

# **The Importance of Knowledge Produced in the Management Consulting Sector -A Perspective Analysis related to the research field of Strategy-as-Practice**

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## **Abstract:**

Although management consulting activities have obtained a considerable growth in terms of economic significance in recent years, these results have not been duly followed by a greater number of conceptual and empirical research in this area. In order to fight the lack of studies on the actual work of management consultants, this article aims at answer some questions that remain open. Is management consulting an intensive and specialized knowledge activity? Are there knowledge and learning key success factors in this area? Are consultants the real experts and the true practitioners of strategy as practice? The results of the empirical analysis in the form of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires given to management consultants and SME managers in Portugal shows that management consulting is founded on a knowledge-intensive base, although consultants cannot be called strategy practitioners as many authors call them. This is illustrated by the Portuguese model of determinants that constitute the management consulting industry presented in this article, which means this proposition is a new direction in strategic thinking in what the field's research strategy-as-practice concerns.

Keywords: Management Consulting, Strategy-as-Practice, Knowledge, Learning

## **1. Introduction**

In fact, although the management activities of strategic consulting have achieved in recent years a considerable growth in terms of economic significance, these have not been properly accompanied by a great number of conceptual and empirical research, this results in a shortage of knowledge about the effective work of the consultants (Fincham and Clark, 2002a).

In Portugal, although some studies such as Ferreira and Peixoto (1992), Ignatius and Weir (1993), Amorim (1999), Amorim and Kipping (1999), Silva (1997) and Freire (2008), have contributed in some way for the construction of scientific knowledge in this area, the truth is that none of them focuses on what are the real key success factors in the development of various strategic projects undertaken in the different areas that make up what is constituted as consultancy management, including the study of the practices and activities, the steps and goals, relationships and the impact of the sector at the level of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Portugal.

Moreover, internationally, although the progress and heterogeneity of scientific studies conducted over the last decade in the area of strategic consulting for prestigious authors such as Sturdy (1997, 2008, 2009), Kaiser (2005), McGivern (1983), McLarty (1998), Fincham (1999, 2002, 2008), Karantinou (2001, 2009), Werr (2002, 2003, 2009), Jackall (1988, 1998), Clark (1995, 1996, 2004, 2005, 2008) Schwarz (2005),

Jarzabkowski (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009), Whittington (2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007) and Lundgreen (2009) are added value, a fact is that strategy workers have not received much attention in the field of strategic research. Whittington (2007), gives us an example of this, emphasizing that nothing about consulting was published until 2007 in one of the leading newspapers of the strategy like "Strategy Management Journal".

On a more practical component, although the recent movement of the strategy-as-practice<sup>1</sup> "Strategy-as-Practice" (SAP) has implied some attention on the importance of consultants (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), the truth is that almost no significance has been reflected in the literature of SAP, except the work of McLarty and Robinson (1998), Kaiser and Kampe (2005) and Lundgreen and Blom (2009), the latter with greater exposure since it is presented on the website of the international community of scholars and professionals of strategic as practice.

Thus, to combat the lack of studies in this emerging field it is necessary to penetrate this market and understand this activity, bringing to the academic field a considerable volume of information that contributes concretely to the development of this research field, and one of the ways to do this, is to realize and define the characteristics and factors that lead to the identification of the identity of this industry, realizing their relationship with the market in terms of knowledge, rather than just identify with a set of static techniques to be applied (Fincham and Clark, 2002a).

## 2.A Strategy-as-Practice

The perspective of the strategy-as-practice developed from general dissatisfaction about the strategic research carried out by several authors who have been studying this field of research refocusing research into practical actions and interactions of the strategy .

For many years strategy has been analyzed based on the actions and the internal dynamics of companies trying to relate this vision in terms of organizational performance (Johnson et al., 2007), focusing on the action only in certain top groups, as if giving the understanding that they can only act strategically, which Johnson et al. (2003) explain as a result of the microeconomic area, leaving aside the emotions, motivations and actions that lead and drive the strategy itself (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

The development of the strategy-as-practice answers these concerns, bringing to the center of the study the actions and interactions in the field of strategic research and social complexity and the causal ambiguity of the basic vision of the analysis of means (Jarzabkowski, 2005), explaining simultaneously the practice that is in the strategic process (Johnson et al. 2003).

