can become problematic.

The sequence of the paper is as follows: the topic of negative capability is introduced and its relevance to organisational leadership explained. The reader is introduced to a case study involving an international joint venture between a large corporation and two powerful nation states. The contribution of negative capability to positive outcomes in the case study is discussed and this leads to a consideration of the implications for organisational leadership. The authors weigh the possibility of developing negative capability consciously and consider how low-status behaviours (like waiting and listening) are more valued in some cultures than others. The paper closes with concluding remarks

arguing that negative capability should be part of a leader's skill set, especially so in conditions of risk and uncertainty.

This is a theoretical paper using a case study and drawing on literature to explain the origins of negative capability, its adoption by and application to spheres outside the arts and its relevance to organisational leadership. Examples from the case study are described from the perspective of the leader responsible for the corporation's negotiating team. We are told that this person was interviewed 'as part of an ongoing research study into the practices of business leaders'. How many times they were interviewed is unclear just as are further details of data generation, analysis and interpretation. No interview schedule was included nor a reflexive consideration of how the interviewer or the process may have influenced the data. Missing details of this nature inevitably put the integrity of the research in some doubt.

The case study offers an account of how the leader of a negotiating team came to discover that what and who he knew, the resources customarily at his disposal, were not enough to secure satisfactory outcomes. Excerpts from an interview detail moments in the project when he elected to resist pressure and the temptation to disperse his energies into highlighting facts and logic, instead pausing, absorbing difficult emotions and bringing to bear his ability to listen, wait and learn from so doing. The authors describe his experience as an example of continuing to think in difficult situations. They borrow the term 'dispersal' from a philosopher, Needleman (1990), who uses it to describe a point at which anxiety becomes unbearable and the subject 'disperses into' explanations, emotional reactions or physical action i.e. diverting energy away from engagement with the task and towards avoidance or distraction.

The dynamics of containment and dispersal are said to shape a leader's capacity to learn from experience. Whereas learning is sometimes innocently represented as an unqualified positive, when actually faced with one's own ignorance or incompetence, the pressure to disperse is strong. Referring to the case, the authors describe a shift in the leader's mind during a momentary dispute over technical specifications. He recognises himself to be not in a technical role but in one concerned with managing meaning. This involves him living with doubt but not reacting to it. On another occasion, he feels an attack made on his personal integrity but resists the urge to defend himself in favour of inaction that will sustain working relationships around the negotiating table. Waiting, attending to deeper patterns of relating and meaning-making became his and his team's objective. Intense listening and close attention to language were critical here because they had not just to

derive meaning from words but formulate new sentences that all parties to the negotiation could agree on. The authors quote Howard Stein (1994:339) who describes negative capability as ‘a consultant’s most valuable skill’ and as listening ‘for the hidden story to emerge’ and fostering it ‘into the sight of consciousness’.

Reflecting on the case study, they propose that the practice of negative capability requires humility, empathy and a willingness to flex. To stay open and receptive demands what they call ‘chameleon-like adaptation’. The leader in the case study described how his team shifted from being negotiators themselves to brokers of agreement between the other parties. ‘We became what was needed in the situation’, he is quoted as saying. They contrast this approach with conventional ideas about constancy being a feature of effective leadership. Instead, here is an argument for working with what is actually happening irrespective of what was planned, hoped for or intended. The authors go on to speculate how far negative capability is an innate or an acquired capacity. If it can be acquired, they suggest, then experiential learning in the Tavistock tradition (such as group relations conferences) or individual reflexive techniques (such as journaling or meditation) may help.

The leader in the case study described how different team members did and did not rise to the challenge of re-thinking their individual and collective roles in the negotiations. Those that remained after a re-structure brought about by this re-think developed a shared *modus operandi* based around negative capability, humility and being capable of submission. This stood in contrast to received wisdom about asserting control and treating emotions as ‘disturbance’ rather than valuable data (Armstrong, 2006). However, the authors conclude, it is difficult in many contexts for leaders to think differently and adopt low-status behaviours even when they are effective.

In my view, the article offers a helpful alternative to the idea that positive capability is synonymous with ‘good’ or ‘strong’ leadership. The case study provides evidence that low status behaviours (such as waiting, listening with empathy and observing) can be instrumental to the accomplishment of desired outcomes. The leader in the case study exhibits an ability to learn in the moment from things as they are without getting too stuck on opinions about things as they ought to be. This offers a refreshing counter to ‘strong man’ views of organisational leadership which remain popular. I thought the article had the potential to influence leadership practice and validate those organisation development specialists who labour to introduce moments of still awareness into client systems preoccupied with performativity and control.

The article had limitations. I was left unclear as to the division of responsibilities between the 3 named authors and would have liked to know more about who worked on the action research project in what roles, who proposed to write an article, what was the collaborative process and the dynamic between the co-authors. That the interview with the leader of the negotiating team in a joint venture was undertaken ‘as part of an ongoing research study into the practices of business leaders’ was too vague a description of the research design for my purposes. It left me unable to evaluate the status and validity of the findings to the depth I would have liked.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature review revealed considerable academic interest in the topic of management consulting. To introduce the chapter, I summarised 14 articles in which the topic was explored from perspectives that did not attend to the influence of the unconscious mind.

These articles were concerned with 3 separate but related aspects of management consulting. First, evidence was presented that consultants are subject to stress and anxiety from multiple sources. Second, selected studies showed that for women, this anxiety could be compounded when they encountered structural inequalities that made it harder to be valued, promoted and have one’s needs accommodated. Third, it was proposed that new entrants to professional services, eager to belong, were socialised into over-working and putting the client’s needs above everything else, potentially at some cost to their non-work selves and relationships. Together, these articles demonstrated both that consulting work is generative of strong emotions and that the way the work is organised may intensify them.

The articles subject to detailed critical review justified a deeper look at consulting and presented a more nuanced picture in which emotions, politics and the unconscious made a significant contribution to workers’ experiences and group dynamics. The first two articles presented evidence of the sorts of task and role-related pressures that Partners in consulting firms are subject to. One source of pressure (Beeby et al., 1998) was the vicarious stress brought about by contact and engagement with client systems that are themselves in distress. A second source of pressure were the conditions of ‘unstable equilibrium’ described by Empson L. & Alvehus J., (2020) under which leaders in professional services firms attempted either to take up their own authority or grant it to their peers as part of a collective leadership group.

The next paper (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012) extended the idea of Partners under pressure to include identity work. Using case material from a family-owned fashion empire, it offered insight into the unconscious forces at work for leaders to present acceptable selves and the consequences for social relations when unacceptable selves are projected into those close by. Problems with the provenance of the data weakened the integrity of this work. How leaders handle disappointment was the topic of the next paper, (Clancy, Vince & Gabriel, 2012), included because Partners are routinely exposed to the risk of loss. The paper identified the potential for a constructive relationship with disappointment but also highlighted the risk of a 'blame culture' if disappointment could only be understood as failure of the self or others.

In the fifth paper, (Vince, 2002) it was proposed that a firm's capacity to adapt was contingent on its approach to organisational learning. Where emotions and politics constituted 'uncomfortable knowledge' and were thought best to be avoided, it appeared likely that opportunities to reflect and course-correct would be passed up and, potentially, pressure loaded onto individuals to enact systemic issues. In the final article, (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002) it was shown that the 'dispersal' of emotion into defensive action can come at the expense of an ability to think under pressure.

Emerging from the review is an overall picture of management consulting as an emotionally-charged arena. The studies drawing on systems psychodynamic theory (which has as its express purpose an understanding of how emotions shape and are shaped by social systems) suggest that an original understanding of Partner dynamics would be available were they to be investigated from this unique theoretical base.

From a research design perspective, all studies in the review drew on interviews, case material or some combination of the two. In several cases, missing methodological details, an absence of reflexivity and unjustifiable claims to truth suggest that the literature in this field is of variable quality and therefore reliability. Notably missing from the studies selected for review is the sort of experience-near information available to researchers who observe and participate in the daily lives of participants for an extended period, in other words, researchers who remain close to participants in the ethnographic 'field'.

Organisational anthropology is an established academic research tradition dating back to the 1950s (e.g. Dalton, 1959) and organisational ethnography, a dynamic contemporary field of study (e.g. Kunda, 2006; Neyland, 2008; Ybema, Yanow, Wels & Kamsteeg, 2009).

With the aim of bringing a new perspective to this tradition by using systems psychodynamics as its informing theory, I therefore proposed an ethnographic study to understand the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics in the UK business unit of a global consulting firm. The ambition that I held for this original combination of ethnography and systems psychodynamics was that it would afford access to layers of meaning (about group emotions, the entanglement of relationships and the dynamics of anxiety) that either approach on their own might not do justice to. In the next chapter, I will detail the methodology I applied with its informing ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the opening chapter, I offered some context for this study and an overview of its design. I explained how I came to be interested in the topic, described the research aims and detailed the setting in which it was conducted. In the second chapter, I analysed earlier studies and made a case for extending our knowledge of this subject. Having identified a gap in the literature, I will detail the methodological choices I made in order to address that gap.

First I will describe my philosophical orientation and the theoretical position that informs the research strategy I pursued. I will demonstrate the consistency between what I assume concerning reality and knowledge and the approach I adopted, including my relationship to the knowledge generated. Then I will cover how I gained access to the research setting, what methods I used in situ and what data was generated. In a third section, I will describe the procedures I used to analyse and represent the data. The final section will explain the constraints I worked within, the obstacles I encountered and the consequent limitations to my findings.

3.2 Philosophical orientation and theoretical position

My research was not an attempt to measure or quantify aspects of the research setting, only to understand its characteristics. I aimed to observe, describe and analyse ways that the inhabitants of the environment thought, felt and behaved in relation to one another and to their work. I hoped to understand why they experienced life as they did and, approaching the inquiry from a systems psychodynamics perspective, why some ways of acting on the world might unconsciously be favoured whilst others appeared to be resisted or defended against.

My findings derive from a single case study identifying mental processes that generate particular outcomes. I was aware that these processes could be consistent with those found at other times and in other settings where comparable outcomes occurred but did not assume them to be generalisable to other contexts. To avoid premature interpretations and test the utility of theory, I held in mind that mental processes are not themselves observable, only the outcomes from which we infer they are in operation. The unconscious can explain evidence without being evidence.

3.2.1 Adopting a critical realist position

My approach derived from assumptions that I hold about the material, social and psychological world. My intention was to capture and portray group mental processes that I believed were happening independently of my knowledge of them. I believe that unconscious emotional and relational phenomena can be identified and represented provided that a researcher has the skills to perceive and describe characteristic patterns, generating defendable hypotheses that satisfactorily account for what has been observed. This is a process which includes the reflexivity of the researcher and develops over the course of fieldwork. It contrives to identify patterns in the counter-transference and link them to what is observed in the field. As such it takes time and cycles of reflection.

In this approach I adopted a Critical Realist position following theory introduced by Bhaskar, (1989). Critical Realism allows the researcher to go beyond a simple dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, holding both that a world can exist independently of our perceptions, language and imagination *and* that part of that world is made up of subjective interpretations informing how it is understood and experienced. Whereas naive realism assumes 'that a relatively uncomplicated relationship exists between what presents itself (the data, the evidence) and what is going on (the reality we want to understand)' (Willig, 2012, p.13), critical realism assumes that 'the underlying (in this case, psychological) structures that generate the manifest, observable phenomena (behaviors, symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue, etc.) are not necessarily accessible to those who experience them' (Willig, ibid). Critical realist researchers therefore engage with experiences that are 'real' for those who have had them whilst examining how such 'realities' are arrived at.

O'Mahoney and Vincent, (2014: 17) describe critical realist researchers as using two explanatory logics, progressing from the empirical to the real through the use of what they term 'abduction' and 'retroduction'. Abduction combines theory and data to explain why phenomena pattern over time as they do. Retroduction 'seeks to ascertain what the world must be like for the mechanisms we observe to be as they are'; that is, the environmental conditions that cause these patterns to emerge and endure.

In line with these authors' assertion that entities cannot be observed or analysed satisfactorily in isolation from their environments, I studied the phenomena under investigation by gaining access to the 'natural habitat' of the consultants and sharing it

over a sufficiently extended period of time to record regularities and exceptions. My assumption was that while the data generated could make explanations possible, the meaning would not necessarily be self-evident, instead requiring interpretation to identify the 'generative mechanisms' (in my case, the workings of the unconscious such as defences) that Bhaskar describes (ibid). What was observed therefore held different significance for me as the researcher than it did for members of the population studied and I held in tension a desire to be respectful of indigenous meanings with the liberty to weigh alternatives. For example, if I were to describe a pattern of behaviour as a *projective identification*, I would likely be interpreting it differently from the local population.

3.2.2 Discourse as an example of a 'generative mechanism'

Much human experience is mediated via language and, whilst rejecting absolute relativism, I share a postmodern interest in discourse and power following the early work of the philosopher, Michel Foucault (1926-1984). In other words, I am interested in how language is deployed and how the resources available come to inform practice by shaping the meaning of experiences. Foucault's perspective is distinct and unorthodox. Power, in his conception, 'constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them' (Gaventa, 2003: 1).

Designing the study, I was interested in how the accepted truths of situations were arrived at. I thought to do this by examining institutionalised thought and speech which I believed to be 'generative mechanisms' as defined by Bhaskar. Alongside Foucault's ideas, I was also influenced by Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' described by Wacquant (2005: 316, cited in Navarro 2006: 16) as 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them'. Both theoretical positions could explain why members of a work community might, consciously and unconsciously, hold its own orthodoxies to be beyond question.

3.2.3 Reflexivity

Despite a realist orientation, I do not assume that a world existing independently of my knowledge of it can be seen from a distance or represented objectively. I oppose the view that subjectivity and involvement hinder scientific study and support the argument that effective research requires self-knowledge and reflexive practice (Hunt, 1989). In this case, I was a dynamic element in the research setting, affected by what I observed just as

I was affecting it. Although research is a systematic and audited process of finding 'empirical answers to outstanding questions' (Willig, 2012), there is an inevitable tension, as Hollway identifies (2015, p. 7), between the need to go beyond what is already known while staying within the confines of how things can be known. In my attempt to research unconscious communications, group dynamics and social defences, this tension was evident and as researcher, I was aware that my unconscious played a part in the research environment as well as in my choice of setting, topic, forms of data generation and analysis.

The concept of the 'defended researcher', Hollway and Jefferson's extension of their 'defended subject' (2013), offered an alternative to the notion of a neutral researcher but required me to maintain an ongoing critical dialogue with my own biases, investments and relationships within the setting. Aware that aspects of my internal world would be hidden from my own view and that unconscious processes would inevitably structure relations between myself, the participants and the data, I combined methods of data generation and analysis to be able to triangulate the findings.

I also judged that aspects of my appearance would influence the data. Harding (1987) argues it is only possible to know from a situated perspective and that structural inequalities mean different weights are attached to different groups' accounts of social reality. In respect of my own identity and cultural background, I believe that by virtue of my gender, age, class and race, I viewed the setting from a position of privilege, identifying with and being identified as part of the dominant group. As a formally educated, middle-aged, white, middle-class, male, who spent considerable time with Partners, from the non-Partner perspective, I probably appeared quite indistinct from them.

3.2.4 Subjectivity

A feature of practice and research informed by systems psychodynamics is the register of what is not happening as well as what is. What is missing, what goes unsaid form part of the data, but the register of these elements necessitates the use of the self as a tool of research. This is potentially problematic in that the unconscious mind as an instrument of knowing is not controlled because, as stated, the researcher's mind is subject to influence outside its own awareness (Stamenova and Hinshelwood, 2018). Seeking exposure to potentially disturbing material, as a researcher, I was inevitably involved in unconscious communication with others in the research environment. With periodic supervision

however, I was able to reflect on how my subjectivity was arrived at and mitigate some of the risk of distortion when it was not practical to be challenged on the data in dialogue with participants.

3.2.5 Counter-transference

In respect of my intention to observe phenomena in their natural setting and my conviction that the observer is by definition involved, I align with Hinshelwood and Skogstad (2000) who note a similarity between contemporary practice in a) anthropological and sociological research, which has moved away from positivist ideas of objectivity, and b) psychoanalytic training, specifically the infant observation method of Esther Bick, which starts from the Kleinian assumption that the inner world of the observer and the external world of the observed are mutually constitutive. Hinshelwood and Skogstad draw attention to the importance of emotional atmosphere as a facet of organisational culture and note that the researcher recording how they experience such an atmosphere from a critical distance has access to data equivalent to counter-transference in the clinical setting. For example, when the fear of eviction was heightened in the field, I was preoccupied with fears about how long my observer presence would be tolerated.

3.2.6 Summary of my ontological and epistemological position

To summarise my position: I approached the research with a belief in an independent reality that can be approached through observation and critical reflexivity. I used language as a medium to record my fieldwork experiences and captured the speech of participants in writing. From there I was able to deconstruct these texts and propose a number of encoded meanings. I used systems psychodynamic theory - in particular, Object Relations, Open Systems Theory and Social Defences Theory - to help me interpret the evidence I generated, but in the belief that theory had to be provisional and was useful only in so far as it accounted for what I had observed. My attention was focused on external events, the emotional atmosphere (to which I was contributing) and my subjective experience of myself in the context. I saw myself as co-producing the data rather than collecting it.

3.3 The research design and operationalising the research strategy

The consulting firm and I were known to one another before the research got underway. On behalf of a business school, I had designed and facilitated a leadership development

programme for them which was well regarded and I used the reputation this had given me, as well as that of the business school, as the basis for a formal request to undertake an ethnographic inquiry (by which I mean a prolonged immersion, developing relationships with members of an organisational system, observation of group behaviour, participation in daily life and critical reflection).

I was interested in ethnography because I felt my research interest required me to understand what happened on 'the shop floor' in such a firm and I saw a valuable opportunity to undertake a research study in the tradition of earlier organisational anthropologists from the Tavistock, such as Jacques (1951), Rice (1958) and Miller & Rice (1967) who had the benefit of prolonged and comparatively unrestrained access to a single setting. Extended exposure gave them sufficient time to develop an appreciation of emotional currents shaping the field and I hoped to build on their approach, albeit that research orthodoxies had altered over time. Whereas their research reflected an empirical tradition dominant in the middle of the last century in which the researcher was invisible, I aimed to bring more of a self-conscious, interpretive approach. Like them, I was curious about power relations and social defences.

3.3.1 Gaining access

On the advice of the Global Head of Human Resources, I sought permission to study and participate in the daily life of the UK and Ireland business unit based in Central London (as opposed, for example, to attempting a study of the whole firm). He consulted with the outgoing and incoming Heads of Unit before granting permission in principle. I then presented my request at a meeting of the London Partners who gave it final assent. My intention was to become a temporary member of the organisation over an extended period and to share first-hand in the problems, language, rituals and social relationships that were characteristic of that setting. Van Maanen (2011, p.2), wrote 'fieldwork usually means living with and living like those who are studied.'

My primary task was to be involved in and record daily life with a view to creating a critically reflexive account of it afterwards. In the event, I never felt myself to be a complete member of the organisation, temporary or otherwise. For the period of my field work, I was a guest of the Partnership and given the honorary title: Academic in Residence.

3.3.2 Insider research

From this, I would not classify the study as ‘insider research’, as I was not a member of the organisation before fieldwork began, but I was in a relationship with it and some of its employees. This affected the relative ease with which I gained access (not an unqualified advantage), the biases and assumptions I held on arrival, the way I interpreted my role and status as well as my identity and pre-existing allegiances within the organisation’s dynamic political system. The research design had to take into account the additional fact that I was not a complete outsider on entry.

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) highlight problems associated with insider research which they say is ‘frequently disqualified because it is not perceived to conform to standards of intellectual rigour’. Insider researchers can be thought to lack critical distance. However, they go on to argue that by taking a reflexive stance towards one’s own epistemological position and questioning how cognition occurs, tacit knowledge borne of socialisation within a system can be made available as theoretical knowledge enriched by experience. In hindsight, I concur with their position.

In my case, the benefit of leveraging my position as an educator to secure access to a restricted setting was offset by some loss of strangeness: the perplexing too easily explained away within the ‘logic’ of the context and the ‘dumb question’ sometimes too awkward or discrediting to ask at the relevant moment. There being no neutral position available within the political system, I came to be perceived as a player more than an observer and assumed to be loyal to those who granted me access.

Yet even if I had come to the organisation with no prior knowledge, there is still an extent to which the problems of insider research apply: consultants and researchers could be thought of as part of a common intellectual elite, sharing similar blind-spots, educational formatting and social privileges. However, the amount of time that elapsed between fieldwork and final analysis - a distance of almost two years due to a global health crisis - ensured that my withdrawal and isolation from the field was total and absolute. This time was spent in evaluative reflection and self-examination. I was able to regain critical distance that had become compromised in the field. Blurred boundaries (e.g.: insider - outsider, researcher - consultant) were re-drawn. Under supervision, I was able to see my role and behaviour in a critical light.

3.3.3 Duration of the research

Field work took place between July 2018 and December 2019. It was originally intended to be for a period of 6 months and I believed that this would be adequate time within which to undertake the field study as originally conceived. However, as 2018 drew to a close, an unexpected development caused me to revisit the scope. Although it had been a commercially successful year overall, the last quarter of the year showed signs that the market was slowing. Bookings for the first two quarters of 2019 were low too and there was a real prospect that staff would return from the holidays with significantly fewer client projects to work on. At the same time, I became aware from comments and asides, that, in response to a potential market downturn, some Partners were becoming territorial about their clients, others exaggerating the value and likelihood of landing the leads that they were working on.

Given that my research focus was the dynamic among the Partners and learning that market conditions were having a material effect on this dynamic, I thought it wise to stay longer and observe the transition from a time of plenty to a time of scarcity. This decision, once authorised by my hosts, felt justified when the uncertainty that began at the end of 2018 continued and deepened into the first two quarters of 2019. It was only by Q3 of that year that the group started to feel confident of a return to favourable market conditions. It taking some weeks to wind up field work and fulfil various commitments I had entered into, I left in December 2019.

3.3.4 The research site

The research site was confined to the firm's open-plan offices, (a floor in a prestigious building in Central London) and nearby cafés, restaurants and bars. I was allocated a security pass that let me come and go freely with respect to the office but could not access client sites nor observe the taxi rides, airport waits or hotel meals that formed a significant part of consultants' lives 'on the road'. I was invited to some corporate hospitality events with clients and took part in a sponsored walk for charity. I was given a company email address and some intranet permissions but I tended not to be included in informal chat groups using social media platforms like WhatsApp or Instagram which I understood to be well-used. I held a standing invitation to monthly Partner meetings; beyond that it was up to me to define what was meant by participant observation in this context and negotiate accordingly.

