

Flourishing Relationships with Consulting Clients: A Phenomenological Study

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This paper summarises a doctoral research project aimed at advancing professional practice in organisation consulting. I explore what the term 'flourishing' means in a consultant-client relationship, and how such a bond develops. Using a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994), I draw on conversations with consultants to describe the essence of their experience of flourishing relationships. In contrast to a quantitative analysis, the description obtained in this way retains the complexity of what took place. To summarise their experience, firstly consultant and client mark out some fundamental common ground they have with one another. As they do so, they find effective ways to mutually engage as individuals. With their partnership developing, they also become a dyadic unit 'in relation' (Buber, 1937). Finally, as a team, they act in concert as they engage with the outside world to further the purpose of the consulting assignment for the client organisation.

Keywords: Consulting, Flourishing, Relating, Phenomenology

Introduction

The topic of this paper is the relationships that organisation consultants like me have with our clients. We assist management clients with changes they wish to make in their institutions. Assignments involve various aspects of how people organise themselves in their work, including planning, team structures, communications, operational processes, evaluation methods and information resources. In a client organisation, clients can have different roles in the consultation. Schein (1997, p. 203) defines as the *primary client*, "the individual(s) who ultimately "own" the problem or issue being worked on"; it is the primary client that I normally work most closely with in an organisation and it is the relationships between consultants and primary clients that I set out to research.

I undertook this inquiry to deal with a concern that developed from several personal experiences of consulting when I perceived that clients were not benefitting from the attentions of consultants who had been engaged to help them. Those experiences disappointed me and left me with a sense that an important requisite for the successful practice of consulting was missing. Shapiro et al (1993) found that clients criticise consultants for a variety of ills such as telling them what they want to hear, constantly trying to expand the length and scope of their work and making recommendations that only they the consultants can implement. Ben-Gal & Tzafrir (2011, p. 667) find that the level of *trust* between consultant and client and then the *commitment to change* engendered jointly by both parties play a major role in shaping the success of an organisational change in which consultants are employed. Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, and others, make a close connection between the quality of the consulting relationship and the outcome of a consulting project; indeed I cannot find any scholarship that questions this link. This association offers the possibility of opening a new window into the effectiveness of consulting.

Flourishing is as a means of expressing the process of developing a high quality relationship. Flourishing is a natural process that beings pursue for themselves and nurture in their bonding with one another. Somewhat like a person's capability to flourish, Aristotle (2005) described *eudemonia* as an *ability that suffices for living well*, although Anscombe (1981) points out that an ability to function well is necessary but not sufficient to ensure flourishing – conducive circumstances are also needed. Keyes, a 'positive psychologist' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) describes the flourishing of individuals as the presence of *mental health*, "a syndrome of positive feelings and positive functioning in life" (Keyes, 2002, p. 208).

These definitions are of individuals and their thriving. Relationships, however, need a different approach. For instance, a relationship cannot feel - yet it can function. The positive psychologists point to a relational dimension of individual flourishing: Keyes (2002) included in his 'index' of flourishing, positive relations with others and positive social functioning; Seligman (2011) posits that an individual's wellbeing has measurable elements including 'Positive Relationships'. But what does it mean for relationships themselves to flourish? This is what I set out to investigate, in a consulting context.

Relating in literature

Block, a popular writer on consulting, says, "Consulting is primarily a relationship business" (Block, 2000, p. 327). I wonder whether this relational nature of consulting is one that other consultants and I privilege enough – or that we sell to our clients. It feels quite novel. Taking a relational – and positive - approach runs counter to the prevailing attitude I have experienced in several consulting environments, often overshadowed by either consultant or client trying to protect their personal position and unwilling to be open with each other.

In his work *I and Thou* (1937), Buber offered a construct for the way our relational selves operate by identifying two attitudes of man to others: *I-It* and *I-Thou*:

*The I of man is . . . twofold. For the I of . . . I-Thou is a different I from that of I-It. I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I will something. I feel something. I think something . . . This and the like establish the realm of It. But the realm of Thou has a different basis. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds. When Thou is spoken, the speaker . . . takes his stand **in relation** [my emphasis] (Buber, 1937, pp. 3,4).*

What does it mean to be *in relation*? I have a sense of being invited to think of myself as bound up with another person, as merging and mingling with them with no clear boundary or distinction between us. It feels intimate, open and vulnerable all at once. But this ontology raises an epistemological challenge. How can I know another if I cannot experience him or her?