According Jarzabkowski et al., (2007), the term strategy-as-practice can be well defined as a situation that includes actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors in the construction and a set of practical situations that result later in a particular activity, being therefore their parameters translated in the study of practical (practioners - people who make the strategy work), practices (practices - social tools, symbolic and material with which the strategy is made), and the "praxis" [the flow activity in which the strategy will be implied (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006)].

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<sup>1</sup> Movement created in 2007 by Whittington and Jarzabkowski through the Website [www.strategy\\_as\\_practice.org](http://www.strategy_as_practice.org) in order to understand the actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors in the construction of a set of practical situations that result later in a particular activity, bringing to the study the actions and interactions in the field of strategic research and field research social complexity and causal ambiguity of the basic vision analysis of resources, which explains both the practice which is the strategic process

Together, the "practioners", the "practices" and "praxis" are the elements that constitute the research topic of strategy-as-practice, forming what is called "doing strategy" (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) or "strategizing" (Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), worrying about who makes it, what they do, how they do it, what they use and what are the implications of this guidance in the conceptualization of the strategy (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009 ), which importance is decisive regarding the direction and possible organizational performance.

The idea of practice in strategic theory arises from the sociological construction of practice (Kaiser and Kampe, 2005). Here, the practice is basically defined as the matrix of human activity. This largely reflects the sociological thought of Giddens (1984) that attempts to examine the activity independent from social structures. Following this idea, Schatzki (2001: 2) defines the practice as "the matrix of human activity centrally organized around common practical understandings ", highlighting the incorporation and dependence of activity on the skills and shared understandings, thus pointing to the unification of mind and activity in practice.

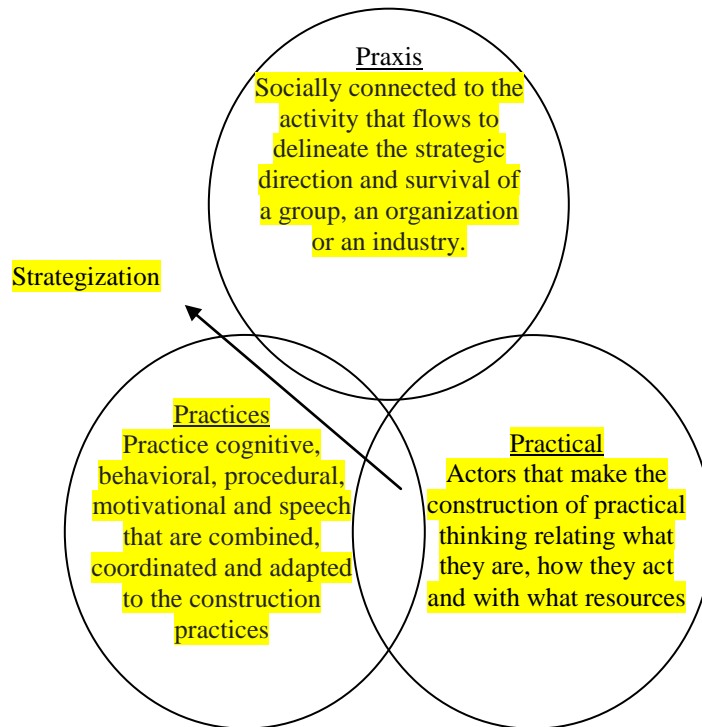
In the same line of reasoning Thévenot (2001: 56) speaks of practice as "bodily and shaped activities by habits without reflection", underlining the nature of the action routine. The focus is thus on the unconscious activity in daily routines, habits and traditions. In business terms, practice, therefore, is the condensation of the active body and mind in the process of organizational routines. (Swidler, 2001; Thévenot, 2001).

But to look at the strategy-as-practice one has to reflect the concept of "speech", as Knights and Morgan (1991:253) understand it. A speech "is a set of ideas and practices that affect our way of relating and acting on particular phenomena." A particular speech creates these phenomena of thinking and acting within a given context. Furthermore, creates true effects, creating assumptions in the world with specific problems that the speech can solve (Hendry, 2000).

In order to contextualize the strategy as a "speech" this theory has developed historically when the practioners had a shared belief about market manipulation that influenced business success of corporate planning and decision making (Bracker, 1980; Knights and Morgan, 1991). Thus, the action of a manager, reflects assumptions about a specific phenomena and shows objectives on how to confront them (Hendry, 2000).