My physical access to the building was subject to the same security constraints as were applied to full-time staff. Once in, my attendance at work meetings was subject to the approval of the convenor and therefore the filter of 'what I would find useful' could be applied to limit what I witnessed or learned about. I was advised by one Partner early on that I needed to 'get beyond set pieces' to see what was 'really happening' and though I did occasionally invite myself to formal and informal gatherings, this required a lot of self-confidence, which tended to fluctuate. On the whole I was permitted to move about as I pleased, but not always welcome to do so and found it difficult to weigh whether I was being sufficiently curious versus overly invasive.

3.3.4 Operationalising participant observation

The London office was 'home' to c170 employees. Those most consistently present were from the Management Services division. These office-bound staff provided specialist (finance, marketing, human resources, secretarial) support to the more nomadic Management Consulting division who split their time between working on client sites and returning to the office to prepare for future encounters with ongoing or prospective clients. Work on client sites usually took place from Mondays to Thursdays and the office was more populated on Fridays, with 'hot seats' harder to find.

My role was ambiguous for employees and often a source of conflict within me. I tried explaining my presence as a beginner ethnographer which led to associations with classical anthropology and the study of 'exotic' tribes. Some newly arrived juniors, possibly projecting their own culture shock, assumed that I planned to unmask the hidden world of management consulting like an undercover journalist. From questions about the timing of publication, I sensed they anticipated an exposé.

While I was a novelty, it was easier to get myself invited to internal meetings. As this wore off however, I took to 'hanging out' in communal spaces where passers-by would engage me in conversation. It became easy to distinguish those wanting to avoid interruption and those looking for a break from slides and spreadsheets. Given my background, as well as a capacity for acting as a 'confidant' and 'an interesting guy' (Kunda, 2006: 245), when not involved in specific initiatives, I took on a seemingly welcome role as a listening ear. Everything being apparently of interest to me, my true motives and the nature of my work were opaque, but people usually assumed that I wanted the organisation to improve in some way. As a marginal figure myself, I seemed to hold an attraction for people feeling marginalised and learned that corridors and coffee stations yielded valuable information.

3.3.5 Keeping notes

Typically, I would write up my notes each evening while commuting by train and add some further reflections during the commute the following morning. My stamina and family commitments meant that my 'working day' was shorter than their norm and that my working week in the office extended to three or four days whereas I understood evening and weekend work was commonplace among those I was observing.

The notes took on a variety of forms. Most were descriptive of scenes or episodes involving human interaction and moved over time but occasionally they recorded the physical attributes of a space: what Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) refer to as 'still life' field notes. Some were more like reflections on the events of a particular day, e.g.:

> *What struck me was that nobody seemed to feel any better. The discussion was completed only just within the time allocated so there wasn't time for reflection after the report out, but in any case, listing what needed to be done in this way seemed not to generate any excitement. The energy among those present in the room seemed not to have changed as a result of what was discussed, as though it was the wrong topic or people just going through the motions.*

Others spoke to my experience as a stranger. The following is from my first few days in the field:

> *Mulling on my walk from the tube about dress code - what should be understood by the message, 'We don't wear ties, by and large'? Notice that Robert wears a tie more than other Partners and looks like he's not to be interrupted because he's rushing out of the building to go and do something else.*

3.3.6 Defining the role

It felt difficult 'merely' to hang around in an environment where everyone else seemed to be straining every sinew to add value to the firm or its client companies. Even if people were not busy, I felt there to be an unspoken code about appearing so and I would feel guilty when not visibly useful, the strength of this feeling pointing towards a counter-transference. As a consultant myself and feeling indebted to the firm for affording me access, occasionally I felt a desire to forego research and 'do some real work' as a form of exchange that would relieve me of this obligation. Resisting this by staying in role as a researcher came at a cost to my identity and confidence.

Added to this discomfort were doubts about my neutrality that I had not foreseen. The strong connection I established with the incoming Unit Head whilst gaining entry left me open to the suspicion from some Partners, especially at times of heightened emotion, that I was his spy. With hindsight, I realise that I had not anticipated how invasive observation could feel nor how resistance to my presence might be covert, given the official sponsorship I had received. Although people were consistently friendly towards me and went out of their way to make me feel welcome, when occasionally I was turned away or excluded, I felt an exaggerated loneliness and dejection. While counter-transference in the research setting can be written about in a rather detached fashion, the way that strong systemic emotions would awaken or heighten my own anxieties and insecurities could be very painful and isolating.

3.3.7 Partner meetings

The exception to extended periods of hanging out, with some accompanying feelings of dejection and loneliness, were the monthly Partner meetings that usually took place on a Thursday evening and were often followed by drinks and a meal. During these intense experiences I witnessed organisational culture much as Bate (1997, p.1159) describes it: 'a political process, in which meanings are constantly being contested in rough-and-tumble fashion'. I did not start these 'set pieces' with a template for what to record but I was aware of trying to describe fast-changing social processes while they were in motion. My attention was often drawn to in-group and out-group dynamics and my field notes reflect an attention to the following:

- where are we and what's it like?
- who is here? why are we here? how are we grouped?
- what are people saying/not saying; doing/not doing?
- what 'rules' are being followed/tested/violated in the moment? (rules about feelings, belonging, identity, status, shared beliefs)
- how does it benefit/harm people to comply with/contravene these rules?
- what are the effects of their choices on the emotional atmosphere?

Over time, I learned to pay more attention to the question of what people saw themselves as doing from an insider perspective and came to understand that I had to decode their culture in its own terms before re-coding it in the language of another (Barthes 1972).

3.3.8 Handling setbacks

Partner meetings were relatively comfortable in that I was in the background, observing more than participating. I was less prepared for impromptu occasions when I felt incompetent, and recognise a transference here. Like Partners, I felt I had to generate a product within a given time and put myself under pressure to 'capture' vivid episodes. Dead-ends, periods of inactivity, noting what was basic or banal at first felt much like failure and it was tempting to 'force' psychodynamic interpretations prematurely. With supervision, however, I came to appreciate the value of such periods even if my journal records that I felt discouraged and self-critical, some time before I was in a position to understand paranoia as a systemic phenomenon.

3.3.9 Interviews

When planning my approach to fieldwork, I had intended to supplement observation with interviews. I anticipated building trusting relationships with a small number of 'informants' and having periodic conversations that built on one another over the course of time. Without thinking it through sufficiently, I assumed that a selection of Partners would be happy to free associate on the record and that I could build a composite picture from a series of snapshots. In practice, I learned that securing time with Partners was difficult and that it was acceptable to cancel at the last minute due to 'client needs'. I also learned that Partners liked to be prepared. The idea of taking part in a conversation in which the unanticipated might emerge seemed uncomfortable. Partners wanted to be obliging and some did seek me out for advice but seemed less avoidant with me in the role of coach, where the status relationship was clear, rather than researcher, where limits to my authority were ambiguous.

When able to take up the role of researcher in earnest, first attempts at conversations about the firm tended to generate only theoretical advice which kept the dialogue emotionally distant and gave me little insight into lived experiences. Grateful to have access to them at all, I realise I contributed to this by playing student to their teacher. Yet, I had a difficulty to overcome. Partners were so influential but often absent, and with time passing, I grew worried that I had only witnessed their behaviour in group settings. I felt I needed to speak with them one to one.

An opportunity presented itself in advance of an off-site Partner meeting in June 2019, one year into my field work. Whereas the business had being doing well in the period July to December 2018, in the first two quarters of the following year, results were

disappointing and the Unit Head took the decision to reduce the number of Partners in the UK. This destabilised the remaining Partners but they tended to voice their disquiet in private. Approached by the Unit Head to facilitate a session that he hoped would instigate a ‘step change’ in the unit’s performance, I offered to speak to each Partner in private and reflect back the aggregate picture as a way to get the conversation started. This was on the understanding that I could record the conversations and use the material for my research. Of 13 remaining Partners, 10 formally consented, one agreed but declined to be recorded, one ‘timed out’ by delaying their decision until it was too late and another by accepting meeting invitations with vocal enthusiasm then serially postponing them. Of 10 who agreed to a recorded interview, 9 were men and 1 was a woman. All were aged between 45 and 55 years old. Two interviewees were Asian and the remainder, White European. The longest interview lasted almost 2 hours and the shortest one was over within 20 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured and confined to a discussion about the interplay between team dynamics and business performance. I drew up questions based on a subjective and cautious view of what I thought it legitimate to discuss at the time:

- Please could you summarise the current situation in the UK ?
- How do you see the mood or morale among Partners?
- How do you think the UK unit is seen by the wider firm?
- What level of ambition should the team be setting for itself?
- Does the team have the resources to match its ambitions?
- What do you think unites Partners and what divides them?
- Is there a particular change you think this team should adopt?
- What do you need from your fellow Partners in order to succeed?

I now recognise that these questions were crafted within the ‘problem-solution’ paradigm that dominated the office. I also acknowledge the effect that feeling nervous and disheartened mid-stream had on the deferential way I approached the interviews. (I was anxious not to ‘waste’ Partners’ time, stuck to relatively safe topics and, abiding by the ‘house-rules’, was reluctant to approach topics such as emotions, politics or relationships head-on). Sampling was uncomplicated as all the available population agreed to speak with me but had I, for example, had more confidence and only sought volunteers, I might have risked having fewer respondents and therefore less data despite the benefit of being more direct in my approach.

3.3.10 Journaling

Earlier I made reference to the value I attach to reflexivity and, consistent with that, I kept a record of my experience as a researcher to accompany notes of what I observed. This was partly for audit purposes; I expected that false starts and wrong turns would oblige me to adapt the research design and I wanted to be able to account for that later. However, it was also data generation in itself; I wanted a record of my changing feelings and to register the effect on me of feelings at large in the system.

'Journals' took the form of notebooks, but I also made entries on my laptop, in my mobile phone and on scraps of paper. These combined reflection with reflexivity. Bolton (2014) describes reflection as 'in-depth review' and reflexivity as 'finding strategies to question our own attitudes, theories-in use, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions' (p. 7) In my experience, journaling and research supervision were complementary in that both aimed at nurturing reflexivity as a habit of mind in order to appreciate how the observer affects what is observed. In a similar vein, regular therapy (in my case, Jungian analysis) illuminated entanglements and helped me appreciate the 'chemical reaction' that occurs between systemic and personal feelings, one that gets down-played when practitioners talk in terms of 'sorting out what belongs to whom', as if it were uncomplicated.

3.4 Data handling and analysis

Fieldwork generated 3 categories of data: field notes, journal entries and interview transcripts. These were concerned with descriptive information based on observations of the organisation under study, my experience of myself as a researcher in that organisation and the personal perspectives of its most senior members.

Field notes and journal entries took the form of digital files and folders, regularly backed up from a laptop onto an external hard drive and both encrypted to keep the data secure. I organised these chronologically and analysed them using Thematic Analysis (TA) to accommodate my dual interest in the meanings that individuals arrive at and how the context, including its unconscious aspects, impinges on those meanings. With the interview transcripts I used Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) critically to evaluate what meanings were available and how Partners consciously and unconsciously used constructions of the discursive object to influence what was thought normal and legitimate by their employees. On reflection, though I found FDA useful for triangulation, the findings largely reflect the TA.

Once an interview was complete, I transferred the sound file from a recording device to a secure laptop and used encrypted, web-based transcription software to get a transcript of around 80% accuracy which I refined manually. I could have used a denaturalised transcription convention such as Jefferson Lite (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017) and this would have allowed me to portray silences, false starts and internal resistance with more accuracy. However, I opted for a more naturalistic approach, wanting it to be accessible to the interviewee which would give them the opportunity to withdraw portions or withdraw from the project altogether. Silences and pauses were thus represented by three spaced points (…) and switches from one clause to another by a dash (-). Where the speaker omitted a word and I reintroduced it to make sense of the sentence, the implicit or inferred word was bracketed (thus).

The transcription complete, I copied the web file into an MS Word document ensuring that the file and folder were password protected. I sent a copy of the Word document to the interviewee for information and organised my copy into three columns. I arranged the text into the left hand column, leaving two blank for annotation.

3.4.1 Analysis of field notes - Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006:79) describe Thematic Analysis as a 'poorly branded' method that can reinforce 'anything goes' criticisms of qualitative research, which are legitimised when researchers describe themes as 'emerging from' or 'being discovered in' the data, obscuring the active role that the researcher plays in identifying themes. The benefit of Thematic Analysis, in their view, is its relative freedom from epistemological boundaries and its amenability for use with a variety of theoretical frameworks. I chose it to help me to describe reality as experienced and to excavate beneath its surface. The important thing, for Braun and Clarke, is an auditable trail of consciously taken decisions. Acknowledging that analysis is usually iterative, they nevertheless propose a sequence (p.87) that I improvised upon:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

To begin, I read and re-read the data, making notes of ideas and associations but also allowing ample time for contemplation. The interpretation of data arguably involving creative thinking, it was my experience that reflections and connections resisted being forced. Next I began a manual process of generating initial codes, holding my research question in mind and paying particular attention to observable feeling states and atmospheres. Where I thought a particular phrase stood out as representative of a widely held sentiment, (for example: 'who's got my back?' or 'I feel like I don't know the rules anymore') or where I felt participants' language was more powerful than my own, I used it verbatim. Having worked systematically through the entire data set, I transferred codes from the annotated field notes onto sticky paper squares and posted them on my office wall so that I could see all 260 open codes together in one space and move the data around to create connections. I also made an alphabetical card index with the page numbers of extracts sharing a code.

My instinct was to look for repetition and this led to some surprises. For example, I had not been aware of how many times a particular sub-group had been spoken of negatively until I saw the volume of evidence in front of me. Here a category suggested itself and as I tentatively noted more potential categories, I began to see relationships between them, as well as duplications. Taking the disparaged sub-group for example, I linked 'disparagement' to 'envy' and the category of 'envy', because it was hidden, to 'shame'. At this point, the work became interpretative. For example, a category of 'performative behaviour' was latent across a number of codes without being the focus of one; it was observable but went unacknowledged. On one occasion, Partners competed for who could appear busiest at an offsite meeting and I coded this as 'appearing busy'. On another, I was greeted in a public place like a long lost friend by a very senior person who I knew only a little. These codes had in common an attention to impression management, hence the 'performative' category.

Working backwards and forwards, I was able to generate a long list of provisional themes and the sense of a hierarchy among them, i.e.: between dominant and subsidiary themes. This done, I recognised a) that data could be organised and represented just as easily chronologically as thematically and b) that there was a difference in the data over time. First impressions had given way to new understandings, but it was clear that a decline in the commercial performance of the organisation had had a significant impact on the data generated. Not wanting to lose this idea of a contrast between first impressions and how the situation evolved, I created a mind-map/sticky note cluster of evidence recording

what I felt was an accurate 'surface reading' of the setting and the behaviours that appeared to be valued in it (Figure 3.2). This meant combining single codes (with page references) into categories:

Single codes	Category
Absurd humour p.9	
Sense of humour p.20	
Playful banter p.21	*Value attached to humour*
Camaraderie, play, irony p.73	
Humour as a defence p.83	

As I worked categories up into themes, I considered representing the data as a chronological narrative (an idea I later discarded) and created a second sticky note cluster to capture the arc of the story: changes in atmosphere that I perceived over time. Believing that there was more information to derive from the fieldnotes, I returned to them for a second coding exercise. From my perspective, those members of the organisation that I had the most exposure to often behaved as though following a set of unwritten rules, so I thought it would be interesting to look afresh at the notes with the aim of identifying rules as it were encoded within them, noting when an implicit rule was followed and if one was transgressed. The following extract from my fieldnotes is presented as an illustration, showing first order codes (feeling states etc.) in the left column and second order codes (implied rules) in the right hand column:

1st order code		2nd order code
Light-hearted atmosphere	*We go round the room briefly introducing ourselves. A Business Analyst (junior consultant) called Marcus sits next to Ben (a Partner) and describes how much he enjoyed working on Ben's project. There's general mirth at his fulsome description and gentle teasing about the flattery. 'Is it PA (performance appraisal) time?', asks Robert (the other Partner present). 'Too late' someone replies.* *Later on, as we continue with introductions, another junior consultant called Emma tells us that she's recently joined from Canada and that she worked on a project that Ben led.*	If you suck up to Partners, be subtle about it
Momentary awkwardness	***Emma**: I worked on UtilityCo. (Momentary pause, light laugh). I don't know if you remember?*	Defer to seniors, reinforce their high status
Relief	*The room looks at Ben who looks blankly at Emma. A moment. The room laughs. Perhaps Ben could have bluffed but he doesn't choose to. Instead his face signals that he can't recall.*	Transgression of 'Partners should know 'their' team members'

The second order coding generated a further 104 codes including implied rules such as 'don't waste the time of important people' and time-honoured survival strategies such as

‘avoid any association with failure’. In order to distil the insight from the second coding exercise, I chose to ask the question ‘What is proscribed in this system?’ and generated a third sticky note cluster with the categories I formed. Realising that this exercise had also given me access to a kind of template for individual survival in what felt like a hostile environment, I decided to make a note of that too.

In summary, two rounds of coding field notes and journal entries had generated the following:

- a small number of provisional themes
- a record of my first or ‘surface’ reading
- a sense of how themes heightened and intensified over time
- information about what felt ‘off-limits’ within the system
- a sense of what rules and conventions also made possible
- a personal survival template inferred from consultant talk and ‘lore’

3.4.2 Analysis of interviews - Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)

Several versions of FDA are available including a 20-step procedure described by Parker (1992). This being too elaborate for my needs, I followed Willig’s (2001) 6 stage process which links discursive constructions to an individual’s subjectivity and behaviour, as well as examining the social and political contexts that determine the discursive resources and the subject positions available. I chose it for its accessibility for the novice researcher and in the belief that it would be complementary to the systems psychodynamic perspective I brought to the research.

FDA enables researchers to look at the part language plays in the constitution of social and psychological life. Discourse analysts are concerned with the availability of discursive resources within a culture, resources that determine which ways of seeing and being in the world are authorised and normal, which cast as deviant or unnatural. A discourse, which Parker (1994, p.245) defines as a corpus of statements ‘that construct objects and an array of subject positions’, is evidenced in our choice of language, enabling and constraining what is thought and said. Using history to excavate how knowledge was arrived at in the past, Foucault invited a deconstruction of the present, a suspicious reading of what we take for granted.

I brought to the analysis the understanding that discourses are sets of statements that are ideologically coherent. In practical terms, analysis involves identifying linguistic constructions in passages of text and exploring what they make possible in respect of

behaviour and subjectivity. FDA looks at how discourses combine to keep some versions of reality in circulation while excluding others. I believed that a deeper understanding of social defences could be achieved were anxiety weighed alongside the dimension of power relations. I was also interested in the extent to which 'authorised' discourses became internalised by individuals such that self-surveillance represented an unconscious form of organisational control. As Willig puts it:

> *… while discourses legitimate and reinforce existing social and institutional structures, these structures in turn also support and validate the discourses.*
>
> (Willig, 2013, p. 130)

The first stage was to gain a deep familiarity with the transcripts by reading and re-reading them and by listening over to the sound recordings of each interview. I made detailed notes on each transcript using a checklist that Willig adapted from Vingoe (2008):

Key questions	*Corresponding analytic stage*
How is the discursive object constructed through language?	Stage 1: Discursive constructions
What type of object is being constructed?	
What discourses are drawn upon?	Stage 2: Discourses
What is their relation to one another?	
What do the constructions achieve?	Stage 3: Action orientation
What is gained from deploying them here?	
What are their functions? What is the author doing here?	
What subject positions are made available by these constructions?	Stage 4: Positionings
What possibilities for action are mapped out by these constructions?	Stage 5: Practice
What can be said and done from with these subject positions?	
What can potentially be thought, felt and experienced from the available subject positions?	Stage 6: Subjectivity

My first task was to identify the discursive object in a passage and look at how it was constructed, using the research question to determine my focus. Having identified sections of text contributing to the construction of a single object, my next task was to look at the differences between constructions and situate these within wider discourses. In the third stage, I looked at the contexts in which different constructions were deployed to assess why it served the speaker to construct the object in such a way at a given point in the text. The fourth stage was concerned with the subject positions that speakers occupied in relation to the discourses employed, remembering that the discourse positions the speaker:

> *Subject positions … offer discursive locations from which to speak and act … taking up a subject position has direct implications for subjectivity.*
>
> Willig (2013: 132)

I next went on to look at the practical implications of the relationship between discursive constructions and subject positions, exploring how they work to open up or close down possibilities for action. In the final stage, I looked at the consequences of taking up various subject positions for the research participant's subjective experience. While the focus in the stage before was on what could be said and done from within the available subject positions, the emphasis in the final stage of Willig's version of analysis was on what could be felt, thought and understood from the vantage point of the subject position occupied. As an example of the procedure, consider two extracts from my interview with Tim, a veteran Partner:

Extract 1

> ***Tim:*** *… The important thing is, we're in the biggest market, where we've got a world of opportunity, we've got some very smart and able people. We need to look after each other and we need to go into the market and fight a very stiff competition.*

Extract 2

> ***Tim:*** *… some people go on a purple patch for a month or two months or a year and then they have a quieter six months and that is the reality of the industry we're in. There are some people that are able to do it month to month, quarter to quarter, year to year, almost without pause. But certainly in my experience and the experience of people I've worked with, there's a natural cycle and it's not all that easy.*

In the first extract, Tim portrays 'the market' as a virtual space that has a size and a boundary, so it can be entered and left. Here, 'smart and able people' from his firm 'fight' competitors in order to win clients and secure revenue. We understand this to be a tough fight in which he advises that colleagues 'need to look after each other'. The market in this extract is constructed as a military battleground with consultants from his firm its fellow combatants, on the same side, and competitors, their enemies.

In the second, Tim talks about engaging in market activity and his personal experience of its vicissitudes. For him, 'the reality of the industry' involves busier and quieter periods, even if for others the experience is different. The market is still a virtual space in this example, but it is now subject to cycles of change like weather or the seasons. In the first,

Tim draws on a neoliberal discourse about the virtues of competition, and in the second, on a scientific discourse, creating an equivalence between his fluctuating success in the market and natural cycles of renewal.