The world is not presented to man by experiences alone. These present him only with a world composed of It and He and She and It again. If I face a human being as my Thou, he is not a thing . . . a specific point in space and time . . . not a nature to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But . . . whole in himself he is Thou. Thou is more than It realises. - What, then, do we experience of Thou?

- *Just nothing. For we do not experience it.*
- *What, then, do we know of Thou?*
- *Just everything. For we know nothing isolated about it anymore.*

The Thou meets me. . . I step into direct relation with it (Buber, 1937, pp. 5-11).

I think I can experience being in a relationship with someone and that this is distinct from experiencing him or her as a person. Buber (1947) later said that his work on relating was counterbalancing the traditional, Freudian attention in psychoanalysis on the individual and his or her drives. In recent decades, a 'relational turn' (Mills, 2005) has indeed occurred in psychoanalysis. For instance, feminist writers, citing Buber's influence, have gained insights about relating by studying what tend to be the differences between the psychologies of women and men. Miller (1976) contrasted women's tendency towards cooperation with men's tendency towards competitiveness, and women's tendency towards emotional awareness and relatedness with men's tendency towards active rationality. The feminist psychologists' work has now been brought together as *Relational-Cultural Theory* (Jordan, 2009), which 'suggests that maturity involves growth toward connection and relationship throughout the life span' (Jordan, 2001, p. 92).

Bouwen (1998) and colleagues have theorised relational practice at work, including the work of consulting to which generating fresh ideas is central. Bouwen writes about knowing as a process going on among people. Words, he says, "take on their meaning in a relational context" (Bouwen, 1998, p. 301), or to put it another way, with the people in the conversation in which they are being used. "Knowledge generation and application are no longer split apart" (Bouwen, 1998, p. 317). Hosking (2011) uses the term *relational constructionism* for the concept of relational processes constructing relational realities. These ideas shift attention from individuals to what is going on between them, particularly the way in which new notions gain currency.

Joyce Fletcher, also writing specifically about consulting as *relational practice* (Fletcher, 2001), identifies some of the skills required for this practice:

Relational practice is a way of working that reflects the relational logic of effectiveness and requires a number of relational skills such as empathy, mutuality, reciprocity and a sensitivity to emotional contexts (Fletcher, 2001, p. 84).

In my view, all consulting relies on difference being brought by the consultant to the client's attention. Drawing on the concept of change at boundaries in Gestalt therapy, Edwin Nevis (1987) says this about difference and how it should be used in organisation consulting:

By definition, an intervener is different in some important aspect from the members of the client organization. (Nevis, 1987, p. 49).

To be effective the consultant must be able to display and use his or her differences while appearing acceptable to the "alien" client system . . . The most useful stance implies a balance; one affiliates with the system yet is clearly autonomous and apart. (p. 179).

It seems to me that as a consultant I ought to be seeking all the time during an assignment to understand how my experience, perception and ideas are different to my clients', and how I can usefully deploy my 'differentness' to their benefit, aware also of how that could be counter productive. Cooperrider & Sekerka (2003) offer as a model for achieving positive organisational change, (1) focusing on positive emotions, (2) building relatedness to others and (3) raising the level of inquiry made by members into the 'appreciable world' [the facets they want more of] sustaining and energizing each other.

The quality of the relationships between those involved in a piece of work and the success of the work itself tend to go together in my experience. Cooperrider and Fry (2012) also note the connection between being in burgeoning relationships and being engaged in successful activities:

We define mirror flourishing as the consonant flourishing or growing together that happens naturally and reciprocally to us when we actively engage in or witness the acts that help nature flourish, others flourish, or the world as a whole to flourish (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012, p. 8).