Thus, the practice produces effect of truth in a certain "speech" and improves the structure of social phenomena. On the other hand, the "speech" is embedded in social practices. Thus, the strategy may be regarded as "speech", so the strategy is also a concept of social practices (Wilmott and Ezzamel, 2004; Knights and Morgan, 1991). This leads to the definition of the strategy of a practical standpoint, covering "a set of actions and interactions that contribute to activate and transform the company's management on a daily basis" (Denis et al., 2003: 34) and the focus on the actors as management strategists, since they are "actors who perform strategic management strategy, both through their social interaction with others as to the level of resources and specific practices that are presented in a context" (Jarzabkowski, 2003: 24 .)

In order to conceptualize the concept of structurally strategy and practice and based on the three conceptual elements of the strategy-as-practice ("practioners", "practices" and "praxis"), Whittington (2006) a framework that allows to isolate each of these elements is proposed, so that each constitutes a analytical choice in the study of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) - Figure 01.



Source: (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007)

Figure 01: Conceptual framework for the analysis of strategy-as-practice

The heart of the conceptual model of the strategy-as-practice is what Whittington (2006) calls "strategizing" covered by the architecture shown in Figure 04, each of these essential elements is needed to investigate the field of strategy-as-practice.

Strategic practices are therefore routine behaviors that are expressed and analyzed from different forms as the activity of body and mind of people, their way of thinking and their knowledge use, their understanding and their emotional and motivational state (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007), that is strategic practices are related to habits, products and models socially defined as standards, methods, procedures and routines. Namely, they are what gives meaning and information of the action (e.g., a conversation hotel, interviews data collection, influential contacts - persuasion, cooperation accidental conversation content, etc.) or in other words, they are the resources used during the activities.

It is important however to separate strategic practice of strategy-as-practice, because it emanates from the first of a set of routine behaviors, the second refers to situations, interactions and to own interpretations that cause strategic activity.

If strategic practices are the structural elements of the practice during the process of a strategy that, in turn, creates strategic practices for its activity (Giddens, 1984; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2001; Whittington, 2002), strategy-as-practice refers to the application and interpretation of these same practices.

In this context, it is important to note that the process is not practical. A process refers to "how and why" of the surroundings of things over time, which in relation to the strategic component refers to the concern as to how organizational strategies are formulated and implemented (Van de Ven, 1992). In turn practice,

and as suggested by Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002) is an extension process, or, as suggested by Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst (2006) is one of the six main perspectives of strategy process construction.

From this dichotomy, and as suggested by Whittington (2007) if practice is conceptualized as one of three elements that make up the structure of the research study of strategy-as-practice, the process is continuity, which leads to the logical conclusion that strategy-as-practice is not content, and is not change and is probably not substance, it is rather a process.

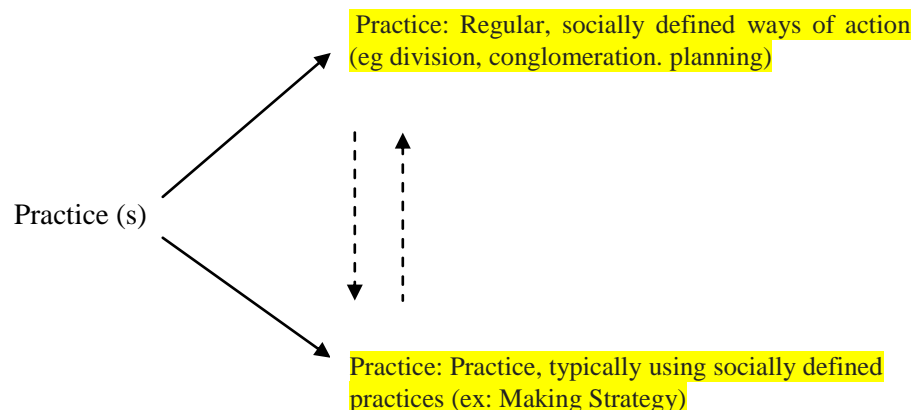
In another context, "practioners" are individuals who define and implement strategies (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) in and with organizations, bringing them new and special management tools, new interests, ambitions and resources for their strategic work. They are seen as actors of the organization, whether they are managers or not, and are internal or external to these same organizations (Whittington, 2007; Lundgreen and Blom, 2009).

According to Whittington (2007) and Lundgreen and Blom (2009), this definition that resulted form the first topic of interest of the strategy-as-practice, "strategic profession", whose focus lies in the institutional field, and being implied in the research area of strategy-as-practice.