At the time of the interview, Tim's performance had dipped. His mood and sense of agency were notably different when he galvanised for a fight than when he described the 'natural cycle' as 'not all that easy'. The fight appeared to be a collective undertaking, perhaps a fantasy of togetherness, whereas waiting for one's luck to change when the cycle was not in your favour, happened alone. However, he was positioned favourably in both extracts: in the first, ready to do battle, even be harmed, on the firm's behalf; in the second example, as a hostage to fortune - he could take only limited responsibility for his results. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we might understand both subject positions as essentially defensive and from which he emerged untarnished - a willing combatant but blameless if vanquished.

Considered from the systemic perspective, Tim's individual subjectivity would have implications for the collective mood and sense of shared responsibility among Partners. The Tim who saw himself engaged in a communal struggle might have felt differently obliged to colleagues compared to the Tim who felt he was waiting on his own for luck to turn in his favour. In the first extract, Tim appears optimistic and resilient, in the second, lonely and defeated. However, Willig stresses the speculative nature of this stage, pointing out that what can be felt, thought and understood is not necessarily what is felt, thought and understood, there being no link from language to mental states assumed within 'her' explanation of FDA. The availability of subject positions does not account for how or why people get attached to them.

The concept of the 'defended subject', referred to above (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013), offered a useful way to think about the relationship between the subject positions people occupy and whether they drew on discourses that were defensive in nature. Following the redundancies, Tim may have been feeling anxious about job security, which would explain him alternating between a 'fight' response to threats and a 'flight' into a fantasy in which the firm waited patiently for a Partner's fortunes to change.

Having annotated each text, I summarised my responses to the questions in the table above so that each interview transcript had an accompanying analysis in note form. I referred to contemporaneous notes on how I had experienced the interview process and made more on the process of analysis, reflecting on how I and the interviewee were

positioned in relation to one another, both in the live situation and during analysis. From Saldana (2016), I took the idea of converting notes into analytic memos that interspersed short extracts with interpretative commentary and reflections. I wrote memos for each interview along with a pen portrait of every interviewee.

I spent around 2 weeks with each transcript, first following Willig's process and then applying a systems psychodynamic filter in a series of further iterations. Having completed this for each interview separately, I returned to analyse the properties of the whole data set. I listed all the constructions used and how the same discursive objects were differently constructed in different discourses. I also noted the broader ideological discourses I felt those in the interviews drew upon (e.g. managerialism, positivism).

This done, I made notes on the implications of particular discourses for action, what subject positions each made available and how this affected practice and subjectivity. I tried to avoid looking only for repetition, paying equal attention to contrast and variety. If field notes were descriptive of the situations I observed, FDA helped me understand how interpretations of those situations were arrived at, maintained and promoted across the system. Over the 10 interviews, I identified 20 constructions I thought to be most significant, either because they were used widely or because they added unique insights that felt important. Having worked through each of the constructions several times and subjected each to the questions in the table above, I used iterative mind-mapping to connect the discourses used and categorise them. Some discourses emerged as forebears, others as descendants or cousins. I found it especially interesting to link discourses in the data to wider societal discourses because it revealed to me something about the mutually reinforcing nature of micro and macro ideological narratives. Just as societal discourses 'showed up' in Partner talk, so their use in this talk reinforced their social validity.

There were risks attached to the approach I adopted combining FDA and systems psychodynamics. Foremost, the risk of uncoupling text from its context and assigning to it meanings never intended or understood in the original conversation. This could be compounded were I to take this text as evidence of an unconscious motive. The means at my disposal to mitigate such risks were reflexive journaling, supervision and attention to the ethical parameters that I identified in advance of the study.

3.5 Ethics, politics and safety

To gain institutional approval for my fieldwork and as a moral duty to the host organisation, I had to demonstrate that I had thought through a series of ethical considerations. My obligation was a) to foresee and thereby avoid the potential to do harm and b) to guide my choices during field work and analysis in response to unforeseen contingencies. I assumed that harm could arise from my failure to have anticipated potential pitfalls as much as from any desire actively to exploit or deceive.

Questions of power inform relations between researcher and researched. An ethnographer has the power to design a study and to represent the people studied, while the researched have power to grant or constrain access to the field and to assign or deny status to the work. Ethical questions are complex and ever-present, some surfacing in advance of an inquiry, some in the course of it and others only afterwards. Current organisational ethnographers, unlike early anthropologists, typically write knowing that the researched can read (and therefore dispute) what is written.

3.5.1 The authority of the researcher

Looking to secure the agreement of the organisation to be studied, I had to be explicit concerning my limited experience as a researcher. While I was obliged to describe what I wanted to do and to demonstrate sufficient confidence in my ability to do it, nevertheless, I felt it was important not to over-state my abilities or convey the impression, in a context where expertise was prized, that I was any kind of expert. The request I made of the firm was therefore that they host a person learning how to research. I now recognise that this primed me for insecurity in some ways, but at the time I struggled when a higher status was conferred on me than I felt I deserved.

3.5.2 Authorisation from stakeholders

Both the host organisation and my academic institution put in place formal contracts to ensure that ethical standards would be upheld. The consulting firm drew up a non-disclosure agreement and the university required that an ethics form be approved. The firm wanted to protect intellectual property, prevent unwanted disclosure and to make it explicit that I would receive no remuneration. For the academic institution, the emphasis was on my duty of care to participants and an obligation to behave with integrity: acting with discretion and avoiding misleading claims.

3.5.3 Pitfalls of psychoanalytically informed research

The claim to perceive, record and represent unconscious patterns of behaviour can be contentious and I had to bear in mind that the psychoanalytically informed researcher can become unjustifiably invested in dysfunctional patterns. To illustrate this, Gabriel (1999) points to the careless or casual use of clinical terms (e.g. 'symptoms' or 'pathological') in systems psychodynamic literature and a risk that such a researcher approaches the organisation preoccupied with damage and toxicity.

And, just as the researcher has a duty of care to participants, so they have a duty of care to themselves. In the abstract, I assumed that I would be a transferential object for others in the field and would identify with research subjects such that our inner lives and personal histories would entwine through complex, unconscious processes. Whilst this offers an avenue to deeper understanding, in practice, it can also be painful and disruptive, hence a need to be disciplined, not only about the protections afforded by therapy and supervision, but also about periodic rest and relaxation.

In my case, as a consultant myself and as someone who had worked for consulting firms, I had to be especially attentive to how much this firm reminded me of those I had worked for in the past and whether some of my motivation for this study derived from unfinished business with the firms who employed me earlier in my career.

3.5.4 Field relations, confidentiality and informed consent

Though attracted to the idea in principle, early in fieldwork I had a change of heart about the use of informants and an aversion to the idea of trading favours or feeling obligated due to alliances with particular individuals. Overall I understood myself to be in a position of trust. I was often confided in and would sometimes listen to one account of a situation, uncomfortable in the knowledge that another party had offered me a different interpretation. In a system where people tended to avoid candid conversations, it could feel burdensome to be complicit with what was going unsaid and stressful to think that a correspondent unconsciously wanted me to act as a conduit even if, post hoc, it offered useful data.

In practice, I found that my role involved working among multiple and competing obligations - to the research participants, to the organisation under study, to my academic institution, to the field of systems psychodynamic scholarship and not least, to myself as researcher. For the interviews, I used signed informed consent forms to be

explicit about my responsibility for confidentiality, anonymity and the secure storage of data. As I wrote up my findings, I also sought periodic feedback from a retired Partner who could challenge how accurately I represented the context.

3.5.5 The representation of individuals and the firm

Writing up, I wanted to offer an account of my time in the field that seemed true. This meant being faithful to the relational and intersubjective way in which the data was generated whilst taking responsibility for a subjective analysis and interpretation that was unique to me. Ethnocentrism is a term used to refer to the evaluation of another culture through the prism of one's own. The concept is a caution to the researcher who unconsciously applies standards from their culture of origin to what is observed in the field and in so doing, assumes their own culture to be superior. To check myself against this, I tried to be tentative in my interpretations and not, as alluded to above, stray from the role of researcher into the role of expert.

3.5.6 The psychological safety of the researcher

I found fieldwork and data analysis to be emotionally demanding, much more so than I had expected. Taking up an unfamiliar role in an unfamiliar environment, I experienced a disjunction, sometimes feeling like a helpless child engaged in an adult pursuit. Dreams that I recorded in my journal, which often involved trying to force my way past obstacles or perform futile tasks, testify to how disturbing this was.

Particularly challenging, I tended to soak up emotions that were widespread in the organisational system yet disbarred from conscious expression. Like those in the setting, when I had an emotional reaction to a field experience, I typically discounted it, being in an environment where it felt threatening. It was only after I left the field that I understood myself to have been 'used' to contain what was at large in the system. At the time, I was merely anxious without appreciating why I felt that way.

Fortunately, academic boundaries proved to be containing. I knew fieldwork was finite and that my insider/outsider status was temporary. It was encouraging that the supervision I received anticipated periodic insecurity and conflicts of interest, and was organised by an academic institution/practising NHS trust that specialises in mental health. Regular meetings with my peers (during fieldwork and data analysis) reassured me that my feelings were valid and shared, even if they were unwanted in the setting. To research into an organisation where people experience difficulty in forming secure

attachments meant that I had to take regular breaks from it to get my own relational needs met. Eventually, a worldwide health crisis forced an unambiguous break from the field.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the findings of the study. In it I present a description and analysis of what I saw, felt, heard and came to understand in the course of my field work. In the following chapter, I interpret these and consider their implications.

The chapter is organised into six themes followed by a summary and an analysis of the whole. The themes comprise two distinct groups. The first group of three represent what I understood to be ‘givens’ of the observed organisation, permanent characteristics that were present and in evidence irrespective of the market conditions:

a) the established work ethic

b) the relationship of organisation members to ambiguity and

c) a fear of fallibility and failure

The second group builds on the first to demonstrate ways that emotions, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics were affected as market conditions altered:

d) uses of power and the function of politics

e) the contested nature of leadership authority

f) the system’s capacity for reflection and change

Though the themes are necessarily presented in a sequence and distinct from one another, it should be noted that this does not fully reflect the dynamic, interdependent and mutually influencing nature of the phenomena observed or described.

I start with a description of the organisation under benign market conditions, including what was latent in the system at that time, and follow it with what happened to group dynamics and organisational behaviour when the firm faced adversity.

The findings are not observations with the observer removed from them. Rather, they reveal patterns of organising and influence that I internalised and became part of.

4.2 Theme 1: The established work ethic

An intense approach to work characterised the research site and this was a constant, irrespective of market conditions. The office design was functional, arranged to support quiet concentration and the atmosphere in the open plan area felt subdued, with juniors appearing hesitant to interrupt or otherwise disturb those in positions of authority. In an early field note, I made a record of my physical surroundings:

> *Only a few workstations are occupied. Men and women who look to be in their thirties or forties stand or sit in front of laptops. Some have grey or navy coats and bags nearby. Other stations are vacant but show signs of earlier occupation. I assume the coats' owners to be in meetings nearby. There is very little sound - the occasional low conversation, a photocopier in motion, soft footsteps on the grey carpeted floor. An official 'Quiet Zone' is situated elsewhere.*

Work and career occupied a central place in the lives of those observed. Consultants worked long hours and reported that they were expected to be available for work to an extent that would have been considered extreme in other occupations. Demanding travel itineraries, tight deadlines, communicating between distant time zones and the frequent reworking of presentation materials meant that early starts, late finishes and weekend work were commonplace. Some junior consultants were at their desks when I arrived for a breakfast meeting at 7.30am one day and still there when I collected my coat after a meal out with Partners at 10.30pm.

Accounts of what lay behind this 'always on' culture varied according to the perspectives of different interest groups. Nervous clients, ambitious Partners, peer pressure and competition for promotion were all said to play a part in standardising excessive work hours. A junior consultant once told me that work regularly consumed the majority of her waking hours and occasionally limited those available for sleep.

A conflict of interest was apparent. Partners were incentivised to sell projects irrespective of resource constraints, but simultaneously responsible for smoothing peaks and troughs in workload to protect juniors from unhealthy stress. The juniors were equipped with mobile phones and laptops to help them be productive on the move, but this made it difficult for them to uphold time boundaries, especially as being widely available could be construed as a virtue in a competition for advancement.

At times, an air of urgency pervaded the office that I felt to have a performative quality and I speculated about the emotions that might be informing the swift movements and

facial expressions I saw. Junior consultants seemed eager to appear occupied, even over-extended, and I thought about what was being communicated - something about them being engaged on work of vital importance, something about them being indispensable. In my notes I speculated they might be worried about appearing under-employed and therefore thought surplus to requirements.

I also noted a connection between client work involving the sale of time as a commodity and an office atmosphere wherein the optimum use of time felt vital. Edward, an experienced Partner, concurring that his colleagues worked flat out, explained the pressures they felt under: anxious about securing work and competing for resources, several relied on their bonus to pay for school fees or to fund other personal commitments. Not everyone, he told me, budgeted on their salary alone.

The intensity of work varied slightly with the strength of demand but, as it is in the nature of consulting to look for work simultaneously with delivering it and, at different phases of the economic cycle, to serve clients both when they are cutting costs and investing surplus, so there always appeared to exist a case for working flat out, as if, even in times of abundance, business failure could lie round the next corner.

Questioned in casual conversation about the attraction of a career in consulting, many replied that the opportunity to work on intellectually stimulating problems with intellectually gifted colleagues held a strong appeal. The prestige of the clients and the material rewards were mentioned but they were considered of less importance. Several experienced staff said that they had been consulting longer than they first imagined.

Consultants were typically ambitious. They expected regular promotion and understood that the quality and volume of what they produced was constantly evaluated. Principals, wanting to progress to Partner, had to prove that they could secure and sustain Partner-like revenue contributions. Once elected, Partners had to achieve or exceed their financial targets year after year. Tim, a consulting industry veteran, explained the ‘deal’ in the form of an equation: ‘If you don’t perform, you’re out.’

Taken at face value, the data conforms to a conventional view of a highly pressurised, professional services environment (e.g. Stein, 2017). Working intensely could be understood as a pragmatic response to demanding circumstances. If and when people feel their employment situation to be precarious, it is unsurprising if they demonstrate their dedication and commitment in rather overt ways, hoping those in charge will take note. However, the starting point for a systems psychodynamic interpretation is to

question whether such a reading offers a full or satisfactory account. In particular, it is concerned with aspects of the situation that lie outside conscious awareness and the psychological properties of the group as a whole.

Considering over-working as a property of the system, three contributory factors stood out when analysing the available data from a systems psychodynamic perspective. They were: a) mixed feelings about depending on clients; b) a collective tendency towards an anxious perfectionism and c) a taboo on acknowledging fatigue.

4.2.1 Depending on clients

A strong impression conveyed in this workplace was that the client occupied an influential position in the collective imagination. The client and their interests were 'present' in almost every task, discussion and decision. As if to justify the strength of their commitment to work, junior consultants could be overheard (e.g. around a meal table) identifying with the client's ambitions and investing themselves wholeheartedly in the success of a project, if not the culture and mission of the client organisation. What was important to the client became important to them and more attractive if the client was working on something of social or environmental benefit. For example, when an oil company was trying to adopt less environmentally damaging working practices, juniors on the team seemed especially proud to be involved.

However, analysis of interviews with Partners also indicated that acting in service of clients could sometimes evoke feelings of inferiority that were correspondingly defended against to maintain the positive self-image of an individual or the firm. Martin, a Partner with long experience in the firm, remembered observing an attitude of intellectual superiority among his senior colleagues back when he was a junior:

> *If I go back to the late 90s, the clients were buying, by comparison with today and certainly in this market, almost anything. There were things you could get clients to do that you wouldn't be able to get them to do today.*

Later, speaking about the present, he described a deference at odds with what had gone before:

> *I think we now have very little power vis-a-vis clients. I think we will do almost anything the client asks for. I think we probably perceive we have less power than we may have. And I think we pander a lot. That's a general sense of how I see us behaving.*

Although the comments refer to contrasting behaviours - arrogance and servility - both could be said to arise in response to mixed feelings about dependency and need. Similarly, in a 1:1 interview, the outgoing unit leader, Paul, described disappointments and setbacks that he had encountered when prospecting for business:

> *It's fine once you've won the work, but people put you through these competitive tender processes, where they insist you speak to procurement people for compliance reasons and it all becomes quite confrontational. And you sometimes feel that you need to put a huge amount of effort in and really try and empathise and understand the client and I think they get that. But it often turns into a conversation of 'Well, we looked at everybody and we decided in the end we'd do it ourselves or we felt like it was too hard. We liked the consultant's pitches, but we felt it was too hard so we should probably just not do it'. And you think 'Okay, well how does that feel for a consultant?' For me it felt like I was wasting a lot of good effort… And then I sort of say to myself, 'Well, you know, I've only got - there's only so many brain cells I've got left. Do I really want them to be dying doing this stuff for nothing?'*

His was a rare acknowledgement that rejection and loss were part of the consulting experience as well as excitement and joy, which I also witnessed. Paul appeared relieved to express something that was true for him, even if it was heretical in respect of the popular discourse. However, the interviews were private conversations; unconscious embargoes that led Partners to self-censor did not appear to apply.

In public, ambivalent feelings towards clients were typically downplayed in favour of the view that client relations were only ever motivating and inspirational, this pointing to the suggestion that only feelings representing work in a positive light were acceptable in this setting. Matthew, a visiting Partner from the US observed that London colleagues tended to engage in fewer 'post-mortems' than they ought to have after pitches, optimistically focusing on future opportunities and post-rationalising disappointing outcomes in order to avoid the uncomfortable feelings involved.

I noted a contrast between the sterile and muted physical environments in which consulting work took place and the strength of feeling that work relationships could evoke. Partners appeared to experience primitive fears: of abandonment when work was scarce and of engulfment when they felt overwhelmed by client demand (Rosenfeld, 1965 cited in Hopper, 2012) . They found advantageous opportunities in the course of their

work and these fuelled ambition and desire, but there were also many uncertainties, which led to fear and insecurity. Whereas ambition and desire seemed legitimate in this workplace, as I will demonstrate, fear and insecurity were disowned.

4.2.2 Perfectionism and the disowning of failure

As mentioned above, much of the activity in the office involved crafting slide presentations for use in pitching for work or for presenting analyses once a project was underway. Spreadsheet and presentation software were ubiquitous and it was understood that client pitches or meetings of a project steering committee were important rituals. Remarkable to the outside observer were the volume of slides each deck could contain and the number of drafts produced to get to a final version. With access to multiple slide decks over time, I learned that every contingency was anticipated, each data point checked with meticulous attention to detail.

Just as there was a shared expectation that client work would be performed to the highest standards, so consultants of all grades set the bar high with respect to teamwork and leadership. Competition for promotion and the continuous deselection of all but the best performers made juniors eager to advance and afraid of being left behind. They in turn placed high demands on their seniors and, in anonymous engagement surveys, were unsparing of Partners whose leadership did not live up to the quality standards they felt entitled to expect. In particular, Partners were criticised in surveys for failing to engage with the apprenticeship of juniors and for modelling values and behaviours that were felt to be inconsistent with those of a leader.

While Paul voiced some frustration about what it took to acquire clients, Theo spoke in interview of his disillusionment about what is achievable with them once acquired:

> *… you go in with a strong ideology, hopefully… a conviction of how to help the client. You put your heart, your mind, everything into it. And you quickly recognize that you have to deal with a multitude of compromises on the way. It took me a long time as a young consultant to accept that… that suboptimal is ultimately what you get… There are just too many minefields, politics, all kinds of stuff … And your anxiety goes up … you will never be recognised for delivering the value that you promised, because you have to compromise. And that multiplies.*

Asked whether he thought it was safe to discuss these feelings in the Partner group, he quickly replied:

No, no. It's a taboo. It's a complete unknown…

And asked why:

> *… because people want to say 'I went in there and I had a huge impact and I killed it' and all that.*

Martin, who only agreed to an interview after he had accepted a job elsewhere, gave a different example of how difficult the collective mindset found it to process failure, referring to stories that would circulate in the aftermath of an unsuccessful pitch:

> *… it's like 'We didn't win this pitch because, I dunno, Fred showed up and Fred's not as good as Harriet and Harriet then thinks that if she had showed up, we would have won it. And it's only because Fred's showed up and he's an idiot that we didn't.' And there's a lot of that type of thought process and various senior Partners very much go down that road. You know, 'We didn't bring the best of the firm.' … It's a narrative that gets created quite a lot. 'The right people didn't go. They should do. If they go there, there's some huge thing just waiting to burst open, but, you know, you're not the right people.' That happens quite a lot.*

The habit of disowning failure by locating it in 'bad' individuals, in other words, of scapegoating, extended to periodic culls of the Partner population, according to Martin's account. He explained what he thought happened after senior leaders compared the bonuses they could afford to pay with those offered by the competition:

> *I think the fact that we see them (our competitors) at a certain figure creates an inferiority complex. And then it comes back to - which comes up a lot in the firm and where we were a few minutes ago - 'Oh, the Partners aren't capable. You guys are not capable enough. You're not good Partners. What we need to do is get rid of the crap Partners. If we get rid of the crap ones, we'll be fine.' And that comes up constantly. And when you're at the Partner table, it's a feeling that's there. You think 'OK, if I haven't sold anything for three months, maybe I'm one of the crap Partners. Ooh, so I'm going to get fired.' There's a lot of fear.*

I will go on to demonstrate that this anxious perfectionism was not confined to Partners but permeated the whole organisation, observable in many forms: excessive working as discussed here but equally manifest among the other themes listed above that I will explore in more detail later. Dominic described there being a 'safety deficit' and my field notes record that, so powerful was the collective aversion to failure, struggling individuals

seemed to be left to fend for themselves without support, almost as if their Partner colleagues feared their struggles to be contagious. For my part, I experienced fear in the counter-transference, focusing particularly on feelings of inadequacy and the perceived threat of exclusion. Like the local population, I found it difficult to acknowledge or accept my own fallibility in the field, unconsciously conforming to a tacit prohibition on anything that could be perceived as weakness. It was only after the end of the fieldwork and completion of the analysis that I recognised my sensitivity to what was a characteristic of the system.