In practice, I find the flourishing of a consultant-client relationship a very useful indicator of effective consulting being in progress. Whether the outcome of a consulting assignment is what had been expected at its inception is at best a backward-looking indicator of its value. Whereas, the quality of a consultant's relationship with his or her client provides a real time indicator of whether useful progress is being made. The context of the consultant and

client's work is constantly evolving and the objectives of the consulting need to be kept in step with the changes. Furthermore, the attitude of people in the client organisation towards the change being pursued by the consultant and primary client is projected – often forcefully - into the consulting relationship. So the flourishing of a consulting relationship seems to be a good 'leading' (predictive) indicator of effective consulting as it happens.

Phenomenology: my methodology

I cited earlier Keyes and Seligman on flourishing. One of the criticisms of these 'positive psychologists' and their school is that its scientific basis is exclusively 'positivist', that is to say characterised by objectification, experimentation and quantification, a 'reductionist epistemology' (Taylor, 2001, p. 15). In contrast, the methodology I use for the research reported in this paper is phenomenology, a quite different scientific tradition. Using phenomenological methods I seek to describe the existential experience of flourishing rather than to categorise and count its features, as is typical of positive psychology.

I set out in my inquiry to get at the meaning and essence of the phenomenon that is flourishing consulting relationships. Phenomenology is the study of people's experience, starting from how things appear in their raw state as they enter consciousness. I employed for my fieldwork, the methods of 'transcendental phenomenological research' documented by Clark Moustakas (1994). These methods provide structured ways to:

- Consciously set aside, as much as is possible, preconceptions about the phenomenon being investigated before collecting data on it; this setting aside is known in phenomenological inquiry as the process of *epoche*.
- Identify the essence of people's experience of the phenomenon in the terms in which it is revealed to them, known as the process of *phenomenological reduction*.
- Build a picture of the underlying *structures* of the phenomenon: what lies behind what is directly experienced. This process is known as *imaginative variation*.
- *Synthesise* the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon, across a range of people experiencing it.

I gathered data on the phenomenon from conversations I arranged with consultants with whom I have worked or otherwise known personally over last few years. I also investigated

a consulting relationship of my own that had flourished, with the help of my client at the time.

As phenomenology is not for many a well-known methodology, I shall present my findings for each of the four processes above alongside a more detailed explanation of the technique employed.

The Epoche: setting aside preconceptions about the subject

'Epoche' in phenomenological research is the method of surfacing and setting aside presuppositions and assumptions so they don't sully the process of gathering evidence. Epoche allows us "to suspend or step back from our ordinary ways of looking" at something (Ihde, 1977, p. 32), in order that we can look afresh at the phenomenon unencumbered by the baggage of our existing ideology about it. Therefore, before fieldwork I used an epoche to surface my assumptions about the questions I would put to participants. I found my preconceptions to be that relational flourishing relies on a bond between the parties, a mutual dependence in order to pursue some shared endeavour; it arises from an initial resonance between people and develops into mutual affirmation, regard and trust; it is fulfilling and resembles friendship.

I sought not to allude to any of these preconceptions, or any other assumptions, when having research conversations with participants. I found the process of *epoche* useful: I can imagine that without consciously following an *epoche*, I could easily have asked questions seeking confirmation for an answer I had already formed. Furthermore, I could easily have offered my opinions without realising I was doing so, and this could have influenced their responses.

In the event I found it impossible to completely avoid suggesting my preconceptions to the participants. For instance, when the influence of power relations between consultant and client came up in one conversation, by asking for more information I could have indicated that I thought power was significant in flourishing relationships. I tried to put my questions as openly as possible and especially not to appear to hint that there was an answer I was looking for. The paradox of *epoche* is that:

without some – at least general – idea of what and how one is to look at a thing, how can anything be seen? Yet, if what is to be seen is to be seen without prejudice or preconception, how can it be circumscribed by definition? (Ihde, 1977, p. 31)

If necessary I was also prepared to get my research participants to use an *epoche* to clear their existing conceptual standpoints to one side. In practice though, I found the participants grasped what type of data I needed from the explanation I gave in the letter I sent them asking them to take part. When I checked with them at the start of our conversations whether they had understood that I was only interested in what they actually experienced of flourishing relationships with clients, I was reassured that going through a formal *epoche* with them was not required in order for them to give me an unvarnished account of their experience. Because they had already got this point, I did not push it, because I imagined there is also a risk that undertaking an *epoche* could have the opposite effect to that intended: that having brought preconceptions about a phenomenon to the fore they might so dominate thinking that they disable access to raw experience and cement a position that is then difficult to change. In practice I found that the participants spoke to me first about their actual experience and then from time to time started to conceptualise, at which point I would attempt to focus them back on their raw experience.

