

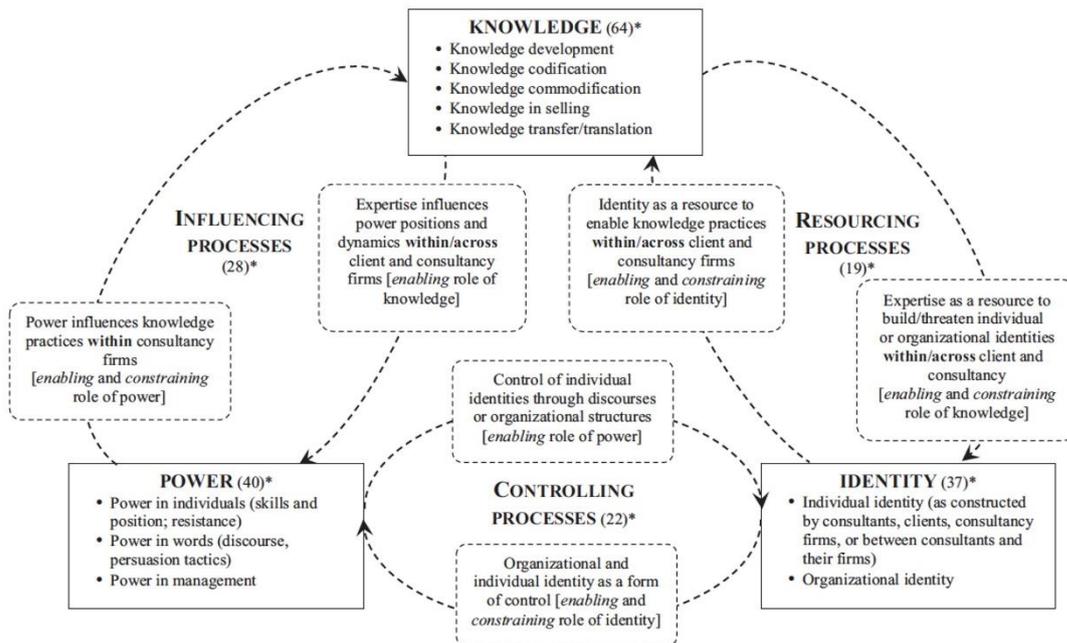
Mastering the Complexity of Client-consultant Relationships – a synopsis

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Faced with the prospect of reading and digesting all the published research on management consultancy over the last 30 years most of us would probably run a mile. However, the speaker at CMCE’s June Showcase, Dr Szilvia Mosonyi of Queen Mary University of London, undertook just that for her paper **Management Consulting: Towards an Integrative Framework of Knowledge, Identity, and Power** which won the Client/Consultant Relationships category in our 2020 Research Awards.

If you’re reading this thinking that we’re about to dive into a deeply academic report then think again: since Dr Mosonyi’s interest in the topic stems from her prior experience as a consultant with Deloitte, her talk was highly practice-oriented.

The Influencing-Resourcing-Controlling (IRC) Framework of management consulting



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The framework presents the three main themes that occurred in the literature: knowledge, identity and power. These were often defined in relation to each other and so the framework illustrates three types of processes – resourcing, controlling and influencing – that link them and show how they play out in consultants’ everyday work.

Our regular CMCE Showcase facilitator Cosette Reczek steered the discussion through four questions that, together with the input provided by the audience throughout the session, helped illustrate the applicability of this framework to consulting practice.

1. What does research tell us about how knowledge is developed and shared in management consulting, and how does this inform an evolution of identity for management consultants and their firms?

Knowledge is obviously an asset for consultants (it represents their expertise) that is exchanged but it's, at the same time, socially constructed through interaction and therefore can also be something that is translated as well as transferred.

Knowledge links to identity through resourcing processes, in other words how we use our expertise to create our own identities. This can either build or threaten identities and it refers to the knowledge consultants have or the knowledge they build during the assignment, typically through shadowing and learning from more experienced colleagues. This can also *threaten* the client's identity: we want to look competent in front of the client and they want to look competent in front of us, which results in a tension that has to be recognised and managed. As we progress and improve, we are continuously rebuilding our identity as consultants and this also works at a firm level: how firms manage their knowledge collectively is thus highly important.

2. How does Identity manifest in how management consultants relate to and manage each other and their client relationships?

The link between Identity and Power is a critical one. Power can come from the position in an organisation and also on a personal level, typically when your expertise acts as a source of power. Organisations also possess their own latent power through the processes and procedures that operate. The words that consultants use also possess power and it's a worthwhile exercise to step back and identify the dominant discourses i.e. what gets talked about and what's important, that exists within a firm or between a consultant and a client.

The interface highlights how identities may be influenced by organisation processes such as performance management systems and recruitment into firms. And once in the firm, power is controlled by discourses.

It was revealing to see how attendees defined their individual identity with many choosing Expert or Guru as ways to describe themselves. We also had at least one Magician and a couple of Provocateurs in attendance, which suggests that some people might have quite interesting CVs.

3. How does Power influence how knowledge is shared and used?

Knowledge and Power are linked by influencing processes: power influences the knowledge practices that take place within consulting firms and knowledge or expertise influences the power positions and dynamics in client/consultant relationships.

It was pointed out by one attendee that clients and consultants have power in different spheres where both bring different aspects of power to the relationship, presenting themselves through their own "brand archetype": forging a productive partnership here is very important.

4. How can this integrated framework of Knowledge, Power and Identity be leveraged to master the complexity of client-consultant relationships?

The recent changes in working practices forced by COVID meant that the framework could be used to examine how to manage relationships productively when traditional face-to-face working

interactions are not possible. How, for example, could we secure and maintain the right level of intimacy and power dynamics? This is something that we probably do implicitly but using the framework encourages a deeper level of reflection. Consulting firms often run courses on understanding the power networks of a client but Dr Mosonyi argued that this alone was not enough: the connection to knowledge and identity was equally important to fully understand the dynamics at play in the relationship.

This Showcase was very much in CMCE's "sweet spot" as it harnessed unique research and insights on consulting practices and I hope that we'll be able to unearth more papers that achieve a similar fit as we review the candidates for this year's Research Awards.

We've condensed a very rich 80-minute discussion into a 30-minute video summary which you can find [here](#), and also in the Events section of our website.