4.2.3 A taboo on acknowledging fatigue

Meetings with the Human Resources Manager and the Staffing Operations Manager in early 2019 provided a deeper insight into the experience of workers in this setting. At that point, sickness absence among consultants was running a percentage point and a half above the national average; six cases of burnout were being managed and a backlog of unused leave was distorting the overall picture of availability. From the various formal and informal monitoring systems used to gauge staff engagement, work-life balance was evidently a constant and enduring preoccupation. Although a degree of staff turnover was encouraged by the 'up or out' approach to career management, attrition at the Manager level was problematic. The unit found it especially difficult to retain female Managers which impacted the composition of the available talent pool for promotion to Principal and Partner.

Partners often looked and sounded tired. Puffiness around the eyes, hoarse voices and the symptoms of minor ailments were commonplace. I witnessed a small number of aggressive exchanges between Partners which suggested that parties to the disagreement were chronically stressed and insufficiently rested. In the wider firm beyond the UK, the lack of growth in London and a perception of poor productivity per Partner were remarked on, something that the unit leader, Christopher, accepted:

> *… one weakness that I specifically want to address is our low productivity in the UK market. I want us to be successful because growth will allow the juniors to be promoted, but for them to move up the pyramid, we have to be more productive. By productive, I mean the amount of revenue that we bring in per Partner…*

Talking to Ben on the same topic - the perceived weakness of the UK - drew a terse response:

I know people from the unit head meeting in Europe who constantly said 'Ben, why is London doing so crap?' But they happened to be in that forum. Speak to anyone outside that meeting, they don't think that at all … I'm sure Christopher gets a lot of heat for it with Marcus (Head of Europe) and I know others in that meeting have that perception, but it's not a universally held view.

However much London's performance may or may not have been disputed, that Ben looked to discount the view of the European leadership team appeared defensive. Taken together, low growth and productivity, high sickness absence, unused leave, high turnover in critical roles, stress related health complaints, micro-management and irritability all point to an emotional exhaustion consistent with burnout. Yet, despite discussing morale on a regular basis, only once did I hear a Partner meeting make any connection between fatigue and disappointing performance. Nor did I hear Partners consider whether fatigue might distort their own perception of threat and cause them to over-react to what they perceived to be danger.

On an unconscious level, it appeared as though the Partner group felt itself to face a stark choice, either a) to be so overcome with tiredness as to stop functioning altogether or b) to refuse to succumb to tiredness, instead presenting itself as unflagging and expecting everyone else to do the same. An alternative option, that of acknowledging the shared feeling of tiredness and treating it as a source of data rather than a collective failure did not appear to be available for conscious consideration. The consequence for the unit seems to have been to render it deaf to distress.

To summarise: evidence indicated a culture of nervous hyperactivity which could not be accounted for as pragmatism alone. It appeared that unconscious defences were also operating. Partners had mixed feelings about depending on clients and were disturbed when client relations evoked feelings of vulnerability or a loss of control. The system appeared to have evolved unconscious defences in the form of an anxious perfectionism and a fearful splitting off of emotions, which could be seen as potential weaknesses in this context. Tiredness had no place in this setting and appearing tireless was glorified. The evidence does not support the attribution of over-working to a single factor but rather to a complex interplay between dynamic factors.

As the chapter develops, I will look further into the idea that Partners' exhaustion derived not only from the demands of client projects but was added to by the emotional energy they expended in repressing the feelings that arose in the course of the work. Consciously

maintaining a calm exterior whilst unconsciously maintaining defences against anxiety meant using physical and psychological resources that might otherwise have been invested to improve productivity and grow the unit.

4.3 Theme 2: The relationship of organisation members to ambiguity

My notes record that Partners often used the term 'entrepreneurial' to describe their own attitudes and to argue for a quality they thought the firm should be known for. An entrepreneur was thought to be creative and dynamic, someone with an appetite for risk and as such, potentially attractive to clients. By extension, change and uncertainty, with associations to novelty and opportunity, were framed as exciting. In one of our periodic 'catch-ups', a junior consultant told me about working on a new client prospect, their recent promotion and an opportunity to join a successful practice, bringing all these developments together with the phrase 'So… exciting times!' However, as much as I understood excitement to be an authorised emotion, I also came to think of it as a counterfeit for other feelings that were more mixed in nature. In particular, I noted that consulting work required a high tolerance of ambiguity at the same time seeming to attract people with an appetite for feeling in control.

Existing to insulate against the destabilising aspects of change, institutional rituals and rites of passage played a significant and symbolic part in the life of this firm. New consultants were on-boarded and assigned mentors in uniform fashion. Projects followed the same arc from kick-off events through steering committee meetings to a final wrap-up. There was an understood dress code for pitching to clients. Team dinners, promotion announcements and networking or alumni events followed an established pattern. Even social events had a routine aspect - the annual ski trip, the charity hike and the client hospitality event were much the same when I attended as they had been before and have been since. Such predictable aspects of daily life offered constancy and continuity in an otherwise turbulent environment.

However, while ceremonies and traditions were useful in respect of strengthening a sense of belonging and reinforcing the firm's values, when weighed against the volume of change that was a permanent feature of consultants' lives, these practices were not sufficient to contain the anxiety that suffused the research setting. Indeed, they may have added to it. Traditions could be said to function as management controls, defending the existing social order and keeping resistance in check.

More anxiety-inducing, as I understood it, was that consultants spent much of their time awaiting the outcome of decisions (e.g. about being selected for projects or promotion) over which they exercised limited control. I witnessed displays of hope and optimism - e.g. when Partners became playful as they set off for a client pitch - but also heard in interviews that members of the organisation often dealt with their fear of the unknown by imagining worst case scenarios and preparing themselves for those.

For juniors, much of their anxiety focused on being selected for projects, meeting deadlines and on whether their career was progressing at pace with their expectations. For Partners, their preoccupations and worries focused on meeting ambiguous obligations to clients, securing a pipeline of future work and, as they saw it, safeguarding their main assets - client relationships - from predatory colleagues. When they stepped back from these day-to-day concerns, they also faced more existential questions about the sustainability and integrity of consulting as a whole.

4.3.1 The legitimacy of consulting as a profession

Listening to talk among Partners and attending their meetings, it was evident that consulting services cost large sums of money and that the benefits to clients could be difficult to prove beyond doubt. Consultants gave advice and shared knowledge with clients but could not always legislate for whether their advice was followed or their recommendations implemented. Even when they were, the return on investment for clients could be intangible and difficult to attribute to consulting alone.

I found no evidence to suggest that these consultants were dishonest. As equity stakeholders, they were invested in the firm's fortunes but I did not encounter the unethical practices for which some rival firms have since been significantly criticised (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022; Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Rather, I noted the projects they worked on were complex, time-bound and highly contextual. The merit of specific outcomes could be contested and politicised because they relied on subjective judgements, but according to my observations, it would only be accurate to say that the work was characterised by a high degree of ambiguity and, at odds with the stereotypical image of consultants as somewhat over-confident, that this level of uncertainty actually contributed to a fragile sense of collective self-worth.

In interview, Natasha described Partners oscillating between feelings of grandiosity and impotence:

You know, our firm is really interesting. And it's not just a UK problem. We see success and we become high about it. 'Oh my god! We are, like, the best in the world. We are like God!' And then we see failure and we think 'Oh my god! We are the worst in the world. Let's just kill each other…' It feels more like we are kids (than) mature professionals who realise this is a difficult market.

I observed the same phenomenon. Partners, feeling under constant pressure to prove themselves, tended both to overstate their accomplishments and react with horror to setbacks. No doubt they maintained a polished image in client-facing situations but when perpetually selling themselves to each other, they seemed insecure.

An example was the habitual use of language (e.g. 'awesome', 'incredible', 'amazing') that could be interpreted as hyperbolic and overblown. In contrast to the candid quote from Natasha, Christopher, the unit head, opened our interview totally 'on message':

I want to reinforce that we've got a very strong Partner team. As individuals, everybody is strong and is very capable. And I believe we work well together as a group. I've said many times before, we don't have anyone that's arrogant, we don't have anyone that is quiet and shy in the corner. We don't have cliques that don't work with one another. It's actually a very productive and capable team. And that team is surrounded by some truly amazing people in the company. As we sit through the consultant reviews, we look at the fabulous people we've got and the opportunity around us. And then, out in the market, we have London and the UK. We couldn't wish to be in a better city.

This example of positivity, relating in this case to internal capabilities, gives some insight into how the imperative to sell influenced the discourse but also into whether Partners themselves had internalised doubts about whether their contributions were valuable. Assuming these doubts were largely repressed in daily life, gaining and securing access to clients nevertheless meant engaging with complex internal dynamics.

4.3.2 The availability of client work

In interview, Martin compared purchasing patterns from early in his career with the present day:

I think the internet has been another driver of change. It's less information arbitrage. It has to be more bringing real insight. In the past you could bring certain knowledge and people were wowed by it. A lot of the time (now), clients know

more about a lot of things than the consultants. That wasn't always the case in the past because we had access to our own research functions and these types of things, whereas today, everyone can be their own researcher.

Ben also had an observation about purchasing behaviour, but for him, competition was the issue:

The UK market's a little bit more mature and it demands a more surgical use of consultants. There's also a range of competitors who are quite niche-y, who are typically about half our cost. So if companies really want to squeeze it, it's quite hard because we're still somewhat - also given our scale - we're somewhat a jack of all trades, master of none. If a company really wants to shop around and get a niche player with deep expertise, it's hard to compete.

The Partners I spoke to put different emphases on internal and extraneous factors limiting the volume of opportunities open to them. Some blamed soft market conditions, others a reward system that favoured short term cash over long term assets. For Hugo, Partners needed to be 'more bloody-mindedly commercial'. In Paul's view, Partners were too enamoured of bespoke solutions to scale them up and monetise them. Ben and Theo separately acknowledged that a single win (of the right magnitude) could be the difference between a good and a disappointing year. However, among them all was a shared conviction that work was getting harder to find.

Theo was most direct about how it felt to start the financial year with an ambitious target:

Many people - and it's not a criticism - they wake up on January 1st with a big concern, which is 'Okay, I'm going to have to find the next 5 million. Where am I going to find 5 million?' Then the clock ticks. It doesn't help that we have financial reporting that shows you are on zero in March and it's like 'Oh my god! What am I going to do?' It takes a lot of confidence to ultimately to be able to see through this and say 'You know what? I know what I'm doing.'

Having a lot of confidence appears to have been rare. Theo reported that some Partners guarded access to client relationships as though they were their personal property:

There is a bit of 'I don't understand what you stand for and therefore I'm not going to bring you to my clients' type of thing. 'These are my clients and not your clients and I don't know what you represent, but whatever you represent, you are a risk to

my relationships because I don't know and I'm not going to make an effort to understand.'

He also described how certain Partners also judged themselves to be above their peers:

There are a couple who feel like they over-deliver and that the others are losers, that they don't contribute. They look at the rest of the team with contempt.

When established Partners held onto their assets tightly, the effect on new Partners was discouraging. Duncan spoke about a change in colleagues who had sponsored his election to Partner but became territorial and possessive when he took up the role:

In terms of what I thought it would be like, (I expected) even more togetherness when you're going after things. I find that a bit the opposite to be frank. You know, it's a bit like, well, 'This is my pie, this is your pie' kind of thing'.

In sum, it appeared that gaining access to clients was felt by Partners to be difficult. The advent of the internet had reduced dependency on consultants and Partners had to navigate a complex political system within the firm in order to meet their targets. An ever-present tension between individual and collective interests, perhaps more hidden under favourable market conditions, became more evident in harder times.

4.3.3 Fairness and reliability

Along with doubts about the legitimacy of the profession and access to future work opportunities, a further source of uncertainty concerned the peer system of governance and its capacity to generate just and foreseeable outcomes. Though I learned of instances where individual Partners sought advantage over colleagues, these tended to be covert because the official expectation was that the firm as a whole ought to be held to high standards of reliability, consistency and equitability. In the following extract, Martin appears to find it difficult to talk directly about firing people, instead repeatedly using the word 'unpredictable'. It is applied both as a euphemism and its repetition as a means whereby he can convey the strength of emotion he and colleagues felt when the firm decided to move three UK Partners on:

And the organisation has been known for doing unpredictable things. Well, we did some unpredictable things in London earlier in the year, which we didn't predict and weren't predicted, interestingly. You know, they really weren't predicted. And even now, there's fear that some unpredicted thing is going to happen either this year or next year. Who knows? It's there. It's definitely there and the global Partner

meeting did not disabuse anybody that some unpredictable things might happen. And that creates fear. That creates fear.

Some Partners felt Christopher, the unit leader, to be partisan and his practice to be unfairly advantaged. In casual conversation, Ben pointed out to me that whilst the practice that he belonged to was generating 10m USD per Partner with two Partners, the unit leader's, with four, was considerably behind, at 1m per Partner. When Christopher overturned a decision of the Appraisal Committee to secure more resources for his practice at the expense of others, there was rancour. Martin described this as 'protectionist' and such partisanship as 'the elephant in the room'. Dominic described the leader's practice as 'a firm within a firm'; David labelled them 'a clique'.

Entered just after the Appraisal Committee meeting, when new wins were starting to prove elusive, a field note reads:

There's a big yearning for fairness and justice. And a hatred of 'cheats'.

Informally, Tim talked of 'old behaviours surfacing'. Prompted to elaborate, he detailed:

Squabbles about booking credits, looking good at other people's expense, superficial forms of 'helping' that give the appearance of collegiality but don't help.

Forecasting meetings were a special source of antagonism. Their purpose was to exchange information that would inform future resourcing and investment decisions. Duncan questioned the honesty in the Partner group, using these meetings as an example:

You know, we have a - I don't know what it is now - 40, 50 million pipeline but… is it really, really there? Sometimes I feel that people say there are these opportunities and there might be, but I don't think they are as real as people say…

Paul, drawing on his experience as a former unit leader, was less tentative in his appraisal:

… you do see defensive behaviours and selfish behaviours creep in when there isn't enough to go round. When individuals are under pressure they start - well, there are a number of things that happen. One is that they don't involve other people or share. They start chasing things which are pretty marginal from a probability perspective. Then they start faking and lying to their colleagues, both as a way of

securing resources to pursue those marginal opportunities and as a way of deferring anything nasty that might happen to them…

In a catch-up with Tim after one such meeting, I recorded his frustration with what had been:

… a good call for 30 minutes that descended into a 'pissing contest' between Francis and Theo that had the effect of discouraging everyone else and discrediting the entire process. Ben got especially upset and Martin started mischief-making and throwing in hand-grenades…

Partners saw in these violations of trust the potential for a delicate system of peer accountability, one that relied on individual integrity, to disintegrate. Reflecting on my own feelings at the time - of inadequacy, exhaustion and dismay - I came to understand the significance of the counter-transference. It occurred to me that a) I had a valency for taking on emotions that were proving burdensome to the system and b) that, as a researcher wanting to get to know Partners, I was easily recruited into helping them avoid interpersonal conflicts by being available to listen to their grievances.

4.3.4 Cognitive dissonance

In an informal conversation in the second quarter of 2019, Eve, a newly elected Partner, lamented the decision to 'fire people we were recently told were great'. As already stated above, she exclaimed 'I feel like I don't know the rules of the game anymore.'

Reflecting on the meaning of this remark in the process of data analysis, I experimented with the idea that she was obliged to play two games in parallel. This was prompted by a follow-on comment she made, observing that the behaviours required for promotion and those for survival as a Partner were very different. She perceived a conflict between a desire for honesty among Partners and a felt necessity to 'cover your arse'. She said she was finding it very stressful 'not to be me'.

Having observed that Partners tended to forget about internal targets in the midst of a client pursuit, Dominic explained how such considerations returned when his performance was evaluated. 'The truth is', he said, 'you look after your own, you look after your own situation.' In other words, he felt obliged to act on mixed messages - 'be a team player' on the one hand and 'look after number one' on the other.

At the time of my entry into the field, the then newly elected Managing Partner of the firm and the senior leadership team were asking their fellow Partners to collaborate more. The

thinking was to go after larger, multi-year and multi-disciplinary projects in teams, investing less time in shorter, more specialised projects involving a single Partner. ‘Team up to win big’ was one mantra I overheard and ‘bring the best of the firm’ was another. In its marketing, the firm began to position itself as a reliable partner for large scale corporate transformations. ‘What we need now are fewer soloists and more of an ensemble’ I heard one senior leader say.

Commercially successful Partners will enjoy high status in any firm but beyond being individually successful, in this firm, a ‘good’ Partner became someone who could bring in a new client then grow the relationship by introducing colleagues to the account. When Christopher took over the unit leadership, he put an emphasis on accountability between peers for contributing to the bonus pool and the upkeep of the firm. In return, he afforded high-contributing Partners a greater degree of latitude in respect of their behaviour and a significant say in group decisions. It was therefore tacitly understood that a) power and influence was commensurate with one’s financial contribution and b) individual heroism won more kudos more than teamwork.

By contrast, I observed that not to ‘pull one’s weight’ had a shameful aspect and there appeared to be a stigma attached to Partners who were struggling in revenue terms. This manifest as what could be interpreted as a subtle form of shunning. For weeks in succession I noticed Duncan, a newly promoted Partner, sitting on his own in a shared hot-desking space. He was present from early until late and I understood that the client upon whom his election to Partner had been based had stopped buying. I asked him whether he felt others shared his risks. He replied ‘I feel completely on my own.’

So when Eve said that she did not know the rules of the game and that she was stressed not being herself, I understood her to mean that she was finding it difficult to reconcile her personal preference for reciprocity with a sense that, in this culture, she needed to act in her own interests first and foremost, just as others appeared to do. She did not want there to be a ‘sink or swim’ culture, it did not sit comfortably with her and yet, as a newly elected Partner, she was wondering if she had a choice. This in turn precipitated unsettling questions about who she might become in this role.

4.3.5 Job security

As it transpired, Partners’ fears about job losses proved somewhat justified when, in Quarter 2 of 2019, two Partners were asked to relocate to other offices where they might be more successful and one required to leave the firm altogether. Before that decision

was arrived at, however, I had already recorded evidence that employees thought their work situation to be precarious.

Central to their experience was an 'up or out' approach to promotion, characterised by the expectation that employees would either be promoted within a given timeframe or leave the firm if they did not meet the criteria. The approach was designed in part to maintain the ratios of Partners to juniors through which profit was leveraged but also to motivate employees and recognise those able to perform at the next level. A former Principal once told me that such an approach 'oils the system'.

However, 'up or out' could be said to come at some cost to the emotional wellbeing of employees. Junior consultants lived in fear of not advancing at pace with or ahead of their 'cohort' (other people recruited into the same entry level roles at the same time). From their perspective, missing out on a promotion was not only disappointing in itself, it also heightened the risk of a premature end to their desired career. This had the effect of putting peers in competition with one another for limited places at the next level and contributed to the long hours/burnout culture described above. One senior employee thought I would appreciate the irony of her dedication being 'rewarded' by her bosses with Amazon vouchers while she repeatedly came home to an empty fridge because she had no time to shop for groceries.

Of more local concern than the physical and psychological effects of over-working was a fear that the promotion process was unfair and that a majority male, white, privately educated Partner group would promote in its own likeness, unconscious of bias. Here are my notes from a review committee meeting to discuss promotion candidates:

> *We work through individuals one by one. The mentor introduces the candidate and enlists the help of people they can rely on to be supportive. Ben talks about one individual: 'can they monetise their capability and networks?' This group is talking about getting recommendations 'past' another committee. I notice lots of superlatives when talking about the available talent. I have heard them saying different things in other contexts but the form here is to sell your mentees. It's a performance - norms are around showing largesse and appearing magnanimous. 'Amazing intellect… incredible focus…' etc. Seems more about impressions than evidence. Francis introduces a consideration about managing multiple work-life priorities when a female candidate is discussed. Her mentor replays this as a strength and Paul points out that this is sexist, to which Tim agrees. I learn that to*

become a Partner, one must have built up a base of junior followers and senior advocates. On this evidence, if your advocates look and sound like you, you've a better chance of making it. The qualifying attribute for a 'good' Partner is to be a male.

The sense of being victim to an inescapable and self-perpetuating double-bind was a source of stress. Employees wanting to secure their livelihoods and advance their careers had simultaneously a) to comply with the rules so as to not to appear difficult and b) disregard the rules, seeking alternative means to compete and get ahead. Looking into the existing Partner group, women, black and minority ethnic employees and those from other marginalised groups may have felt less seen and their experience less known about than those whose profile reflected that of those in power. On the evidence above, they had reason to fear that the promotion system in practice was incompatible with the firm's stated ambitions concerning diversity and inclusion.

To summarise, I found that while consulting attracted ambitious individuals who wanted to exert control over their lives, the work involved a significant amount of ambiguity and that this was a source of stress. In a profession where knowing was prized, not-knowing appeared to be significantly uncomfortable. Consultants felt under pressure to sell their profession as a legitimate contributor to business. They had to navigate internal politics to gain access to client work and accept that adhering to cultural norms could involve some loss of identity or compromise of personal values. Continuing employment could feel unstable and unexamined promotion processes could be seen to give unfair advantage to over-represented groups. When some Partners began to exaggerate the value and likelihood of leads, others feared this could precipitate a race to the bottom in respect of ethics and integrity.

4.4 Theme 3: A fear of fallibility and failure

Repressed, and therefore not publicly available to be acknowledged or worked through, the fear of failure was a significant feature of the social and psychological landscape in the UK unit of this firm. In part, this was discernible from the way that Partners related to and internalised representations of others who populated their working world. My notes record instances of Partners feeling at the mercy of insatiable clients, under attack from the firm's leadership and inferior to competitors. Such was the character of their object relationships, some reported being worried and care-worn, unable to enjoy the senior professional status they had worked hard to acquire.

On the topic of collective self-esteem, I recorded that Partners made frequent reference to rival firms, almost always accepting that three in particular were bigger and better by virtually every measure. Though I noted that individuals would sometimes challenge this perspective, defeatist phrases like ‘we punch above our weight’ or ‘we can’t hope to compete on scale’ suggested that some Partners from this firm held it to be fundamentally inadequate, despite ample evidence of enduring profitability.

Further evidence of such a fear was found in how Partners reacted to setbacks. On one occasion I noted, when 3 or 4 senior Partners from the US elected to leave the firm, the situation was treated as a full-blown crisis and their departures feared to herald a mass exodus. Such was the panic that ensued, all 350 Partners worldwide hastily agreed to convene in California, at considerable expense, in order to avert disaster.