Phenomenological Reduction: the texture of what presented itself as flourishing consulting relationships

The process after *epoche* in the methodology of transcendental phenomenology is Phenomenological Reduction. This is about pointing to themes about a phenomenon (in this case relational flourishing) in the raw data (what the participants said). What the process of Phenomenological Reduction yields should be the *texture* (or *noema*) of the phenomenon, how it appears at the surface or what it is noticed as. The product of the process of Phenomenological Reduction is a description of the texture of the phenomenon.

To carry out this process, I took the transcribed conversations I had with my inquiry participants and focused just on their reported experience of the phenomenon that is my subject (a phenomenological technique known as *bracketing*). With this focus, I used

intuition to pick out the phrases that were used by the participants to describe the phenomenon (a process of identifying what are known as *horizons*, or *horizontalisation*).

In the process of Phenomenological Reduction, the phrases used by the participants about the phenomenon are all given equal weight: in other words repetition is not, on its own, taken to imply greater importance (this procedure is known as *delimiting*). Then *themes* are identified: *horizons* (phrases) that are closely connected in their meaning are grouped and given labels. This is a process of *ideation*, standing back a little way in order to see all the data, reflecting on the meanings found, and being able to distil out their *essence*.

The question I put to the participants in my research conversations was:

What is being in a flourishing consulting relationship like and how does it develop?

The composite 'textural' description of what the participants said about their experience follows. I have used their words:

1) They find substantial common ground with their clients in terms of their mind-sets, values, beliefs, interests and behaviours. They have a sense that each is coming from broadly the same direction, that they share similar views about the world, talk the same language and see eye-to-eye on issues. They feel passionate about what they are doing, that something is at stake that both value.

2) They go through a process of emotionally engaging with the client at the start of flourishing relationships, letting each other in, reciprocating gestures and showing affirmation of each other's ideas. They came to like, respect and feel accepted by one another. They 'hang in there' with a strong sense of personal connection despite the peaks and troughs experienced thereafter. They come to trust each other. Consultant and client have a participative relationship in which they ask each other's opinions, value the other's experience, throw ideas around and try them out in an on-going dialogue, tossing them to and fro many times and refining them in the process. Neither feels superior or wants to be in charge. They become energised about what they are doing, enjoy working together and think more of giving than getting. They become relaxed about bringing up contentious matters and encourage

challenge. They articulate what they honestly think about a proposal or idea and learn from each other.

3) Together they become a team. They co-own their project, embedded together in it, joined at the hip. What the client wants is what the consultant wants. They get into each other's pockets. They include each other in what they do and share the work. They feel a sense of responsibility and want the best for one another. Both are committed to the relationship. They take risks and suffer setbacks together. There is mutual affection. They enter into each other's mind, emotions and perspective and empathise with one another; even learning from the frustrations they have with each other. They use the differences between them to their advantage. Their skills and experience become complementary and are synergised.

4) Client and consultant conspire together and find an effective way forward in the same direction. They have a common purpose, aim, plot and script, within which they can both improvise.

Imaginative Variation: the underlying structures found

Imaginative Variation is a further process of analysing the data that adds a deeper layer of ideation. Its purpose is to identify the *structures* or *noesis* of experience. The product of the process of Imaginative Variation is a description of the structure of the subject phenomenon.

Gurwitsch (1967, cited in Moustakas, 1994) provides an example of the phenomenon of a house - something experienced in the physical world - to illustrate the distinction between *texture* and *structure*. To paraphrase Gurwitsch:

Someone in the street experiencing (seeing) a house sees only the texture of an outwards facade. The whole structure of the house cannot be directly experienced, only imagined, but every time the observer moves and looks at the house from a different angle, the structure - though still hidden - becomes clearer to them. (from Moustakas, 1994, p. 31).