Finally, the strategic "praxis" are the various activities involved in the formulation and implementation of corporate strategy (Whittington, 2006), that can be described as the current activity in which the strategy is carried out (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), such as decisions, meetings, "workshops" strategic process changes, changes in patterns of actions, among others, i.e., the activities that constitute the strategic work.

The complexity and ambiguity of these concepts, as well as its duality in terms of action and structure can be seen in Figure 02.

Figure 02: Strategy-as-practice - The interaction of practices and practice



Source: Whittington (2001: 6)

Figure 02: Strategy-as-practice - The interaction of practices and practice

In this perspective, the emphasis in terms of "practices" is when the practice happens (in space and time), how to think during these situations of contribution to the strategic direction of the company, as well as on how to act in organizational terms (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2001;

Whittington, 2002), referring, as stated earlier, the perspective of the strategy-as-practice for the application and interpretation of these same practices.

The argument here is that, given this new context, obtaining a competitive advantage may depend not only on the environment or the resources and capabilities of the company, but also, and crucially, the routine tasks of the work in formulating and implementing the strategy at a micro level, and the micro phenomena, social interactions that take place in such a interpersonal way that can be seen as the life of a strategic process from the point of view of the manager. (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Whittington, 2001; Whittington et al. 2,004; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2004).

The strategy-as-practice results thus simultaneously observing the "what" is done and "how" is done, having as priority the discovery of situations that result in strategic activity, the so-called "micro activities that transform strategy in practice strategy "(Johnson et al. 2,003: 3).

This return to the micro level of analysis although it is not a new theme in the social sciences (Brown and Duguid, 2001), which in fact brings a new framework in the study of strategy, obviously implying that the field of research of strategy-as-practice has set a new direction in strategic thinking, primarily for managers in how they act and interact and how they "make" strategy, but also for teachers, researchers and for the "strategy practioners" themselves such as consultants, suggesting all this an analysis that goes far beyond the manipulation of large statistical databases and / or simple conceptual readings of already conceptualized approaches (Whittington, 1996).

### **3.Strategy-as-Practice in Management Consulting Services and Industry**

Even though the strategic consulting being a sub-dominant branch of management consulting (Poufelt et al., 2005) and there is a growing interest in strategy consulting and strategic influence in business, there is a very limited number of studies investigating the contributions of the consultants in the strategic process (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Fullerton and West, 1996; Kirby and Jones-Evans, 1997; Lundberg, 1997; Powell, 1997; Salaman, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2002; Fincham and Clark, 2002a; Clark, 2004) and their contribution to the creation, dissemination and use of knowledge management at a macro and micro level.

If we take into account aspects of the process and at the same time the content of human activity, as provided by the analysis of strategy-as-practice, from the analysis of the effective work of the consultants, the shortage is even more evident (Kaiser and Kampe, 2005; Lungreen and Blom, 2009; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), which accentuates the need of the strategy to be analyzed from the accumulation of social practices, produced, used and practiced by so-called extra-organizational strategic experts.

The focus of the strategy-as-practice study in people from outside the organization such as consultants (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) and their complex interactions as a practical strategy due to their extra -organization status in relation to their client companies (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), is to contribute concretely to the development of this research, this status is characterized by a relationship (customer-partner) mainly formal oriented, which can eventually become a more informal relationship evolving over time (Lungreen and Blom, 2009), and for this reason Jarzakowski et al. (2007) call themselves the "practioners", the "praxis" and "practices" as essential factors of what is called "doing strategy".

Thus, to proceed with research about the influence of strategy consultants, it is not sufficient to describe their presence throughout the various stages of the strategic process, not only it is not sufficient to explain their contributions to the content of the strategy. It takes a more global perspective to capture its influence on the genesis of the strategy, i.e. taking into account the importance of these actors as co-producers of management and the contribution they bring to the corporate strategy (Clark, 2004).

The study of management consulting in the field of strategy-as-practice done by Sturdy et al. (2006), shows us for example how micro routines and practices can either illuminate the path of action and interaction of strategists, but also produced strategic outcomes in this case illustrating how a simple social structure routine as a dinner business can evolve to build a business for strategic agents as management consultants, conceptualizing a theoretical mundane practice and micro-practice in building strategic standards of activity (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008).

According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), however, examine the influence of consultants in a practical perspective goes far beyond this kind of research, because it means investigating which practices affect the strategy and determine the influence of consultants on these practices.