4.4.1 Aversion to risk

Indicating that a fear of failure was a property of the unit as a whole was an observable and systemic tendency to avoid risk at the individual and collective level. For Tim, the way the firm incentivised and rewarded Partners spoke of a cautious, short-term and low-trust attitude which inhibited his ability to pursue advantageous opportunities:

> *… the in-year reward mechanism encourages people to chase the here-and-now rather than build a strategic pipeline of opportunities. If we can win a hundred grand today, we tend to do that rather than doing a series of meetings with senior people that might deliver a million, but that won’t happen until the second half of the year and, God forbid, maybe even next year. We are rewarded on our P&L (profit and loss), and not on our balance sheet.*

Asking Tim to elaborate, I heard him make a distinction between individual and shared risks:

> ***Interviewer:*** *What do the Partners need to do to be more successful in the market?*
>
> ***Tim:*** *More bluntly, (we need to) stopping doing some of the P&L[4] driven activity and chase after some of the bigger stuff. But that is, at a very personal level, a huge risk. Because if I go to a meeting and sell a hundred, that’s a*

[4] Profit and loss (in this context meaning short term)

hundred. If I go and spend time with my colleagues to go after a million, well, we might not get there. Least I've got a hundred (if I do my own thing).

Interviewer: *Well, who's got your back if the bigger gamble doesn't pay off?*

Tim: *No-one.*

Interviewer: *Isn't that what makes it a team, that the team has your back?*

Tim: *No, because if you don't perform, you don't stay.*

Interviewer: *So, it's not a shared risk that the team is taking together?*

Tim: *No, you're taking it, the individuals in the team are each personally taking the risk.*

Interviewer: *It's quite a gamble then, isn't it?*

Tim: *Yeah. And that's why people don't do it.*

Officially, Partners were entreated to follow the firm's strategy of 'team up and win big' but, according to Tim, unintentionally incentivised to put their individual interests first. And to guard against either of these strategies ending in failure, Partners tended to hedge their bets by going through the motions of collaboration in public, whilst in private, covertly and in parallel, pursuing a 'paddle your own canoe' approach.

4.4.2 Avoiding decisions and commitments

Comparable with how Tim felt risk-taking and collaboration to be inhibited, I noted a reluctance among Partners to make joint decisions and take up their shared role as the group responsible for leadership of the unit. A field note from May 2019 records what I experienced as an inability to give up the consulting role, leading to a form of paralysis:

Sometimes, in Partner meetings, there exists among the group a shared belief in a mythical other and that this group is only tasked with making recommendations (as

a consultant would) to this mythical other for them to carry out at some future unnamed point. Their remarks are a kind of commentary on the system but not delivered as if they have any responsibility for it.

Defensive in nature, this messianic fantasy may appear as an unwillingness to engage with adult responsibilities, but taken together with other data, it is equally plausible to conclude that taking decisions was not felt psychologically safe in this environment and therefore resisted by even the most senior. As long as Partners knew mistakes and errors of judgement to be unacceptable in this organisation, this would explain why prevaricating over decisions or putting off decision dates would appeal.

Robert expressed the view that a benefit of widespread ambiguity and an absence of explicit purpose afforded the Partnership as a whole the opportunity to avoid difficult choices such as who might be best placed to win a piece of work or lead an account:

… we're still not fully in 100% trust mode… I think we have to get a little bit ruthless with how we're actually showing up at these major clients and the way that the account team Partners are really managing them persistently. I think we have to get a lot more ruthless at saying 'no' to things and de-prioritising. I think we have to get a lot more ruthless and honest with each other about it.

Using the example of a practice area with growth potential, he described how an unwillingness to make joint commitments as a Partner group was harming the business:

Digital is one of the biggest growth areas; it's growing at twice the rate of the consulting market in general and probably higher in reality. Yet our best Digital opportunity, we failed to trigger. We haven't activated that. We have to ask ourselves really - taking that as a case - why is that? Is it because we don't have the clients to activate it with? Is it because we put it in the 'too difficult' box? I think we need to be honest about what's stopping us doing that, whether it's a mindset, a capability, a relationship. I don't think we're having those conversations in our meeting. I think we're still having the conversation, 'We're not doing that. Everyone try harder.' I don't think we're actually solving problems in the Partner meetings. I think we're recognising them, we're aligning to them and then we're all going away and getting very busy on other things.

Natascha voiced frustration at this busy-ness among the Partner group, preventing it from or helping it avoid making significant commitments, with all the risks they entailed:

> *… we come up with too many actions and then there's an action log and then we look into the account one-pager and then we get a refresher on the one-pager. I just feel that, rather than all this, lots of tasks and doing, we need to have conversations more. As a Partnership, what are we seeing in the market? What's the 'aha'? And what are we going to do about it? It's that strategic part that I don't think we're having enough productive conversation on. We are, often times I feel, getting bogged down with lots of management topics, while the single most important metric that defines our success is our market success.*

4.4.3 Learning from mistakes

A significant obstacle to bold commitments, as I perceived it, was that errors were felt to be potentially costly in career terms. To acquire the stigma of failure was harmful to one's advancement within the firm. By this, I refer not only to promotion but one's selection for client projects and internal collaborations. One's status and 'stock value' in a dynamic internal market for talent was to be preciously safeguarded. Some individuals found it preferable to avoid choices than make errors.

Dominic used a story about a culture of learning from mistakes in another company to express his feelings about how they were handled in his own firm. He had attended a talk about a team from Amazon who launched a smartphone with a concierge capability. Though it had not succeeded in the market, recycling the lessons learned from this 'failure', they went on to produce the Alexa device, an innovation which proved to be successful. He compared the Amazon culture to that of his firm:

> *… he (the guest speaker) had a series of insights about how Amazon was successful and unfortunately, none of them applied to us. I thought 'What would happen here with a bad project or someone loses an account?' Would we go 'Hey, what should we do to make sure we never lose an account? What did you learn from it or what did you do that wasn't quite right? And how would you do it differently? In fact, you might be the person to put on this account. Because, although you lost that one, you might be just the person to lead this one.' I mean it*

sounds ridiculous to say that would happen here. To me, it sounds like it would never happen. Instead, it would be like, everyone would be saying 'Oh, you know that guy or woman? He or she lost the account or they messed up that project and let's never, ever go there again!'

In my field notes, I likened the impulse to avoid an association with failure to the children's party game of Musical Chairs, where participants have to find a safe seat or be exposed to ridicule as the music stops. To be tainted with failure was felt to be intensely humiliating, especially as a competition for survival among Partners grew ever more divisive.

4.4.4 Envy, projection and blame

Of all interviewees, Martin was most candid about how the operating model could set Partners against one another. In his view, there was a relationship between disappointment with the UK unit's performance and feelings of rivalry or even of envy:

In some firms, Partners are targeted to make other people Partners. That's not really targeted here… We're more elbow-y. We're more 'If I grow another Partner, it's competition' which is reflective of not having grown. There's a bit of that mindset…

He went on to say that the tendency of the firm to behave erratically combined with the stresses of client work and business development could generate animosity between peers:

I think it leads to a certain level of jostling within the Partner group and it leads to some of this behaviour of 'Oh well, we didn't get that (business opportunity) because X isn't very good'. It's all about the rationalisation of individuals, how good or bad they are as being the whole denominator of everything.

From Martin's perspective, the firm had acquired the habit of locating imperfections in individuals as a means to avoid group reflection or any need for disruptive change:

We seem to want to blame issues on bad performers or the Partners not being good enough or whatever the answer is, rather than reflect on how we actually change or what do we need to change, what we need to do differently at the guts of the business…

For Dominic too, success and failure were often talked about in somewhat all-or-nothing terms:

There's often a beating of chests. It goes back to this, 'I've just sold this. I'm a hero!' But you go from being a hero to a villain very quickly in our environment.

Ben offered evidence of how difficult some Partners found it to enjoy one another's successes:

I think there was a survey - I think it was three Partner meetings ago - about Partner culture, which you may have seen. And there was a question about 'Do you celebrate the success of others?' I can't remember the exact score but it wasn't great. And I think there's a bit of that. There's some stuff goes on. Pet Food Co. got us out of the shit last year (profitable client project). But the amount of Partner meetings where Theo (the lead Partner for the Pet Food Co. account) wasn't in the room where everyone wanted to talk about the downsides. And it was like 'Tell you what, why don't we get all those geese that have laid those golden eggs and shoot them?'

Matthew, a Partner on secondment to the UK from the US, described the atmosphere he encountered as 'friendly and cordial' but 'everyone does their own thing' and 'when people reach out to one another, it is under obligation but without desire':

Here, work is felt to be a personal thing, a personal scorecard. In the US, people are more likely to collaborate but less so here. People seem reluctant to share (client) relationships and opportunities. There's a high degree of skepticism. You get a sense of open wounds and lingering hurts which are used to justify bad behaviours. Certainly a feeling that some senior Partners claim credits not due to them, that they have gradually learned to game the system.

Rather than invest in a collective effort to seek safety, it appeared that some Partners sought their own safety first, even if it came at the expense of their colleagues.

Theo attributed the perceived under-performance of the UK unit to a lack of ambition:

> *If your intention is to go to the Olympics and compete for a medal, you set your mind to compete not just to participate. I think we're much more into the participate and maybe from time to time, make the final heat. But we're not into winning a medal. With some exceptions. The majority is happy to do well but not exceptionally well. And that attitude creeps into our group dynamics I find.*

From my perspective, ambition was less the issue. Many Partners felt unable to combine their energies in joint endeavours due to the complexities of internal politics which organised around a perceived need to self-optimise and thereby survive. A significant proportion of Partner energy was consumed with calculating the potential impact of different contingencies and avoiding the damaging stigma of failure.

4.4.5 Survival mentality

My notes record that headhunters repeatedly approached Partners on behalf of competitor firms and on multiple occasions I heard Partners speaking about the risk to their business if their most talented juniors elected to leave. From these observations, I formed the impression of a lively and fluid job market with moves between rival firms unexceptional. In interview, I therefore put a question to Martin about why survival (if that meant retaining one's job) mattered so much to individuals:

> *It comes back to this thing about consultants being insecure high achievers… it's the psychological fear of having failed that is, I think, the bigger fear, not the material aspect of 'Oh, I've lost out in terms of money'. And then it's the kind of comparing yourself against peers elsewhere and thinking, versus them, 'Have I failed? Have I lost out? Have I not met my own expectations?' I think that's where the fears come in, because, anyone who gets fired from here as a Partner, they're not going to starve. It's just that fear of the consequences. How you're going to feel about yourself. Your confidence in the future.*

A forced departure therefore was, as Martin says, not so much a threat to livelihood as to identity. Opportunities to work elsewhere seemed abundant, but to lose the confidence of

one's professional peer group was spoken about as a kind of social death. Tim used the analogy of a wounded animal; Dominic, that of a battlefield casualty.

In summary, I found evidence indicating an unconscious and systemic aversion to risk and an avoidance of commitment. Leaders did not appear to promote a culture of learning from mistakes so that to be associated with errors of judgement was felt to be a threat to one's career. In such a febrile atmosphere relationships between Partners could sour and I recorded evidence of an 'every man (sic) for himself' attitude to survival. Partners were often anxious because consulting work seemed to confront them with two existential fears: a) of being overwhelmed and consumed by demands or b) of being rejected (by clients or peers) and therefore feeling abandoned and alone.

To recap, I have presented evidence a) that consultants in the study felt a compulsion to work, b) that they had a paradoxical relationship with uncertainty and ambiguity and c) were influenced by a fear of failure. I have also shown that anxious feelings - those of survival anxiety, persecutory anxiety and depressive anxiety - were hidden from view. Vulnerabilities which could be perceived as weaknesses or career obstacles were largely out of place in the research environment. Adopting a mask of tirelessness, consultants lionised certainty and confidence but occasionally the mask would slip to reveal fear and self-doubt.

4.5 Theme 4: Uses of power and the function of politics

4.5.1 Organisational structure and governance

The choice of partnership as a form of governance represented a conscious decision about how power should be concentrated. It was formally vested in the group and individuals thus prevented from using positional authority for personal advantage. Elected leadership positions were subject to three-yearly rotations and an annual Shareholder Meeting was the main decision-making forum. The Managing Partner and his executive were accountable to an elected Board made up of other Partners.

Most formal leadership roles were either responsible for *geographical units* (i.e. countries or regions) or *practice areas* which focused on particular industries (e.g. banking) or specific services (e.g. digital transformation). Unit and practice leaders took decisions about bonuses, promotions and the deployment of resources. Former leaders often returned to client work at the end of a rotation and typically maintained a high standing in informal networks, acting as coaches, mentors and role models.

4.5.2 Informal sources of power and influence

I observed that leadership roles were influential but that market success was the most reliable measure of an individual's value to the firm and its main currency. 'Rainmakers' who could be relied upon to generate significant revenues year on year had the highest status. Their 'assets' took the form of profitable relationships with CEOs. Whereas I observed some individuals working hard to develop intellectual capital in the form of innovative products and services, I understood these to have less transfer value than strong relationships with senior business people.

I recorded that Partners took pride in the equality of shareholders and were glad not to work within a corporate hierarchy. I once heard the phrase 'one Partner, one vote' used when someone was taking aim at an authority figure, as if to remind those present that no individual, however senior, should consider themselves bigger than the firm. On several separate occasions I noted Partners using gendered language (e.g. 'fraternity', 'fellowship', 'brotherhood', 'band of brothers') to convey what they most valued about the communal spirit. I also heard the culture described as 'collegiate'.

Feelings of camaraderie were fondly remembered in interviews. Dominic's story of Partners 'pulling together' for a client pitch without thought for the division of spoils was typical. In a similar vein, Hugo remembered an instance when he felt close to a colleague:

> *I remember sitting next to Tim, for example, getting to know him a little bit more, talking about watches. Then you start to kind of feel that this is somebody who is not just a Partner but also, you know, somebody who you like and could be a friend. I value that a lot. I want to know that someone's got my back. But also for them to know that I've got their back and those conversations help you believe those things. It's just human nature. It's not about the watches, it's the connection you make when you speak with somebody.*

Hugo bundled the ideas of friendship and mutual protection together which speaks to the complexity of peer relationships in a way that idealised or chauvinistic descriptions do not. I witnessed several moments when Partners showed tenderness and affection for one another but also became aware how afraid they could be that a colleague might take unfair advantage of them. Dominic, for example, speaking to me before the economic downturn, told of his experiences of 'getting screwed over' by other Partners. 'You end up in a kind of arms race,' he said, 'deciding how to invest your time based on protecting

yourself from past hurts.' Matthew also spoke about 'seasoned' Partners who 'had learned to game the system'.

It was also Hugo who directed my attention to an all-or-nothing quality in Partner relations. In his experience, once ruptures occurred, there was little chance of reparation:

> *What divides us? I mean, occasionally, there's personal things, there's a feeling that some people are not playing with a straight bat. That causes great rancour. If somebody feels that somebody else has crossed them, then that's that. I mean the relationship is severely damaged. I'm not saying that I've seen a lot of that but things do happen and then they're kept fairly quiet… because you probably would want to keep those sorts of things relatively quiet.*

Overtly, Partners often spoke about organisational politics with suspicion and distanced themselves from political activities. Tim, for example, when asked about divisive behaviours in our interview, declined the opportunity to speculate on this topic:

> *I'm sure there are but I don't feel it. And maybe that's because I'm not very good at spotting it, which is one thing. I'm generally quite a positive person anyway, so - and I certainly wouldn't engage in it, or not knowingly engage in it - so, I'm sure there are but I don't see it. There's one or two people that can be unhelpful in meetings and conversations. But you know those people are just different, right? You have to accommodate other people's nuances, don't you?*

Covertly however, there were Partners who would position themselves for personal advantage at the expense of others. Robert gave an example of subtle self-optimisation:

> *… the level of teaming is great when there is something on the table to team around, like a proposal. It's not so great when it's 'I've got to have 10 meetings to get to the lead to get to the proposal.'*

Paul also spoke (more directly) about the tendency of some to muscle in on likely prospects:

> *… there are other people who purposefully go around - are just very, very smart at sniffing out opportunities of 'Oh, I think there's going to be a big win there. I'm going to invite myself to the pitch so that I can then claim a share of what we end up with…' It's not a huge number of people who do that, but we know who they are.*

Albeit that, in the words of a visiting US Partner, the culture favoured 'self-reliance' and discouraged 'neediness', Partners could not avoid some degree of interdependence. From what I witnessed, what were tolerated as unavoidable skirmishes and turf wars under benign market conditions could prove deep sources of antagonism when opportunities became scarce and pressure on individuals was mounting.

4.5.3 'Sharp elbows'

Natascha, a newly-elected 'service' Partner who relied on 'industry' colleagues for access to clients was dismayed by the attitudes that the downturn had started to bring on:

> *… now, the mindset would be all about 'OK, it's my relationship. Let me secure it and take care of it. Let's not get anybody else involved in it.'*

She singled out the unit leader's practice as the least likely to invite her to collaborate:

> *I don't think I'm seeing enough pull with regards to 'What's the art of the possible?' that we can take to them. We know the client, so how can we bring forward the Digital offer to make it one plus one equals three? I'm not seeing enough of that as a working team, between the Partners, that we're pushing towards.*

Theo, a more established and higher status Partner than Natascha, could afford to be more direct in his criticism of hoarding and of colleagues undermining one another:

> *… keeping clients to yourself is bad behaviour. Talking behind other people's backs about your colleagues is bad behaviour.*

Duncan, also new to the Partner role, observed that a vocal minority in the Partner group took an unequal share of voice:

> *… the dynamic is that there's probably a few people that, their point of view, I think will maybe be considered more heavily than others and some people will have a stronger point of view than others as well. And, probably, there's people like me, who, to be quite frank, I think the new joiners say less, to begin with. I certainly have. I've been more in the 'OK. How does this work?' mode.*

Spending extended time among them, I learned of several ways in which Partners were able, should they wish, to advance their personal interests above those of their peers, e.g. by:

- fabricating spurious reasons to retain junior staff at the end of a project when they should have been released and made accessible to others;

- pumping colleagues for intellectual capital with no intention to use them on the project or credit them for their contribution to it;
- blocking colleagues' access to a client without any real dialogue about their suitability;
- using senior status to secure access to big opportunities and therefore a share of the net fees.

Paul described how service Partners were vulnerable to 'sharp elbowed' industry colleagues if, assuming they already knew about a topic, they felt no obligation to collaborate:

> *… either 'Yes, I've done two procurement projects, so I think I can do a third' or, even worse, 'I was listening to the client and they were saying a whole bunch of stuff. They mentioned something about procurement but I sort of blended it out because it sounded very boring and actually I'm going to write them a proposal about digital sales because that's my new favourite topic these days'…*

4.5.4 Rumour and gossip

In the same interview, Paul went on to contrast a tolerance for colleagues undermining one another that he had not experienced when he worked for a competitor:

> ***Paul:*** *When I was at (name of competitor), well… for a Partner to speak badly of another Partner in front of a non-Partner was virtually a dismissible offence… I mean, certainly it would be considered - we formally called that unprofessional behaviour. And so if you only had one of those in your year-end appraisal, you'd get called out on it as a sort of warning: 'Don't do this again, okay?'. But if it did happen again, then certainly, you'd be gone.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *And here, by contrast?*
>
> ***Paul:*** *People do it all the time.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *Do you mean gossip?*
>
> ***Paul:*** *Less gossip, I think. But there's certainly - you hear some around 'Oh yeah, so and so…' or 'He's not so…' I think the good part of the culture is you can say things in a sort of teasing, gently challenging way which is more authentic and accepted among the staff because they know everybody's quirks. But there's certainly some - I think some Partners here do let slip that they think*

some types of work are not good or somebody's not doing well. That kind of thing. They don't tell lots of people, but they tell the Principals and their team and then the Principals tell the Managers. We have had issues with that… the staff are very acute to it. And I mean it does make them unsettled because it makes them think that things like evaluation processes are completely about who's on your side. So they exaggerate and think that little bits of tension mean that it's a massively politicised environment and 'Oh my god! If you haven't got so and so backing you then you're gonna get - that actually all sorts of bad things are going to happen to you…'

4.5.5 Not knowing what to do

As I began field work, a few Partners spoke to me about the fragmented and 'unsafe' nature of the Partner group. Dominic, for example, portrayed it as 'wary and defensive'. He found himself 'unable to lean in' and therefore reluctant to afford the group status or authority. 'When we are together,' he said, 'it feels forced and artificial.' In his opinion, colleagues often lacked candour and tended towards distorted interpretations of each other's motives. Some behaved in a 'passive-aggressive fashion', remaining silent in group discussions but afterwards splitting into small groups who would engage in 'character assassinations' and 'hostile' post-mortems.

If his was not a universal experience, it was nevertheless evident that Partners demonstrated a low desire to team which became more acute as commercial results deteriorated. If in a downturn one might expect Partners' collective attention to turn outwards towards the market, in fact some individuals focused more on internal dynamics, growing fearfully preoccupied with their relative status in what they perceived as a competition for survival. The lack of cohesion appeared to inhibit a realistic appraisal of challenges and a sober collective response. Where a mature, well-functioning leadership team might have been able to engage in collective sense-making, prioritising and risk mitigation, this group, being more disparate, tended to avoid difficult topics or reach for simplistic solutions.

Hugo reduced the difficulties to a need to be 'more bloody-mindedly commercial.' Robert also focused on attitudes of mind - 'we've got to be more ruthless.' For Martin however, what lay behind the stuckness and reluctance to engage with complexity was a difficulty accepting that, as a leadership team facing adversity, the Partners did not know what to do:

Martin: *I'll be candid. I don't know how to get the London office from 55 million to 100 million in the next couple of years. I don't know. I've got no idea. Genuinely, I'm not sure anybody else knows either. There's plenty of people who think they might know but I don't think anyone really does. I wouldn't mind starting the conversation from that premise. And I don't think Christopher's saying he knows, by the way. I think he'd be quite candid but there's others who are not. There are those who say, 'Well, just copy what we're doing at client X' or what ever it is and that's the sort of answer people come up with.*

Interviewer: *What happens when people make those kinds of statements?*

Martin: *They feel, we feel… the group then feels infantilised. And that happens a lot. That's an important thing to call out but we don't because we don't know the answer. There's work to do to create the answer but I think it's got to be done with a general sense of humility. We don't do humility well as an organisation. Some individuals do, but not as an organisation. When we come together, the humility is not high.*

To summarise, my notes record surprise at a failure to anticipate the downturn (given a market crash in the US in Q4 2018) and my perception of a leadership group that struggled to accept its severity. Fragmentation, jockeying for position and pursuing individual agendas, the Partner group appeared to regress towards splitting and projection as ways to deal with unfamiliar and unwelcome emotions. A number felt furious when their colleagues began to misrepresent the size and likelihood of new prospects. There were those who wanted to engage with reality and others who could not bear to confront it.