Merleau-Ponty (1968) wrote about the visible (or sensible) and invisible (or sentient) qualities of phenomena as respectively their *texture* and *flesh*. Of the idea of *flesh*, which is similar to that of *structure*, he says:

Between the alleged colours and visible, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a 'flesh' of things (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 133).

I feel Merleau-Ponty inviting me to examine more deeply what I recognise in a phenomenon. What is the idea that makes red red - what is redness? What is it about relational flourishing that makes it relational flourishing?

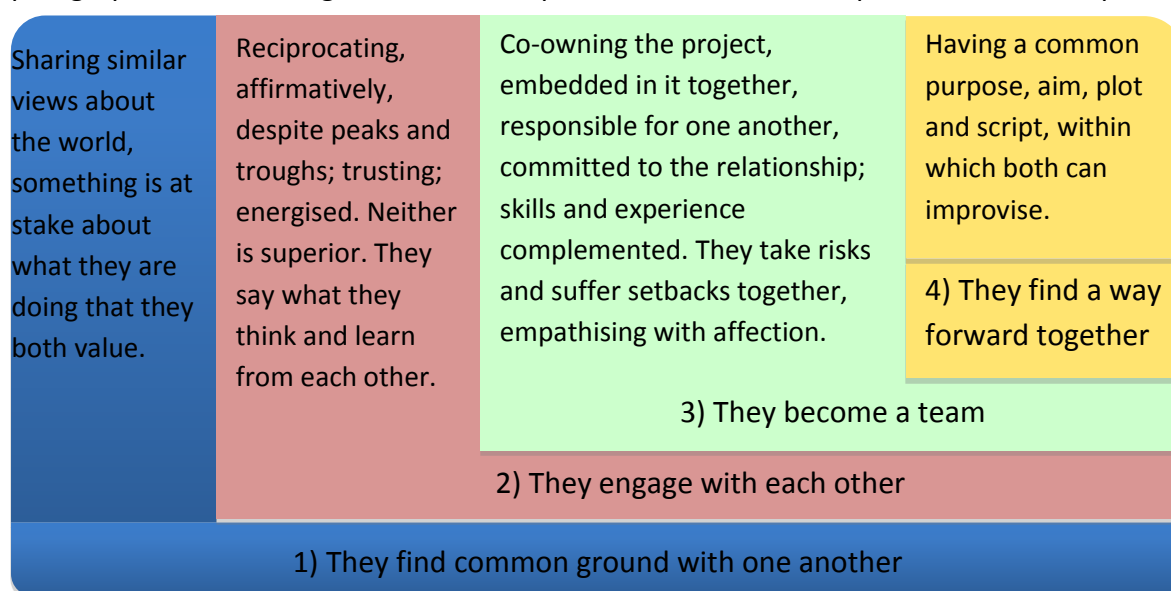
After undertaking a long process of Imaginative Variation, the structure of flourishing consulting relationships I eventually evolved was this:

| | <i>Facing outwards to the world</i> | <i>Facing inwards to the relationship</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>As individuals (I-It)</i> | 1) They find common ground with one another | 2) They engage with each other |
| <i>In relation (I-Thou)</i> | 4) They find a way forward together | 3) They become a team |

The first structural feature I found was that consultant and client experience their relationship in both Buber's *I-It* and *I-Thou* attitudes. In the first two paragraphs of the textural description above, participants speak about 1) finding *common ground* with each other and 2) *engaging* with each other - these I comprehend as an *I* experiencing an *It*. In the third and fourth paragraphs of the textural description, participants speak about 3) *becoming a team* and 4) *finding a way forward together*; these I recognise as them experiencing being together in an *I-Thou* relation.

The second feature I found was that participants appeared to be either looking inwards at their relationship or placing their relationship in the wider world. Facing inwards, paragraphs 2) and 3) are about how consultant and client are with each other, respectively as individuals and together as a team. Facing outwards, paragraphs 1) and 4) describe their experience in a wider context, respectively their take on the wider world and what they decide to pursue in it.