Referring all addressed theoretical propositions to the field and / or empirical study in the literature of management consulting, certain questions remain open. Is management consulting a knowledge-intensive and specialized activity? What is the importance given by consultants and clients in relation to the knowledge that is generated by the sector and by management consultants? Is learning one of the key factors in the management consulting industry? Are the consultants considered experts? Can these be considered true practical strategics?

#### **4.Methodology**

Regarding, the present research was based on a pragmatic or inductive level, and was conducted from a non-probability sample of convenience, made according to the availability and accessibility of addressed elements (Ferreira and Carmo, 1998) in this case management consultants and senior managers of Portuguese SMEs. Therefore, 300 questionnaires were sent to SMEs and 350 to management consultants (which include 50 independent consultants) per email being sent fortnightly "reminders" so they could proceed to fill them in. 37 questionnaires of managers of SME were received and 29 of management consultants, totaling 66 completed questionnaires with a response rate of 10.15%.

However, taking into account the interest of this research that focused on discovering the meaning and represent the experiences of multiple realities, it was also used as a qualitative method of analysis 17 interviews with nine senior management consultants and 8 managers of SMEs in Portugal, and the interviews had an intentional character, because the selected participants were nominated as being best of the investigated phenomenon in terms of knowledge (Figure 03 - Categorization and coding of the "corpus" of the interview for qualitative analysis).