In respect of its formal governance and constitution, the partnership form was designed and chosen to manage and contain political activity, ensuring that the group and not any individual was sovereign. In practice however, the fact of organisational politics could not be owned or worked with constructively but was instead consigned to the organisational shadow (Jung, 1970, p.872) from where, in my interpretation, it exerted an even more powerful influence. It would be to misrepresent this Partner group to portray its behaviour only as scheming or unscrupulous but misleading to deny the existence of such behaviour altogether.

It seemed that the Partner group, while composed of mature individuals, exhibited adolescent behaviours as a system and acted as though unable to assume the

responsibilities of adulthood. Partners and staff appeared not only to feel anxiety in the course of their work and their social relations, but doubted that the firm could offer satisfactory containment.

4.6 Theme 5: The contested nature of leadership authority

The findings presented so far have established that:

- consulting was observed to be a psychologically demanding occupation;
- to progress, consultants had to demonstrate physical and mental endurance;
- consulting tasks and the lifestyle could be generative of chronic and acute stress;
- some consultants in the firm felt unsafe and insufficiently 'held' by their employer;
- the presence of anxiety was denied and vulnerability positioned off-limits.

In this section, I will share findings concerned with leadership and the exercise of authority. My aim is to consider the potential for leaders to be a source of containment.

4.6.1 A low-trust environment

In interview, just over a year since the election of a new Managing Partner, Ben expressed an 'annoyance about the way the firm's going'. Asked to elaborate, he explained:

> *A lot of us in London care about global teaming, account building and longer term metrics. (But) we are being driven by American views: short term metrics, local maintaining of profit and wealth which runs against the London mentality.*

Dominic had some reservations too, questioning a new emphasis on unit profitability:

> *I've always done a lot of work outside the UK, in the Middle East and continental Europe and so on. Now we've gone from global to regional and from regional to being a unit. And that drives behaviours, right? I get the logic of it but I also get - and for me it's an important point - that it's about the scalability. It's about 'Are we always at sufficient scale? Do we have the critical mass in one unit to be individually and collectively successful?' I'm not sure we do.*

Their comments relate to intellectual differences of opinion over corporate strategy. Martin, by contrast, questioned the character and integrity of the firm's global leaders:

> *You know, whenever we have a bad year, it's spun. So this year's a difficult time for the firm, so our Managing Partner globally talks about it as 'our second best year'*

rather than saying it's declined. I don't see many private equity owned clients getting away with that kind of euphemism on performance. But we seem to almost revel in saying 'Everything's great' until we do something unexpected in reaction to everything not being great. What we don't seem to like is having the honest dialogue about what can be done better.

These remarks focus on the question of trust - be it whether London Partners felt they could trust the strategic direction set by the global leadership or trust the transparency of their communications. Nor were such doubts only operating upwards. At the local level, some Partners reported that as the downturn took hold, Christopher, the new unit lead (and therefore perceived by some as an agent of the global leadership) 'coached' some Partners in a way that conveyed a mistrust in their ability.

4.6.2 Coaching felt as questioning competence

Ben referenced the topic of coaching twice in interview, first talking in a roundabout way:

I feel that we are in a place where we are not that open to be coached because we worry that we are being criticised. In some of the conversations, it feels like when someone is trying to be helpful, it comes across as trying to show off.

However, as the interview progressed, he raised the topic of coaching-as-surveillance more directly:

I think perhaps there's a nagging fear: is this person trying to help me to actually help me? Or is it a performance conversation? Or is it a judging conversation or what have you?

Dominic, less established than Ben, described a similar sentiment early on in our exchange:

… the questioning can come across as being somehow questioning trust, questioning 'are you doing the right things?' So that inquiry has to come across as a genuine wanting-to-help curiosity and sometimes it doesn't. Were those questions being asked six months or a year ago, consistently 'As a new Partner, what more can you do?' Then, okay. Good times and bad, you're asking me and others what is going on. But when it comes on the back of lay-offs, you're thinking 'Why the questions? Is it because I'm not safe? I'm next?'

4.6.3 Leadership neutralised

I noted that it appeared difficult to exercise leadership authority in this low-trust environment. Followers would have needed to feel their leaders to be dependable for them to surrender a part of their own authority and fall in behind those in charge. They would have needed to feel that their leaders had faith in their competence. Instead, it seemed that Partners could be suspicious of leaders' good intentions and vice-versa.

My field notes capture the observation that 'in this firm, leadership is consumed, not co-created.' Were I to re-write that sentence now, I would perhaps add that leadership, in particular, Christopher's leadership, was both consumed and heavily critiqued, to the point that, while Christopher occupied the role, his mandate felt tenuous.

Foremost among the criticisms levelled at Christopher and repeated to me was that he had acted unilaterally in changing the composition of the Partner team without consulting his peers. Martin repeatedly said he felt Christopher to be partisan and Ben was frustrated at his tendency to posit the sales-focused model of his own practice as the template for all others. Comments about his tendency to micro-manage were common to a number of interviews and Natascha in particular pointed to his habit of generating a high volume of internal tasks at the same time as exhorting Partners to go to market. She was irritated at what she perceived as his preference for action planning and lamented a lack of attention to exploratory dialogue.

In my mind as I heard successive complaints was a comment that Matthew had made early in my field work. He spoke about a 'firm-wide tendency to appoint and neutralise leaders simultaneously.' Seen in this light, I wondered whether the criticisms that Christopher was subject to were also expressions of an ambivalence towards any form of leadership and a cherishing of personal autonomy. I reflected that perhaps, at an unconscious level, the London Partner group contrived to neutralise their local leadership by making leading a thankless task and a dumping ground for toxicity. While this could be seen as containment of sorts, I felt it to be harmful.

A field note entered in June 2019, as business results were improving, spoke to the impact on the person:

> *Christopher seemed a bit low. We had lunch together and he seemed quite troubled. He listed some of the things that were getting to him - a disappointing rejection by a client, feeling like he was in an invidious position arbitrating in Partner squabbles, anxious that his practice wasn't pulling its weight and wasn't very team-*

like. I think he's disappointed that his leadership position isn't more fun, just kind of a thankless grind. In any case, he was weary.

Rarely was there full attendance at Partner meetings and Christopher was limited in his ability to insist. It was generally accepted that client commitments trumped internal ones and relatively easy for Partners to avoid these meetings if they chose to do so. I noted that Christopher owned a disproportionate responsibility for making them productive and, over time, a negative cycle ensued in which the more Christopher owned the agenda, the less engaged were Partners and the more everything fell to him.

4.6.5 Limited appetite for leadership

Paul, Christopher's predecessor in the unit leader role, gave further evidence of a systemic and historical tendency to limit individual power and the authority of leaders:

… there's a huge scepticism around leadership and it's equated with administration effectively, which is disappointing because we've had - I mean, I'm sure there was a time when most of the leaders were administrators, but it's a long time ago and we've moved beyond that.

Perhaps there were too many leaders, he added:

I don't think we make it any easier for ourselves by having too many people with the nominal title of leader. Not enough decision rights go with it and then they're too cautious to go beyond their decision rights, so in the end they are quite ineffective. Not in a badly intentioned way, but just, well, not much happens.

If junior staff engaged in 'a bit of hero worship' of those in leadership roles, Partners were more circumspect:

… at the Partner level, there is this sort of generic sense that leadership is not good. There is a structural issue about how transparent things are. I'm sure key decisions are made in bodies that are not transparent to regional leadership teams. You never know what their agenda really is. You don't know what's been decided.

Martin remembered what he described as 'a more distributed' form of leadership under the last but two unit leaders. He was nostalgic for a time when the unit leader signed off communications 'on behalf of the London Partners.' Christopher, in his view, was accruing too much power. In his words, Christopher's style was 'autocracy dressed up as democracy.' He thought it lacked credibility to have engaged in hype about the unit's

performance in late 2018 only to have 'sackcloth and ashes' early in the following year. 'This is a partnership not a corporate,' he complained.

To summarise, I observed the research site to be a low trust environment and not a fertile ground for generative leader-follower relations. Among Partners, as the downturn took hold, relations were characterised by mutual suspicion and low empathy. They exhibited an aversion to being led and to identifying as the leadership team for the unit as a whole. This being the case, I felt the capacity of Partners to be a source of containment for the system was compromised. They seemed to want Christopher to do the 'dirty work' of leadership but so prized their autonomy as to withhold from him (and his predecessors) their commitment to the collective.

4.7 Theme 6: The system's capacity for reflection and change

The final theme, based on evidence from notes and interviews, concerns the capacity of the system to adapt and evolve. By their own accounts, some Partners felt the unit to be stuck in self-limiting patterns of behaviour that contributed to low growth.

As did the whole firm, the unit relied on two main inputs - of new clients/projects and new junior consultants. For Ben, as for most Partners, developing juniors and seeing them flourish was motivating:

> *… you look at our new Principals about to be elected and you think about people like Emily coming back - immensely talented - or Erin or Naomi or whoever. And you think 'What do we need to do to build a legacy for them so that they can reach their potential?' Because we all care for those people - everyone in that room would feel personally accountable for one, two, three or all of those folks. That's a unifying force we need to harness. That is our case for change.*

However, despite the energy of individuals within it, the Partner group as a whole found it difficult to generate change - be it commercial growth or ways to improve morale. Gabriella, a former Principal, remarked that 'no-one really sees the value of thinking like a team. The priority,' she went on to explain, 'is simply to sell or help sell.'

4.7.1 Early signs of inertia

At the first Partner meeting I attended in mid-2018, Paul, the outgoing unit leader in the role of chair, used a traffic light system to signify the importance/urgency of different topics. Growth was on red, as was morale. I understood that these were standing agenda items and their status had not altered since the last meeting. My notes record that Nick's

body language was ‘slumped’ and I wrote ‘frustration? fatigue?’ next to this observation. I also recorded Hugo’s ‘pent up anger’ and an ‘outburst about continued low growth’ that struck me at the time as ‘at odds with the norm.’

At a subsequent meeting, a few weeks later, I recorded a ‘feeling of emptiness’ about the proceedings, as though those present were only ‘going through the motions’:

> *What struck me, reflecting on it afterwards, was that nobody seemed to feel any better as a result of the discussion. It was completed only just within the time allocated to the meeting so there wasn’t time for reflection after the report-outs, but in any case, just listing what needed to be done did not seem to generate any excitement. In fact the energy in the room did not seem to change at all as a result of the discussion. Toby told me later that the group had had many such discussions but that nothing ever changed. ‘Everyone knows it’s the behaviours’ he said, to indicate that people knew what needed to happen but didn’t do it. That is what he thought the group should be discussing.*

Two of my dreams from this period indicate that I was unconsciously processing what I was observing. In the first I was underground and became aware of a vast terracotta army - impressive statues, entombed and still. The second was as follows:

> *I am on an aeroplane in flight or it might be a moving train, standing up in my seat and turning round because behind me and to my left, a middle-aged woman is trying to push a shopping trolley up an aisle that looks too narrow. She is dressed in black and is being spoken to harshly by a man who seems to want her to hurry. When I recall the dream later it might have been a bike, but no, I remember it more accurately, it was an empty trolley and no way through.*

The dreams signify feelings of stuckness and obstruction, emotions that were present in the field.

4.7.2 Partner meetings

Monthly Partner meetings, had the potential to offer the group a space for thinking together. They took place in a board room overlooking the South Bank of the River Thames. Usually around 4 hours long, they were often followed by supper in a nearby restaurant. As unit leader, Christopher convened these meetings and set the agendas.

I mentioned above that attendance at the Partner meetings I observed was uneven. A few Partners always attended and a different few were seldom there. The majority came to

some meetings but not others. Christopher set and published all the dates at the beginning of the calendar year and asked colleagues to organise their client commitments around them. However, only twice in 18 months were all Partners present.

In interviews, several Partners expressed the wish that Partner meetings be more productive. Natasha talked about the need for 'clear, open conversation'. Of concern to her was a perceived tendency for the group to get 'bogged down with managing the UK unit' and not give enough attention to emerging issues in the market:

> *The answer doesn't come from doing tasks. It comes from conversations. I mean, you've been in some of the Partner meetings, Peter, there is lots of potential in the topics we have, but unfortunately we don't go deeper into anything.*

Robert also commented on the depth and quality of conversation in Partner meetings. Theo talked about the sensitive issue of how to divide credit on an account fairly among colleagues, remarking 'I wish we could have more open dialogues.' Duncan observed that he found it hard to tell if a decision had been taken.

However, despite the hopes expressed above, I noted that Partners took no action to disrupt the status quo. Just as the attendance at meetings was variable, so too was the attention of those physically present. Some Partners worked on their laptops, others repeatedly looked at their smartphones and would leave without explanation seemingly in response to what they saw or read. One had a habit of launching into long monologues and interrupting others. I observed that Partners seemed to make speeches *at* each other but that the quality of listening was poor. Seldom did they bridge, ask questions or build on the last speaker's contribution. While a few older Partners typically monopolised the space, I observed that those more recently elected often looked afraid of being called upon to speak and said nothing.

4.7.3 Further examples of inertia

In Ben's view, the less reflexive the group, the less likely it was to unlearn its intransigence:

> *I think we've got some very different, but very strong characters in the group. And I think it's incumbent on those strong characters to really, really try - and the trouble is some of us have been at it a long time - to really think 'What could I be doing that is positive and what could I be doing that winds other people up?' And then*

perhaps really try and modify those behaviours, because my fear is that some of those entrenched behaviours are turning off colleagues.

As a newly elected Partner, unable to draw on experience of previous downturns, it was distressing for Dominic that more established colleagues did not offer solutions:

I'm not hearing as many voices that are kind of saying 'We'll ride this through. It'll be okay.' I expect to hear, y'know, 'What's our route out of this?' I'm not hearing a lot of confident voices, quite frankly, which is worrying. If anything, I'm hearing voices that speak to and point to what is making success more difficult.

Max, arguably the UK's most successful Partner, found it frustrating that colleagues talked aggressively about growth whilst acting with extreme caution in respect of promotions.

Martin, 21 years at the firm, explained a firm-wide resistance to change as follows:

As with any organisation, the people who do well out of the current system are those at the top. I might be one of them. And why change something that's been okay for you? There's no revolutionary spirit going on. I don't think we have a strong urge to evolve. I don't think there's an aligned view on how to.

4.7.4 Low appetite for conflict

Based on the events and exchanges I witnessed, interpersonal conflict as a potential source of creativity and change was largely shut off to Partners in this unit. Whereas field notes record my attendance at several meetings when it appeared that a lot went unsaid, on only three occasions in the 18 months I was present did an argument erupt. On one occasion, the group having just agreed to challenge each other more directly, Max found Robert prickly and defensive when he put the agreement into practice. On another, Martin and Paul clashed in public over a sarcastic sideways comment. My notes recorded that 'the spat was over before it began.'

The most public 'blow up' occurred at a meeting of Partners and Principals in September 2018. 25-30 people were present, of different ethnicities. A field note reads:

At the end of the day, in a P&P meeting, a moment of acute conflict between two Partners - Hugo and Paul. The context was a discussion about recruitment. Francis, a Partner, and Simone from HR were telling the room about attending a recent careers fair at an international business school. 30 people (thought to be a

disappointingly low number) had expressed an interest in meeting the firm's representatives of whom less than 10 were thought suitable for interview.

Assuming leadership of the unit and expressing a desire to put it on a sustainable footing, Christopher had recently said he wanted to hire staff who were likely to stay in the country and build their professional networks in the UK. This was in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, an acutely sensitive issue in the unit. News reports told of people being shouted at by strangers to 'speak English' and some British Asian staff members reported being cat-called in the street.

In response to the feedback from the careers fair, the following exchange took place:

Hugo: *In the light of that, should we be looking to hire more British people?*

(Long uncomfortable silence in the room)

Paul: *(appears lost for words) Well, you've only to look around the room Hugo…*

Hugo: *How do you mean?*

Paul: *What does it matter if they're British?*

Hugo: *Well, I'm asking because it's an issue for the business.*

Paul: *Well, you're wrong to ask that. And I'll tell you why you're wrong.*

Paul then went on to rebuke Hugo in the strongest terms for being offensive towards everyone present, most especially those staff whose right to live and work in the UK had become subject to question in a post-Brexit Britain. Farah, a Principal, followed with a strong repudiation of the idea that British people should, in a global consulting firm, get preferential treatment. Gabriella, also a Principal, spoke about how hurtful it was to experience discrimination from within the unit. Hugo tried to justify his position and repair the damage he caused, but was rebuffed. Finally Christopher, who looked quite frozen, shut the whole thing down and moved the meeting on swiftly as if to pretend the conflict had never happened. In the days that followed, Hugo had to be persuaded not to issue an email to all present 'clarifying his position.'

Aside from my own feelings about the substance of the dispute, what I found most striking about this incident was that the intensity of emotion seemed to disable most of those present. In particular, I observed that the leaders in the room were at a loss how to lead in such a situation. My field notes likened the scene to a Greek tragedy, 'aside from the outraged protagonists, were a chorus who had been momentarily struck dumb.' The price of habitually burying emotions was the panic that ensued when they broke the surface. When, some time later, I spoke to Farah about the events of that evening she told me that it 'deeply affected' how she saw the leadership group, that she was 'not proud' to be among them and that the absence of care and a sense of belonging that had drawn her to the firm led to her decision to leave.

4.7.5 Step change

Two months after the announcement of forced departures from the Partner group, Christopher began to make a case to his colleagues for a 'step change' in the unit's performance. However, from some Partners' perspectives, notably Dominic, a lack of what he called a 'safety culture' was a significant obstacle to improved financial outcomes:

> *I personally feel that I'm trying and I feel that step change is absolutely what we need but back to the safety culture - I think we've taken a step back. And from my perspective, we need to address that. So just now going 'Right guys, let's go, step change.' I'm not sure how. We haven't talked about how we'll do that. I'd like to do it consistently, not just when we're struggling with a soft quarter. We should do that all the time. After a good year is a good time to kind of go, 'What were we doing that made that a good year?' I don't think we do that.*

When a Partner meeting to launch the step change turned into a 'clear the air' session, during which some deep resentments got their first public airing, it was apparent to everyone present that the culture of the Partner group was intrinsic to its results.

In the event, results did improve and the last two quarters of 2019 were prosperous for the UK unit. However, leaving the field at the year end, I observed no appetite among Partners to learn from the downturn or the subsequent uptick despite the expectation that another change of fortune was certain to occur, if not soon, then at some point in the future.

To summarise, despite inferring that consultants could be highly adaptive in respect of winning work and meeting client needs, the findings indicate that in respect of

institutional change, the opposite was true. Ambivalence towards organisational change and resistance to learning from experience characterised the research setting. Partners had protracted difficulty with generating business growth in the UK and staff morale appeared to be a perennial concern. Counter-transferential feelings associated with stagnation and inertia were evident in my own dreams recorded in my journal as part of field work.

Monthly Partner meetings offered an illustration. The group acted in concert to ensure that limited space was available for generative dialogue or disruption to the status quo. Poor attendance, limited attention, imposing certainties where confusion could have been creative, Partners sought the comfort of action planning over the discomfort of allowing new insight to emerge. One Partner observed that those doing well out of the status quo had little incentive to interfere with it. However, it was my experience that a low appetite for conflict and a weak capacity for constructive challenge was leaving some junior staff disillusioned. The Partners' response to Christopher's call for step-change was, in my view, a watershed moment in that it demonstrated the influence of culture on business results.

4.8 Summary and analysis of findings

This research furnished an opportunity to investigate the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics in a market downturn. The adjusted aim was to generate insights into the emotional experiences of Partners and develop an understanding of group behaviour during changes from benign to adverse market conditions. Such insights could help Partners in management consulting firms to pursue co-operative relationships despite inevitable economic challenges and uncertainties.

To close this chapter, I will intersperse summary and analysis of each theme before commenting on the findings as a whole. In the Discussion chapter to follow, I will offer an interpretation of the findings and consider their implications for the firm studied, the field of organisation consulting and wider society. This will combine reflection with practical recommendations. The thesis will end with a short conclusion restating the limits of this study and identifying avenues for future research.

4.8.1. The work ethic

Under the conditions studied, consulting work and careers appeared to engender powerful emotions that unconsciously shaped relationships in the research environment. An intense work ethic was fuelled by a combination of anxiety and a desire for gain or

advantage over others. Central to consultants' experience was a shared conviction about the primacy of work. Those in the study inhabited an enclosed world in which conventional boundaries between work, rest and play were blurred. Over-working was normalised.

As it represented a denial of physical and psychological limits, overworking may have signalled a wished-for return to infantile omnipotence: fears of inferiority banished from the conscious mind by the illusory sensation of being in control. A similar form of defence was observed in an anxious perfectionism characterised by splitting. Martin spoke about what was hypothetically lost when 'Fred' (a made-up example of a 'crap Partner') went to a pitch instead of 'Harriet', who would have been ideal.

The normative primary task in this environment was conceived of as rational problem-solving and, despite evidence of intense feelings related to their own senses of belonging and justice, it was clear from slide presentations that, as analysts of client companies, workers were schooled to equate professionalism with detachment. The effect of this was to put the experience of emotion at odds with feelings of self-efficacy. Normal sentiments such as aggression towards a co-worker or insecurity in response to a perceived setback were censored in a setting where some individuals were afraid that they could be interpreted as career-limiting weaknesses or character flaws. I knew this because people raised fears and grievances with me that they would not take up with the other parties involved or air in public.

However, despite that individual and social defences were widely deployed, they offered limited protection and their inadequacy resulted in unconscious fears that containment was unavailable, that the firm could not offer protection from psychological harm, but could be felt to contribute to it. In interview, Dominic made repeated references to 'a safety deficit' and Martin spoke about the anxiety that arose in response to periodic culls of the Partner population. By targeting their hostility towards a persecutory firm, Partners were able to re-direct aggression they felt for each other and maintain among themselves a superficial atmosphere of collegiality.