The third pattern I found in the data was a general sequence to the development of flourishing relationships between consultants and clients. In the order 1), 2), 3), 4) the paragraphs describe stages in the development of the relationship each of which depends



on the one before: consultant and client do not 2) engage with each other unless they have 1) enough in common; they cannot 3) become a team unless they have 2) engaged and formed a strong connection; and they cannot 4) find an effective way forward together unless they 3) are relating as a team.

Synthesis of Flourishing Relationships between Consultants and Clients

The fourth of the processes of phenomenological inquiry is Synthesis: synthesis of the textural description derived from Phenomenological Reduction with the structural description derived from Imaginative Variation, and synthesis of different participants' experience. In other words, this is the bringing together of the textures, structures, meanings and essences of several people's experience into a single, synthesised description painting a picture rich in content and depth (Moustakas, 1994).

I had already synthesised participants' experience in presenting the textural and structural descriptions in the preceding sections. My synthesis of the two is the model above. The model summarises the textural description of the participants' experience into four perspectives, structured as the four permutations achieved pairing Buber's *I-It* and *I-Thou* attitudes with facing inwards to their relationship and outwards to the world. The four perspectives are numbered as the stages in the development of flourishing consulting relationships.

Phenomenological validity

How do I know whether my phenomenological descriptions are valid? There are several validity considerations that I have identified from a number of scholarly sources. The first is whether it is the intended phenomenon that participants are describing (Kvale, 1995). So as I talked and wrote about relational flourishing, I was continually asking myself whether what I was talking and writing about was what the participants perceive as relational flourishing. I wondered whether relational flourishing was tangible enough to my participants for them to be able to attribute their experience to it. In other words, when I spoke the words, did something definite present itself to them from their experience? I noticed that my participants sometimes struggled to understand what *flourishing* meant; it is not a word that we use frequently and so making it an intentional object was not always easy. When I heard participants hesitating, I curbed myself from telling them my answer and instead allowed them to connect with the term; when I did this I found that after a while they could speak confidently about it.

Then I need to consider whether I have accurately perceived the data I am picking up about the phenomenon, acknowledging the subjective nature of that process. I might 'apprehend a state of affairs as it really is' or instead 'distort a state of affairs by over imposing subjectivity on it', or not grasp it sufficiently because I was too little present or inattentive it. 'The former would be valid knowledge and the latter two would be invalid' (Giorgi, 2002, pp. 8,9). Another consideration is whether I am merely noticing the things I perceive, or actually ascribing meaning to them – this being the purpose of phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) makes this important distinction using Husserl's ideas of *signitive* and *intuitive* acts, saying:

Intuitive intention hits the target and makes possible apprehension of the intentional object in some feature or quality and ultimately as a whole, but signitive intention refers to something in its absence. It announces that something has the possibility of appearing or that it exists within the intuitive (Moustakas, 1994, p. 77).

Husserl adds a test of precision to the process of intuition:

Validity is achieved when an act is experienced wherein the fulfilling material matches the signifying meaning precisely (Giorgi, 2002, p. 13).

A case in point during my inquiry was the meaning I ascribed to the 'differentness' of consultant and client. Participants often mentioned it but initially I brushed this data aside and understood differentness as something negative, an unfortunate adjunct to a flourishing consulting relationship or even running counter to it. Later I came to see some differences between consultant and client as essential foundations of a flourishing relationship.

Another consideration is whether what I make of my evidence is actually evident. Husserl (1900/1970 cited in Giorgi, 2002) seeks 'luminous certainty', which sounds like a lot to expect. We are evaluating what we read and hear all the time. Maybe in seeking certainty, Husserl asks for more than is possible; perhaps just the sense of something being evident in the context described is enough to work with.

To summarise these considerations about validity, these are the questions I have held in mind as I worked with my data to obtain the best possible description of the phenomenon I was researching:

- How conscious am I in general to the encounter, to what I am hearing?
- Do I notice what is relevant (signitive) to my research question?
- Do I fully engage my intuition to bring what is relevant into expression?