Over-working was also observed to heighten perceptions of threat and examples were given of Partners over-reacting to questionable crises (such as the resignations which led to a hurriedly convened worldwide Partner meeting). The harder Partners worked, the more difficult it was to maintain a sense of proportion. Junior consultants saw their role models pay obsessional attention to work and assumed they needed to do likewise in

order to be successful. Cumulative indicators of potential burnout were not noticed or acted upon; instead, busyness had a numbing effect and a culture had evolved whereby stamina was championed over self-care. Among workers in competition with one another, a consulting career had the characteristics of an endurance race, with new entrants striving to outlast each other.

4.8.2. Relationship to ambiguity

Management consulting was shown to be knowledge-intensive work and consultants drew on their ingenuity to respond to complex client demands. However, while Partners had to demonstrate flexibility and adaptiveness in client-facing situations, they yearned for certainty in respect of their relationship to the firm and 'the rules of the game', as Eve exclaimed. Organisational rituals and rites of passage went some way to provide containment but regularly waiting for the outcome of decisions over which they exercised only limited control appeared to provoke anxiety.

Consultants were also aware of popular tropes questioning the legitimacy of the profession and the integrity of its leaders. The collective response to this was a defensive reaction formation wherein Partners replaced the unconscious source of anxiety with its opposite: over-stating their credentials and aspiring to be thought among world leaders. But, as Natasha observed, the firm had a pattern of oscillating from grandiosity when things were going well to self-doubt when they were not. Brittle or over-blown confidence actually weakened Partners' sense of security because, as she noted, it spoke to immaturity and difficulty engaging with reality.

Access to clients meant navigating complex internal politics. If hierarchical organisational structures might have evoked Oedipal feelings, the partnership as a form of governance seemed to elicit feelings of envy and perceived injustice consistent with sibling relations. A lack of trust among peers inhibited collaboration and an aversion to conflict meant that they were reluctant to hold one another to account. Many Partners were observed to trust a small coterie but felt a need to keep one eye on their own best interests knowing that they would be evaluated individually.

Observing and hearing from newly-elected Partners helped to demonstrate how this world appeared to the uninitiated. Eve observed that the skills to get elected to Partner and the skills to perform as one were different. Especially confusing was the extent to which they should comply with rules or subvert them in order to meet their targets. Boasting about success or exaggerating the likelihood of it were acutely sensitive topics,

some Partners concerned that a disregard for truth could invoke chaos. Remember Tim's account of a Partner meeting that descended into a 'pissing contest' with Francis and Theo showing off, Martin being mischievous and Ben getting upset.

4.8.3. Fear of failure

Intrinsic to the pursuit of success was a fear of failure, but organisation members found it difficult to acknowledge fear as an occupational hazard or a systemic condition. Instead, fear, like other emotions, was repressed - considered a personal liability and potentially a risk to one's career that had to be kept secret. Alongside the episodic stress that one might expect among workers who occasionally take part in high-stakes situations was observed a chronic stress and a group of people in permanent flight mode. This I understood to be the result of over-indexing on danger.

Highly charged work and a lack of containment contributed to a sense of endangerment felt not only by Partners but across the system. Ben's construction of Partners as rainmakers and hunters conveyed something of the thrill he experienced but also made me think of the worry that dependent others in the unit may have felt. Keeping the system on permanent red alert and fostering a siege mentality would have justified demands for maximum discretionary effort and underscored the heroic role of Partners as responsible for defending and protecting the juniors. Crises thus diverted attention from structural inequalities and injustices which in theory could be returned to under stable conditions but which in practice went unresolved.

Narratives maintaining psychological pressure concerned the insatiability of clients, the superiority of the competition, the need to keep pace with technology and an abundance of talent available to replace under-performers. When market conditions were benign, shared hope played a significant part in the daily life of the office but as the outlook changed, individuals went into survival mode. Partners, who had only ever been a loose grouping and not a team, found it difficult to take on risk or assume collective responsibility for the leadership of the office. Work being in short supply, they were anxious not to be associated with failure, making it hard to learn from mistakes.

4.8.4. Power and politics

I explained the governance and structure of the firm as I did the limits to formal authority. I consider that a key to understanding the research environment was an appreciation for how informal power was exercised. Rainmakers were found to have leverage and influence as individuals but the nature of this particular style of partnership meant that

power was intentionally vested in the group. The concept of ‘having someone else’s back’ was often referred to and I took this to mean a) that the operating environment was assumed to be essentially hostile and b) that Partners felt a need to form small groupings and alliances on the basis of mutual protection. Hugo talking about how Tim could be a friend but then following this with the idea that friendship was about looking out for each other was particularly striking.

If some individuals, notably Tim, reported a lack of awareness when it came to internal politics, the findings offered many examples of low-level gamesmanship and individuals manoeuvring for maximum advantage. Access to clients and the hoarding of resources were a common source of contention and, uncomfortable with direct confrontations, Partners often asked the unit leader to intervene in their disputes, something he found burdensome, as I discovered when I found him ‘a bit low’ over lunch one day. The undermining of colleagues and tactical use of the rumour mill were reported on, as was the difficulty the Partner group had in summoning the political maturity to confront problems associated with the downturn.

On the whole it appeared that organisational politics had negative connotations for Partners. Perhaps because they were obliged to present clients with an image of their relations as harmonious and productive, political activity, as though it existed in opposition to teamwork, was disavowed in order to maintain the performative boundary between what was on show to clients and what was consigned to offstage. Rather than lean into the topic of organisational politics and approach it with curiosity, the consultants observed were only political in a covert way, as though working through conflicting interests in public view would involve some loss of face.

The downturn intensified a tendency towards multiple projections and paranoia. One can only speculate whether power relations imported from client systems were informing group dynamics among Partners, although evidence from the literature supports this. In any case, the group appeared to operate along a continuum with trust and reciprocity at one end and self-interest and mutual suspicion at the other. Unable to be candid with one another, Partners left space open for distorted interpretations of each other’s motives. An observable taboo on politics rendered the topic undiscussable and put it beyond reach as a resource.

4.8.5. Leadership

This was found to be a low-trust environment and the research offered evidence of a generalised antipathy towards leadership with Partners reluctant to bestow authority on peers if it came at the expense of their own much-prized autonomy. Some Partners expressed low confidence in the direction set by the firm's global leaders. Ben, for instance spoke in interview about 'resentment' and 'annoyance about the way the firm's going.' Others, like Dominic, felt the local leader to have little confidence in them. 'Why the questions?' he asked about coaching. 'Is it because I'm not safe?' Overall, the right of the local leader to exercise the authority vested in him by the firm was contested. Some, like Martin, believed that authority was situational and that followership could legitimately be withheld.

The unit leader was an intermediary between local Partners and global bosses. Some of those interviewed complained about his style but his predecessor spoke of a 'huge scepticism' towards leadership going back several years. One senior spoke about a 'firm-wide tendency to appoint and neutralise leaders simultaneously' and questioning the personal integrity of the unit leader was used as a means to check his authority. Corresponding evidence was offered of his disappointment with the role.

An unconscious dynamic was observed whereby autonomy and freedom from interference were highly valued but their shadow aspects i.e. the tendency towards autocracy and unilateral decision-making were disowned, split off and projected. In the case of the UK unit leader, it appeared that on one occasion, when he overruled a committee to allocate resources to his own practice (and thereby deny others) he identified with the projection and seemed thereby to confirm some colleagues' worst fears. So strongly was freedom from interference prized, (perhaps related to the desire for consultants to be independent and impartial) that normal attempts to coach under-performers elicited a paranoid response, a fear that coachees were 'at risk'.

This ambivalence towards leadership may have had it origins in client relations. Was the attitude of Partners towards their leaders a re-enactment of how clients toyed with consultants - sometimes idealising them, sometimes withholding their approval? Might clients' mixed feelings about consultants have informed some Partners' attitudes towards the firm's leaders or explain why they took on a sadistic aspect? A low desire to identify as the leadership group for the unit meant that the group sought safety in offering advice

to an imagined leadership group rather than assume the risk of taking up the collective role, with all the potential for failure involved.

4.8.6. Change

At monthly meetings, Partners had come to accept that behaviours such as interrupting others, monologuing and not paying attention would go unchallenged. Nor were the topics tabled to all Partners' satisfaction. Natasha was especially frustrated that the substitute task of managing the unit, whilst it may temporarily have alleviated anxiety, was detracting from urgently needed analysis of the market. Though meetings were often unsatisfactory and though this was widely felt among Partners, the topic of meeting effectiveness was not tabled for discussion by the unit leader or any Partner. The lack of any shared impulse to step back and review their own performance was a self-imposed limit.

Instead, a pattern of conflict avoidance characterised the Partner group. A rare example of a public disagreement was used to show how handicapped the leadership group became when deeply-felt emotions broke the surface. Yet, whilst ever they remained beneath it, their influence was no less powerful, as the unit leader found when his call for a step change in performance surfaced resentments that had to be worked through before any real progress could be made. Separately, two Partners interpreted the group's resistance to change as in defence of vested interests, conscious or otherwise. According to their accounts, those who had reached the top of the career ladder had the lowest incentive to disrupt the status quo.

4.8.7 Summary and analysis of the whole

Prior to the downturn, the UK unit seemed always to be working at or over capacity. Consultants were expected to be highly responsive under unstable conditions. To pursue a career in consulting was to face internal competition for advancement and external competition for billable work. Partners in the UK did not identify as a group or a team.

As successive quarters returned disappointing financial results, the firm reacted by laying off one Partner and relocating two others. A chronic sense of endangerment among Partners became acute and the atmosphere was feared to have become a fight for survival with 'every man (sic) for himself.' Partners grew afraid that some colleagues might seek personal advantage at the expense of others and of the group. Ambivalence and mistrust also characterised their feelings towards leaders and in their own role as a

leadership group, they seemed unable to adapt when needed or to offer the containment required to manage staff's anxieties about the future.

The findings indicate that a professional services Partnership entering a downturn with high levels of anxiety, unexamined social defences and a low capacity for containment was vulnerable to the risk that a pervasive sense of insecurity could compromise its ability fully to recover. Consulting was shown to combine opportunity and uncertainty. As a consequence, it attracted ambitious workers who sometimes felt fear in response what was expected of them, from themselves or others. In this setting, desire was held to be a legitimate emotion but fear was withheld from consciousness. Though it significantly shaped the unconscious life of the group, fear was largely undiscussable. Partners did not feel safe enough with one another to enjoy intimacy nor disclose vulnerability. Scarcity was divisive because the group lacked the strength of connection to solve their shared problems together.

When favourable conditions returned, the group's impulse was to accelerate out of the downturn without reflection, meaning that little was available to be learned from how it had affected social relations and whether the group would be better able to cope with market fluctuations in future.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Through the course of the research and subsequent analysis a number of salient issues emerged which warrant further discussion. In this chapter I propose to consider these issues with reference to the literature reviewed, my own findings and experience from my practice.

5.2 Emotions

The task of management consultancy in the firm studied was found to be generative of powerful emotions experienced individually and collectively. Consultants worked under sustained pressure which became more acute under adverse conditions. The strategy of over-working was both a response to pressure and a contribution to it: it intensified stress rather than alleviated it. An interpretation of the data which took account of the influence of the unconscious mind indicated that, outside of their awareness, consultants conformed to group norms that had evolved over time. These governed which human emotions could be freely expressed (e.g. excitement) and which (e.g fear) were unconsciously defended against. Adherence to such 'feeling rules' conferred on individuals a sense of belonging; departure from them would likely feel threatening or unsafe.

The literature and the findings both indicated that unwelcome emotions affect lived experience at the individual and collective level, to the extent that defending against them became an unconscious organising principle, diverting energy and attention from the task for which an organisation was understood to exist. In the literature, it was shown that leaders used defences such as projective identification in individual identity work to discard 'unwanted selves' (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). At the systemic level, unwanted feelings, such as disappointment, had to be converted into blame to keep an organisational ideal intact (Clancy, Vince & Gabriel, 2012). Applying the idea of unconscious emotional management to the firm studied, in which personal survival felt paramount, it was shown that avoiding association with failure or defending one's assets felt more important on occasion than did finding shared solutions to the conditions they found themselves in. Vince (2002) offered evidence that such behaviours (as attributing blame) in organisations are often understood or constructed as instances of individual

defensiveness rather than as an organisational dynamic finding expression via an individual.

The workplace was characterised by a pervasive sense of danger and a corresponding anxiety. In data analysis it was not possible, nor did it seem helpful, to apportion this anxiety such that some was attributable to individual personalities, some to a legacy from the organisation's past and some felt vicariously on behalf of clients. However from Beeby et al. (1998) and Martin's remarks in interview about 'pandering' to clients comes a sense that clients had the power to toy with consultants and defend against the humiliation of depending on outside help by behaving towards them in a fickle or sadistic fashion (see also Paul's remarks about jumping through procurement hoops only to be rejected). From the defences mobilised, it appeared that this generalised anxiety was felt partly in the form of paranoia, hence evidence of scapegoating and blame, and partly of depressive anxiety, indicated by the oscillation between omnipotence and impotence that was observed.

It was not, though, the experience of emotion itself but the unacknowledged influence of it that was problematic, especially in an environment where it was not customary to look for systemic patterns. Matthew's observation that UK Partners held too few 'post-mortems' after client pitches will have made sense within the dominant frame of reference, justified on the grounds that it is important to move on to the next opportunity, that time is scarce, that it will not change the outcome etc. However, when seen as a pattern of avoidance in response to unwelcome emotions, it takes on a different significance. Then we start to consider that 'post-mortems' might involve uncomfortable feelings such as anger or shame. They might threaten to question or disrupt established power relations or risk damage to relationships. Post-mortems might also require sophisticated conflict-handling skills that the consultants involved feel they do not possess. So, post-mortems become not-how-we-do-things and those who want to be part of that 'we' unconsciously sign up to the rule. In consulting, with its 'up or out' approach to careers, remaining loyal to the 'we' is vital.

The title of the reviewed article 'Consulting to a 'hurt' or 'upset' organisation' (Beeby et al., 1998) is instructive. The authors recounted that when they presented the findings of their action research to the client organisation's senior management, they were challenged after reporting that the middle managers had been 'hurt' by the change process they had led. Surely they did not mean 'hurt'? It was a strong word. Would not 'upset' have been a more accurate description of how the middle managers were feeling?

The authors drew attention to this because, in discounting the managers' feelings, the seniors were defending themselves and, assuming someone had to be at fault, shifting the burden of blame. The idea of *hurting* could not be borne but the managers being *upset* by changes reflected more on them, implying that staff might need to toughen up somewhat. In the firm I studied, where consultants made their living from knowing what to do, the idea of not knowing in a downturn was just as unbearable. Reflexive activity that might have confronted them with feelings of ignorance or incompetence was therefore avoided.

In the course of field work, I formed the impression that the organisational shadow - a metaphorical repository for all that could not be thought or felt in the research environment - exerted a strong influence. I observed changes in organisational members when talking to me in private because they felt they did not have to self-censor in the way they might have done with colleagues. In other words, in my presence, because of what was projected into me and my valency for it, they granted themselves the permission to include feelings in their experience. For some this came as a relief while for others it was confronting. For example, it upset Eve to acknowledge that she was not being who she wanted to be.

This is salient because if an organisation is unable to secure a place for emotion or see how the management of emotions influences organisation structure, strategy and process, then, on the basis of this research evidence, at least three systemic consequences might be thought to follow. First, as the Gucci case study illustrates, members engage in destructive conflicts when unwanted aspects of themselves are lodged in others. Second, the organisation is blind to any mutual influence between the way it functions and the way it defends against emotions that it finds intolerable e.g. Martin's remark about the periodic culling of Partners to expel the firm's bad objects. Third, organisation members will feel anxious (and less able to contribute) if they sense that their employer lacks the capacity to contain their emotions and that contentious topics, like power relations, have to remain off-limits.

It may be that as knowledge brokers, professional services firms are especially persuaded of the idea that rationality and emotion are mutually exclusive. It may equally be that the UK (with its imperial history and public school system) has become more defensive and disdainful of emotion than other countries (Duffell, 2015). Evidence from the firm studied appears to lend weight to these hypotheses. Emotions were seen as liabilities rather than assets in the research setting, posing risk to the firm's balance sheet and to the career

credits of individuals. Moreover, consultants were shown to have emotions about the legitimacy of their emotions. For example, as we concluded our interview, Tim chided himself for being 'overly negative' as though it were disloyal or that he ought to feel ashamed.

5.3 Containment

The capacity to accept and integrate feelings that are difficult to bear is not, however, only a function of the individual or the group but also of the environment which they create and in which they operate. Elsewhere I make the observation that management consultants could be subject to existential anxieties in the course of their work - feelings of overwhelm should the volume of their work be perceived to exceed their current capacity and feelings of abandonment should clients, colleagues or the firm withdraw support. Where the psychological demands of the Partner role were felt to exceed the emotional resources that Partners were able to access, from within or from their peers, they felt in deficit.

Bion (1970) used the metaphor of a 'container' to describe the way that a child's intense feelings can be made bearable when a parent/care-giver unconsciously holds those feelings on the child's behalf and metabolises or detoxifies them so that they are gradually returned in a way that feels safe. The assumption is of a loving relationship in which a parent temporarily adds their capacity for feeling to the child's as its own develops. Anxieties are not eradicated but nor do they disable mental functioning altogether; the parent has the experience to discern realistic fears and offer reassurance. Similarly, Winnicott (1958) referred to the sensation of being held that a baby or infant stores in their memory for life: the experience of not being allowed to fall is known physically and psychologically. Bion's concept of containment and Winnicott's of the holding environment have both been applied to the topic of psychological safety in organisations (e.g. Kahn, 2001). A lack of containment/holding might make normal anxiety feel catastrophic because both the feelings and a lack of support for them represent danger.

The finding that consultants were subject to significant uncertainty is important in this regard because whereas their external operating environment was significantly unpredictable, the internal operating environment could perhaps have compensated in some way, be it through the structure of the organisation or the design of work flows. A number of rituals and rites of passage were observed that fulfilled this function. However,

it was also found that the firm's partnership structure, a peer-regulated system of governance, whilst effective in preventing individual abuses of power could represent a source of insecurity because it was unclear in a given moment where power lay or how it was constellating. Empson & Alvehus (2020) confirmed this with respect to collective leadership dynamics in professional services firms which were said to be unstable and in 'perpetual flux' (p. 24).

In the firm studied, Partners could be disproportionately concerned about their own status and sometimes felt their situation to be precarious. They were in the strange position of both being the employer and, on occasion, feeling doubtful about where they stood in relation to their continued employment. This they typically found energy-sapping. Unlike their corporate clients, they were unable to lean into the relative safety of an established hierarchy. Instead, informal authority, which was believed to be of most value, belonged to 'winners' and though a small minority of Partners won consistently in the market, most reported that they had some good years and some bad. Many therefore concluded that they needed to insure against market failure by having 'weatherproof' income streams and by being politically well-positioned, able to draw on the support of known allies. A 'holding' environment which facilitated movement towards maturity being absent, the system was vulnerable to movement in the opposite direction. As organisation members sought out alternative ways to find the safety they desired, covert political activities represented attempts at containment, but with undesirable consequences.

Cliques were said to operate in the research setting and this gave rise to feelings of paranoia as organisation members tried to make sure they were positioned within an in-group. Informal communication channels were also active; the tactical use of the rumour mill to spread gossip and undermine colleagues were reported on. If some Partners hoped for more nurture from the firm and found criticism instead, it may have been because they projected their own self-criticism onto it and established it as a persecutory object within the 'organisation in the mind' (Armstrong, 2005). Conflict could not be considered a generative activity in this context but represented a failure to 'keep the lid on' what was proscribed i.e. feelings. Anxiety thus could not be understood as an occupational hazard but had to represent failure - ascribed either to an individual's lack of resilience or neglectful leadership. Consistent with Clancy, Vince & Gabriel (2012) juniors blamed Partners for being emotionally absent and Partners labelled 'millennials' as needy and entitled.

Among themselves, Partners were suspicious of those who stood for formal leadership positions because they associated power with self-seeking, anti-group behaviour and had little experience of power being used to generate more power for everyone. Not trusting their leaders therefore, Partners felt under pressure to be vigilant whilst also being responsible for sales income and for the development of juniors. Nowhere in public did it feel psychologically safe to suggest that they make actually have been attempting the impossible.

Taken together, the evidence as represented by dysfunctional relating and a lack of attention to boundaries could be said to emanate from a systemic lack of containment. The situation was not on a par with the Gucci case study, but the same defences against anxiety: splitting, projection and projective identification, were in operation. And if the anxiety in the setting could not be owned or thought about, neither could a need for containment.

5.4 Reflexivity, learning and adaptation to change

Bion's basic assumptions (Bion, 1961) were not widely referenced in the literature under review, but it would be possible to describe the firm studied as being in permanent fight/flight mode, defending itself against anxiety by identifying an external source of danger (such as market failure) then either engaging in an attack (competing for work) or securing some means of escape (via collective delusion). Bion noted that a group operating from this basic assumption will necessarily be intolerant of activities that are not understood to be forms of fight or flight. Acceptable leadership in a fight/flight group has to involve leading an attack or a retreat. In my study, analysis of interviews showed Partners drawing on discourses and employing constructions that likened the task of competing in the market to warfare and that cast groups of Partners from the same consulting firm as fellow combatants. Rival firms were enemies in this discourse and work likened to doing battle.

With respect to the alternative i.e. securing a means of escape, the data indicates an unconscious retreat into phantasy. The firm was observed to have a strong future focus, its collective attention directed towards the next client opportunity and the end of year results. Despite possessing presence in the orthodox sense, Partners were often challenged actually to be in the present, so strongly were they drawn to the future. This could account for what appeared to be a shared aversion to review and, in a less abstract

way, could have been inferred from how much time they spent checking their mobile phones.

The possibility of a blurred distinction between phantasy and reality is also suggested by the findings from my study. For example, the Partner group's shared belief that they were responsible for advising their own firm rather than leading it or the global leadership team's belief that they could spin disappointing business results without their Partner colleagues calling this into question. This is consistent with an avoidance of 'reality checks' and suggests a capacity for self-deceit. When Dominic described how Amazon had recycled learning from mistakes to create a new and successful product, he was emphatic that this would not occur in this firm because its reflex would be finding someone to blame.

Drawing these ideas together, it appears from an analysis of the literature and the findings that that where work-related anxiety is high, emotions are repressed and containment is unavailable or sought in ways that prove to be self-defeating, then reflection and from it, organisational learning, can feel unsafe. This risks organisational decline if institutionalised defences prevent constructive adaptation to the changes in the environment.

Adjusting or not to the dynamics of the labour market and recognising the priorities of new hires offers a useful example. In the firm studied, revenues were dependent on two inflows: of clients and new recruits. The firm made a profit by achieving an optimal ratio between senior and junior people. Partners would have several projects underway at different clients and deployed supervised teams of juniors to undertake it. In shorthand, this was referred to as 'a pyramid' with junior analysts in greatest number and with progressively fewer senior analysts, managers, Principals and Partners. Leaders had continuously to adjust the inflow of recruits to the work in prospect. Too few new hires meant not enough resources and Partner time lost to project management when they could/should be meeting clients; however, too many and the firm was paying people to sit 'on the beach[5]' unused. In some other consulting firms subject to the same supply and demand dynamics, unused staff were referred to in a dehumanising fashion, as 'inventory'.

[5] 'on the beach' is ironic industry jargon meaning time spent when not on a billable project, possibly naval in origin referring to sailors on half-pay when there was no war to occupy them.

The firm hired highly-educated juniors, paid them a lot, considering their age, and promoted them quickly. Consultants in their mid-twenties could be responsible for projects of significant scale, cost and complexity. With fewer places available at each stage of promotion, competition at all levels of the organisation was fierce and over-working endemic. The psychological contract or agreed exchange between seniors and juniors could be described thus: juniors 'agreed' to work hard and be permanently available; in exchange, seniors 'agreed' to pass on their craft skills to their apprentices. As accomplished sales people, Partners had an aptitude for using rhetoric to convey how highly they valued and relied on junior consultants, but could be found less than convincing.

Most Partners derived genuine satisfaction from developing junior talent; most juniors were happy to work for intelligent leaders and hold significant responsibility. However, when breaches in the psychological contract occurred, they were keenly felt. Biannual staff surveys from my time in the field consistently showed dissatisfaction among junior consultants about the Partners' commitment to apprenticeship. Vince (2002) demonstrated the limited effectiveness of organisational learning without attention to the political and emotional dimensions of organising itself but in the firm studied, relations between Partners and junior consulting staff did not appear to have been examined in this way.

Had they been so, a number of difficulties characterising these relations would have been evident. First, it was apparent that as clients became ever more demanding, so the calibre of recruits ought to get higher. However, this consulting firm was only one among a number of management consultancies competing for a finite amount of available talent. If in the past, such talent had been in infinite supply, so pleased were graduates to join the profession, it was clear that these days had been over for some time. So leaders who behaved towards staff as if they were easily replaceable were not yet alive to this new reality.

Second, also changing were young people's expectations of the world of work. It appeared from defensive reactions to survey results when discussed at Partner meetings that some leaders believed they did not need to adjust their leadership style to take account of this. In their opinion, consulting was inherently tough; it had been tough for them in their day and it was better for the firm if, early on, they weeded out those who, in their view, were not going to make it. Not available for consideration in such discussions were a) the possibility that they might re-enacting their own emotional injuries from the

past because so threatening were the emotions involved, they had to deny their existence and b) that who 'made it' in the past might not have the profiles that were needed in future.

The third change concerned the diversity of the operating environment. Evidence of how far that was reflected in the composition of leadership and client-facing consulting teams also suggests that some Partners were struggling to adjust. In a meeting to determine which Principals should be put up for promotion to Partner, Francis questioned whether a woman could manage potentially conflicting priorities. In another post Brexit discussion about recruitment, Hugo appeared to suggest that British people be given preferential treatment because 'it was an issue for the business'. In both cases, these attitudes were challenged on the grounds that they were offensive. There was not, however, discussion about how they also harmed the business by damaging the firm's reputation as an employer and putting talent out of reach. A white, middle-aged, upper-class, male Partner group was vulnerable to being a closed, prejudicial and anachronistic system, at risk of using its own attributes as the template for a good consultant, of recruiting and promoting in its own likeness and of perpetuating a collective blind-spot in respect of unearned privilege.

I frame this as a vulnerability rather than as an accusation because, in my view, accusations and the defensive responses that they invoke further contribute to stagnation. Claims and counter claims to moral superiority overlook the basic tenets of systems psychodynamic theory. Lewin's Social Field Theory (1951) states that the whole (of an organisation) can possess different attributes to those of its parts and that such systems can act in concert outside their own awareness and in ways that, were they to become aware, they would not choose. It was not the intention of Partners to alienate junior staff.

In this case, a number of hypotheses could account for mutual recrimination between different generations. It may have represented a safe conflict - a means to process aggression felt about client work but the expression of which might have damaged the business. Regardless, the research findings suggest that scaling from the individual to the systemic represents a complex organisational challenge and that good intentions are not enough. The idea that, for example, conscientious and caring people could lead a callous organisation feels counter-intuitive when orthodox thinking would lead us to assume that kind individuals aggregate to a compassionate group. Extrapolating from my findings, however, a first-order reading of emotional intelligence as individual empathy or self-

awareness may conceal a second-order challenge with significance beyond this study: how ought an emotionally intelligent human system (in this case, a leadership group) to behave?

My argument is not just that an anxious organisation finds it difficult to adapt but also that when resistance goes unexamined, it can do harm. Any individual who has suffered a collapse of their psychological defences for example, due to loss, ill health or a fall from grace will testify to their necessity. Defences are the psyche's means of protection against what threatens to annihilate the ego. However, unexamined defences pose a risk to organisations because what can begin as a temporary work-around can get institutionalised should adherence to the shared defence become a condition of belonging. What, in time, proves to be a maladaptation, can become a taken-for-granted feature, out of sight, beyond question and tacitly assumed to be how things are, how they have always been and how they must be in the future. In my view, second order knowledge (Watzlawick et al., 1967), in this case, understanding how and why institutional defences operate, is necessary if maladaptations are to be understood and improvements pursued. This paper departs from the popular idea that dysfunction in consulting firms is attributable to the widespread presence of 'insecure over-achievers', making the case that, in this study at least, participants were so captured by the social defences of the system that they were bound to experience paranoid and depressive anxiety irrespective of their personalities, that insecurity was a property of the whole rather than only of its parts.

This research attempted to answer the question: how does the partnership in the UK unit of a global consulting firm function when the market turns against it? The goal was to gain a systemic understanding of how the unconscious influenced Partner dynamics in such a circumstance. From analysis of the evidence it appeared that the downturn was divisive and put the unit under considerable psychological pressure. It carried a threat of disintegration and only a change in market conditions forestalled this eventuality. Regrettably, in respect of the development of the organisation, an opportunity was missed for Partners to develop a positive relationship with the organisational shadow rather than deny its existence. In this case, it could be said that economic growth was unattainable without attention to developmental growth i.e. movement from regression towards maturity.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Implications of the research for the firm studied

Looking at the relationships between the themes identified and considering the resulting insights from a systems psychodynamic perspective, new ideas surface from this research that could have implications beyond consulting firms to other business organisations.

The first such concerns a relationship between over-working and a felt loss of control, the one potentially being a fearful response to the subjective experience of the other. Partners and their teams exercised limited control over the outcomes of their work, be it developing new business or improving client performance. Understood as a form of displacement, whereby feelings that cannot be discharged in one setting are ventilated in another, consultants may have been compensating for their inability to assert satisfactory control over outputs by intensifying their control over inputs. This maladaptive defence mechanism, a denial of uncertainty, posed a risk, because in practice it caused people to act as if limits to their physical and psychological well-being did not exist, which caused burn out.

The research also offered a nuanced appreciation of the social significance of success and failure. Not only did Partners want success for its intrinsic value but it was also important to them to be seen as successful: crafting an identity that others, be they clients, peers or juniors, would associate with success. The space afforded to performance and impression management in the firm studied created a political and potentially harmful undertow in that most forms of fallibility and vulnerability were held to be unsafe. It appeared that what confidence was garnered for pursuits was contingent on external validation rather than being rooted in a shared conviction of the firm's intrinsic worth.

Where authenticity was perceived to be inimical to survival, intimacy and trust were low. This was explained by Partners as resulting from a lack of contact time but the same logic could equally be argued to work in reverse: i.e. Partners not wanting to spend time together because they felt it a burdensome obligation to be performing acceptable selves to one another rather than relate authentically; or because they saw their peers as competitors, the aggressive dynamics of the market being internalised and represented in

relationships between colleagues. In any case, this had the potential to leave a need for human connection unmet. Believing that they were only able to rely on themselves, Partners prized autonomy and had an allergic reaction to leadership at the collective level. Formal leaders who tried to reconcile individual freedoms with shared ambitions had fragile authority, often adjudicating in ongoing and fruitless tugs of war that ended in paralysis.

A period of scarcity, not unique to consulting firms, was divisive because in the minds of the Partners, it represented a series of individual crises requiring individual responses, rather than a shared problem. In her regular podcast, *Leading Professional People*, Professor Laura Empson (2023) makes the valuable point that, because Partners in professional services firms often have no access to their colleagues' performance data, they may assume that they are being out-performed by peers and redouble their own efforts. In a collective, this can cause an unstable escalation of runaway proportions. From a systems psychodynamic perspective, it appeared that the Partner group fell back on primitive defences such as splitting (e.g the idealisation of competitors and the denigration of the firm), projection (e.g. blaming one another for unsuccessful pitches) and the denial of reality (e.g. the fantasy of perpetual adolescence and freedom from their responsibilities).

Of note is the mutually reinforcing nature of some of the themes identified, to the extent that it can be difficult to distinguish cause from effect. For example, there appears to have been a circular relationship between over-working and distorted perceptions of threat. Danger can of course generate a defensive reaction in the form of over-working but equally over-working can be understood to generate unrealistic ideas of what constitutes danger. In any case, a system believing itself to be under attack will inevitably deploy defences of which some will have functional value and others prove to be unhelpful maladaptations that make matters worse. In this case, the inability of the leadership team to provide adequate containment for the whole system was problematic, especially in that without containment, organisational learning was unsafe and adaptation to environmental changes thus compromised. Why, one might ask, did the leadership of the unit set itself the impossible task of being both the field sales force as well as the principal source of education and pastoral care for the remainder of the organisation? What was being avoided?

Behind this appears to lie the systemic devaluing and disavowal of emotion. Throughout the thesis I have returned to the idea that consulting work feels to those involved in it a

high-stakes endeavour and is generative of powerful emotions, yet is also work in which little or no legitimacy is afforded to the influence of those emotions. In my view, that this paradox goes unaddressed represents a series of missed opportunities. Consultants in the study did not seem aware of the emotional investments their work obliged them to make and tended to attribute exhaustion to their own weaknesses rather than considering that in addition to their other tasks, they were engaged in multiple, invisible forms of labour: managing feelings, relationships and politics. Leaders did not consider the potential for emotions to pattern and organise outside of their awareness such that the influence of avoiding unwelcome feelings on organisational design and decision-making went unseen and unacknowledged. Of arguably most importance, due to its habit of avoiding difficult emotions, the system was prevented from developing the type of deep confidence that is rooted in the experience of having faced into feelings that are hard to bear. In other words, this was a system that, were it to have had more contact with reality, could have gone to market with more strength, finding itself to be more capable than it believed.

6.2 Recommendations for leaders

Some attitudinal changes and strategic investments could do much to alter the situation described above. First I propose to outline a shift in perspective I believe to be required, then I will go on to suggest in operational terms how it might be possible to bring about change.

6.2.1 Attitudinal change

The unit appeared to under-estimate its own ability to contain anxiety without disintegrating. Prevailing attitudes seemed to interpret the existence of anxiety as a form of failure - either a lack of individual resilience, (i.e. a person's unsuitability for a 'tough' industry) or a failure of leadership, in allowing the system to overheat with too much work and too few resources. The idea of anxiety as normal, inevitable, even potentially generative, was not widely entertained. The system, perhaps because of its commitment to exuding calm and containing client anxiety, seemed closed to the idea that anxiety was a natural consequence of high-stakes work and 'chose' not to engage with it as a reality. This did not serve to make the anxiety disappear, only to deny its legitimacy and send it underground.

One consequence was to set the bar for 'emotional intelligence' low and to consider it an individual rather than a systemic property. This is not to undervalue the idea that leaders

should be kind, compassionate and interested in their teams but only to point out the risk of superficiality when EQ become synonymous with charm. In my observation, natural sales people could slip into selling their leadership in a performative way without it having enough substance to satisfy their followers. Understanding the phrase 'emotional intelligence' as a property of the whole system suggests that emotions represent a form of data, the interpretation of which are vital to an understanding of how the organisation functions.

To correct this would be to attempt something counter-cultural. That is, to devote time to learning from experience despite the gravitational pull towards the future and all the exciting possibilities that it represents. In the research I encountered a resistance towards group reflection and in some situations, the unconscious sabotage of thinking spaces in which some Partners were active and other complicit. Yet growth could be thought to depend on a capacity for reflection and review. The term 'post-mortem' that one Partner used to describe the post-hoc evaluation of pitches has a negative connotation, implying failure and the analysis of what went wrong. My suggestion is as much if not more about understanding how success occurs and therefore how, in this example, pitch teams might repeat it. As stated above, the real prize on offer from a deeper engagement with reality is a deeper confidence, not a painted-on swagger, but a shared belief in one's intrinsic value.

6.2.2 Operational change

My field work ended over 4 years since the writing of this thesis so it would be wrong to assume that what I might recommend on the basis of what I learned then is not in place now. Notwithstanding, a small number of interventions suggest themselves:

a) Organisational learning

The firm studied, as I witnessed it, was well-organised in respect of individual learning but less so in respect of organisational learning, that is, inquiry into the behavioural patterns of the system as a whole. For example, a number of Partners in a unit might engage in coaching but I was not aware of an effort to pool the intelligence of the coaches and understand what their experiences reveal about the organisational dynamic. Or, when sales pitches were analysed, of time spent looking across several cases to identify patterns in the data. Just as individual learning might be said to occur on the job and in formal settings, so organisational learning combines formal disciplines (e.g. near-miss reviews in the aviation industry) with opportunism and spontaneity. The point is

to make the behaviour of the system a conscious object of study so that the relationships between organisational, team and interpersonal dynamics can be properly understood and appreciated. In my experience, leaders can be educated to take a whole-system view and hold it in mind.

b) Leadership development

I found Partners to have a developed appetite for personal and professional development. While it was sometimes difficult for them to get informal feedback on their performance on-the-job, the firm was able to organise a comprehensive programme of formal courses and coaching opportunities to a high standard. Investment of this nature was however intermittent and where one Managing Partner might prioritise such a curriculum, the next one elected could just as easily ascribe few resources to it so that Partners' access to well-funded development opportunities could not be relied on consistently.

In the light of the findings from this research, this would be an error of judgement. A perennial issue throughout the thesis concerned Partners' need for figurative spaces in which to deepen their relationships, make collective sense of their situation, agree on how to develop the organisation as a whole and coalesce around a common approach to leadership to be applied across geographies and practices. Followers, not least because of the frequent rotation of Partners in leadership roles, might be said to need a coherent experience of being led and a common model of leadership that they can adopt at all levels of the organisation. Where individual learning is designed with wider strategic and political considerations in mind, there is likely to be less conflict between learning and its application.

c) Democratic audit

As an independent observer, I became aware of a tension between the need for widespread enfranchisement among Partners who co-owned the firm and an executive who needed freedom of manoeuvre to lead and run the business. On occasion, I heard Partners talking as though they had control over the firm's governance and decision-making and at other times as though they were employees who worked for the leadership team.

The owning and disowning of responsibility was part of the organisational dynamic that I observed and reported on; however, if it does not already exist, there may be something to be gained from a periodic audit of how the Partnership functions as a deliberative

democracy. Without it being burdensome, it would be complacent to assume that the democratic functioning of the partnership could not improve from one generation to the next.

6.3 The research design

This thesis concerns a unique research study that set out to answer the question: how does the Partnership in the UK unit of a global consulting firm function when the market turns against it? Interpreting contemporary practice in management consulting through a systems psychodynamic lens, the study became about understanding the influence of the unconscious on Partner dynamics in a market downturn. The research was distinct from other literature on management consulting in two ways. First, it situated group and individual behaviour in the context of fluctuating market conditions. When an opportunity presented itself to study a period of scarcity following a period of abundance, I decided to stay longer in the field and adjusted the direction of the study to look at the transition from one period to the other. Second, this was reflexive ethnographic research. It involved me observing and participating in daily life, recording what I observed, what I felt and the interplay between the two. Ethnography adopts an open-ended approach to data generation asking what is happening here and how do we account for it? In this case, the focus of the inquiry was to look at what was happening with respect to Partner dynamics in a downturn and how I should interpret it were I to apply a systems psychodynamic lens.

Combining systems psychodynamics interpretation with reflexive ethnography enabled an approach that was welcoming to all categories of data but which did not take that data at face value, instead attending to what was missing as well as what was observed, what was avoided as well as what was approached with ease. The research participants not only had an observer in their midst but one with licence to ascribe different meanings to what he witnessed than those typically ascribed in the setting. From negotiating access to writing up the findings, the counter-transference was a significant part of my experience as a researcher. Much of what was felt by Partners in the field, I too experienced - feeling idealised, feeling denigrated and unwanted, losing the ability to think, fearing eviction, seeking the approval of authority figures, feeling guilty for not working hard enough - for some Partners I came to represent a safe place for them to unburden themselves of unwelcome feelings; others used me as a proxy when they were reluctant to confront their leaders or peers. The counter-transference was an invaluable form of triangulation in data analysis.

6.4 Limitations of the research

I had been concerned at the outset that not having access to clients or being able to witness exchanges between Partners and clients would limit the study. Interactions between Partners and clients seemed to represent the 'coal face' of consulting and at first it was disappointing to be absent. In the event and for reasons I accepted, client access was not practically possible but in hindsight, I believe this offered me a vantage point in common with junior staff; that is, I felt the importance of the client without coming into contact.

A second limitation was that the research was undertaken by a single researcher. With one exception, (Vince, 2002), studies described in the literature reviewed were undertaken by teams of researchers who could process the findings together but also offer one another some measure of emotional support. I experienced the counter-transference as intense and felt isolated. The formula for maintaining perspective and staying sane that Beeby et al. (1998) employed - use systemic analysis, engage in dialogue, have (group) supervision - offered that research team a space to debrief and make sense of their experience. In hindsight, I found myself wishing that such space had been available to me.

A third limitation concerned researching a time-poor population. This had implications for the research design because approaches such as action research or co-operative inquiry that would have required Partner time would likely have run aground if, as it transpired, Partners proved to be unavailable. In the course of fieldwork, I had many scheduled meetings with Partners cut short, postponed and cancelled at the last minute. Of course, this too was data, but I describe it as a limitation because, whilst ethically, I may have been more comfortable producing data *with* Partners rather than *about* them, this was not possible.

6.5 Avenues for future research

In the course of the study, two potential avenues for future research occurred to me. The first concerns gender equality. One article from Padavic, Ely & Reid (2020) cited in the literature review seemed especially relevant to my own findings, namely that in their study, male consultants' split off emotions were projected into and identified with by females who carried them on the system's behalf. I associated this finding with a quotation from Jungian analyst and author, James Hollis, who wrote in *Under Saturn's Shadow* (1994, p.36):

> *Surely the greatest tragedy for men in regard to the feminine principle is that their fear alienates them from their own anima, the principle of relatedness, feeling and connection to the life force. This alienation from self obliges alienation from other men as well.*

In my view, this points to a potentially rich avenue for further research and offers the prospect of a breakthrough in practice. Padavic et al. (2020) looked at the propagation and perpetuation of false narratives concerning work and family that caused a *real* problem (how 24/7 working disproportionately affects female consultants) to be reframed by an all male leadership team as a *substitute* problem (of women's stalled advancement). The substitute framing was preferred, they argued, because it helped the firm's male leaders identify themselves as morally enlightened and progressive whilst simultaneously leaving the power relations intact and thereby unconsciously strengthening the status quo.

A second avenue concerns the potential further to understand management consulting from an attachment theory perspective. This idea arose from 3 sources. Firstly, Empson who in *Leading Professionals* (2017) discusses the phenomenon of 'insecure over-achievers' and their attractiveness to professional services firms (p. 108-130). From a systems psychodynamic perspective, I have speculated whether the insecurity might be a property of the system as much as a feature of the people drawn to it. The second source is an article by William Kahn (1995) entitled 'Organization Change and the Provision of a Secure Base: Lessons from the Field' in which he makes the case that (external) change agents can act as temporary attachment figures, creating or undermining organisation members' feelings of security. The third source is the book *The Politics of Uncertainty* by Peter Marris (1996) which examines the relationship between our human need for predictability and how we manage our relationship to uncertainty given that it is endemic in modern life.

Synthesising these ideas and reflecting on fieldwork, I infer a dynamic through which Partners want to experience the firm as a secure base that will protect them from the uncertainties of the market but, as a way of hedging against those uncertainties, also want to maximise and defend their individual autonomy and freedom of manoeuvre. Given that Partners operate at the boundary between the firm and client systems, and given also that, anecdotally, they can be part-inside and part-outside in other aspects of their lives such as family and friendship groups, there is, I believe, further research to be done into the phenomena of security and belonging in consulting. From this research, it

appeared that avoidance and struggles with intimacy were properties of the Partner group. To what extent might this have reflected the attachment styles that individuals brought with them and/or the attunement between the organisation and members who projected into it the identity of a parent?

6.6 Closing comment

However, stepping back and considering this research as a whole, my main reflection is that such a heavily defended organisation as the research found this firm to be is not able fully to experience its own fortitude. In my belief, it would be through owning its disowned self, rather than by blocking it out, that a group, in this case the UK leaders in a global business organisation, could come to appreciate its capacity for coping and, critically, develop that capacity. Painted-on swagger was not the confidence that Partners needed in the market nor should they have relied on external validation alone for their sense of worth.

This study found that when the Partner group got in its own way, this was due in large part to the avoidance of emotion. Despite being composed of intelligent and positively intended individuals, the group as a whole lacked the political maturity to work through difficulties. Fallibility was a source of fear when it could have provided insight and a route to growth. But just as repressed emotion might have prevented the development of this group into greater maturity so I also believe that attention to emotion, the bringing of emotion to consciousness, could release its buried potential and make its work more fulfilling.

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