Discussion of findings

Looking at the textural description (under the heading 'Phenomenological Reduction') and the model (under 'Synthesis'), I suggest that this phenomenological study of consulting

relationships has yielded a different sort of results to the quantitative analyses previously noted (Kellogg, 1984) (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005) (Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011). The quantitative studies categorised and ranked features in order to isolate a few key factors, all of which are present in the phenomenological description in this paper – for instance, trust, cited by Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, appears in the second stage (Engagement) of my model. But the phenomenological description retains every common element of the participants' experience in its full complexity, organised into a structural framework to help us to understand it as a coherent whole.

Books on consulting emphasise ideas also present in my phenomenological description, including common ground ('fit') (Bellman, 2002); responsibility (de Haan, 2004); empathy and reciprocity (Fletcher, 2001); affection (Block, 2000); difference (Nevis, 1987); trust (Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000); and learning together ('relational knowing') (Bouwen, 1998).

The strength of the phenomenological approach is that it yields a rich depiction of a phenomenon, but it does not directly address how this knowledge can be applied in practice. The knowledge I developed about flourishing consulting relationships has now become a mainstay of how I operate as a consultant. I used my findings to produce a set of 'questions to hold while practising' and have analysed recent consulting assignments using the questions. For instance, one question drawn from the description and model above is:

Do we have common ground to stand on?

And a sub-question is:

Are our values and beliefs congruent in the areas that the assignment is testing?

I found in a recent assignment in the British public sector that my beliefs and the beliefs of a few individuals amongst my clients on the rightness of private sector participation in providing publicly funded services was at odds. We did not have an effective basis on which to work together on a project that involved the insourcing and outsourcing of services and my relationships with these particular clients did not flourish. More recently, working in an NGO in Cambodia I have experienced a strong similarity between my beliefs and those of my clients about the links between poverty and sustainability. These common beliefs

underpin the approach of our livelihood development projects and have contributed to a flourishing relationship between us.

Common ground is just one example and I have usefully employed all the areas of my model of flourishing consulting relationships to evaluate on-going assignments. It would be good to go further by finding out more about how to act intentionally to promote flourishing consulting relationships. My findings about the nature of flourishing consulting relationships could be used to suggest strategies that could then be researched in practice, perhaps using Action Research as the methodology.

I think also that we have much to learn about the flourishing of other types of relationship. Imagine a world in which people paid as much attention to the quality of their relationships as they paid to people as individuals. Think of social media like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn: all of them have profiles of individuals and the ability to register connections with others. What would it be like if in addition to the profiles of the individuals, people could jointly (but privately) create profiles of their connections? Drawing on a model of flourishing relationships, these profiles could provide an opportunity for people to attend to their own relationships. I wonder what would happen if we privileged relating this way in all walks of life?

Conclusions

Motivated by what I perceived as ineffectual support in the practice of organisation consultants, I set out to in this study to understand what it meant for consulting relationships to flourish. Relational flourishing I understand to be a useful indicator of whether effective consulting is taking place in practice.

I chose phenomenological methods in order to appreciate the whole of consultants' actual experience of being in flourishing relationships. Unlike quantitative studies, my results do not therefore isolate particular factors but instead retain all the common elements in the participants' experience.

I found that, structured chronologically: consultant and client (1) mark out some fundamental common ground they have with one another; as they do so, (2) they find effective ways to mutually engage as individuals; with their partnership developing, (3) they

also become a dyadic unit; finally, as a team, (4) they act in concert as they engage with the outside world to further their project. Another arrangement of the phenomenon lies in distinguishing how consultant and client face themselves (2&3) from what they share in the outside world (1&4). One more structure lies in their attitude to each other as individuals (1&2) being distinct from the way they are 'in relation' (3&4) (Buber, 1937).

The significance of my results lies in their ability to influence practising consultants and their clients to work together in a way that maximises their chances of a successful outcome to a consulting assignment. A further opportunity exists to extend phenomenological analysis to other types of relationship and in so doing also promote the health and growth of relationships more broadly.

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Richard Davis, 'Flourishing Relationships with Consulting Clients'

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