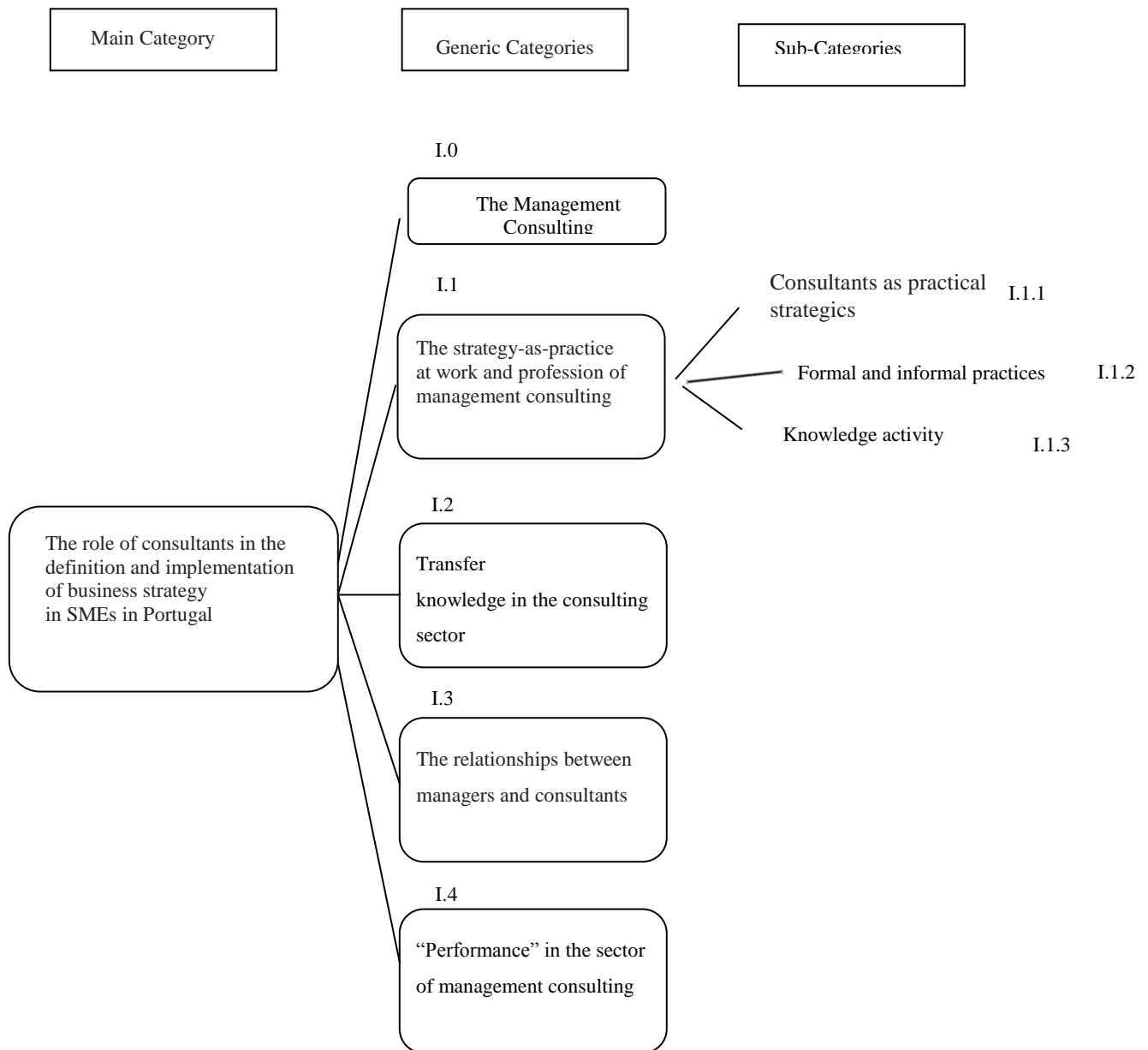


Figure 03: Categorization and coding of the "corpus" of the interview for qualitative analysis

In short, this research was based on a set of primary sources, from the application of surveys in the form of 17 semi-structured interviews to 8 consultants and 9 managers of SMEs, the use of questionnaires with open and closed questions to 29 consultants and 37 SME managers of Lisbon, Douro, Leiria, Porto, Madeira, Minho, Beira and Algarve (Portugal), and the sample is representative of a number of respondents covered predominantly by men (63%), whose ages have an arithmetic mean of 37 years. Almost all respondents have a higher level of academic education and have been working in their current businesses on average of about 8 years. Also note that the sample at the level of SMEs is fundamentally linked to the retail area and consulting to various industry sectors that comprise the area of business management.



## **5. Research results**

The research question is therefore focused on trying to know the determinants that constitute the management consulting industry in Portugal. So, is management consulting a mean of distribution and transfer of knowledge and new organizational practices as said by Bechima and Bommen (2006)? In fact what turns out from this research is that management consulting is undoubtedly based on a structure of expertise, and can even be considered as a knowledge-intensive activity, in line with what happens with sectors or areas such as accounting, medicine or law, which is defended by the theories of Dawes et al. (1992), Alvesson (1993,1995) and Engwall and Kipping (2002) and differing the understanding in this matter by Perkin (2002 ) and Grob and Kieser (2006), they mention that the management consulting industry can not call to itself knowledge structure, or be compared to classic sectors like those mentioned above in terms of knowledge production .

From this analysis it can be concluded, as transmitted by Fincham et al. (2008 ) , that the credibility and knowledge are the two major pillars in the process of management consultancy that differentiate an expert from the customer's point of view, though these can sometimes be transcribed in a more ambiguous and / or transcendent way. In fact, there is a fine line between what the client needs and what the consultant thinks make sense to the customer. In strategic consulting it is most evident where this type of game is, leading the consultant to propose what the customer wants rather than what he or she thinks is best for the business. This is the typical game of strategic consulting, happening mostly in the subconscious, eventually affecting the purpose of management consulting. It is also regarding this that we might understand the value given by consultants and managers when asked about the importance of the nature of relationships in a process of this kind, and the first impressions and relationships with them can be crucial for the subsequent development of a successful process.

In this same framework of analysis and, in the same line of thought by Fincham (1999, 2008), it is stressed the importance of lifelong learning by the consultants in the various processes which are involved together with teams and with various types of clients and projects, considering this same learning as the key factor of knowledge development in the field of management consulting (Fosstenlokken et al., 2003).

In this learning, associated with sensitivity gains, history, knowledge acquisition along the circuit, experience, building standards and growth from past mistakes, we can call the effect of pollination, as it already happens in the natural photosynthesis between plants and insects leading knowledge and learning to be transferred between different organizations from different sectors, allowing a potential unquestionable improvement.

But if knowledge and learning are taken as the basis of management consulting, can its professionals be likewise be entitle experts? In this investigation, although the consultants call themselves real experts, such as entitled by Kaiser and Kampe (2005 ) , Lungreen and Blom (2009) and Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), in fact it does not come out from the collected reports by managers, because, according to them, for them would have to have a thorough knowledge of customer activity, which does not happen. It is to this extent that they are entitled to as specialists but generalized because even though they have mostly a great market knowledge, or practices of various industries, this alone can not lead to call themselves as someone who is a specialist. To illustrate this we can even sum up this situation to a phrase mentioned by one of the interviewed managers, "the consultants never say no to anything", becoming clear that on that account most of the interviewed managers, that there are situations that are clearly not feasible or possible to accomplish, especially when we are talking about a type of procedural consulting more connected to the area of project development processes involving information technology.

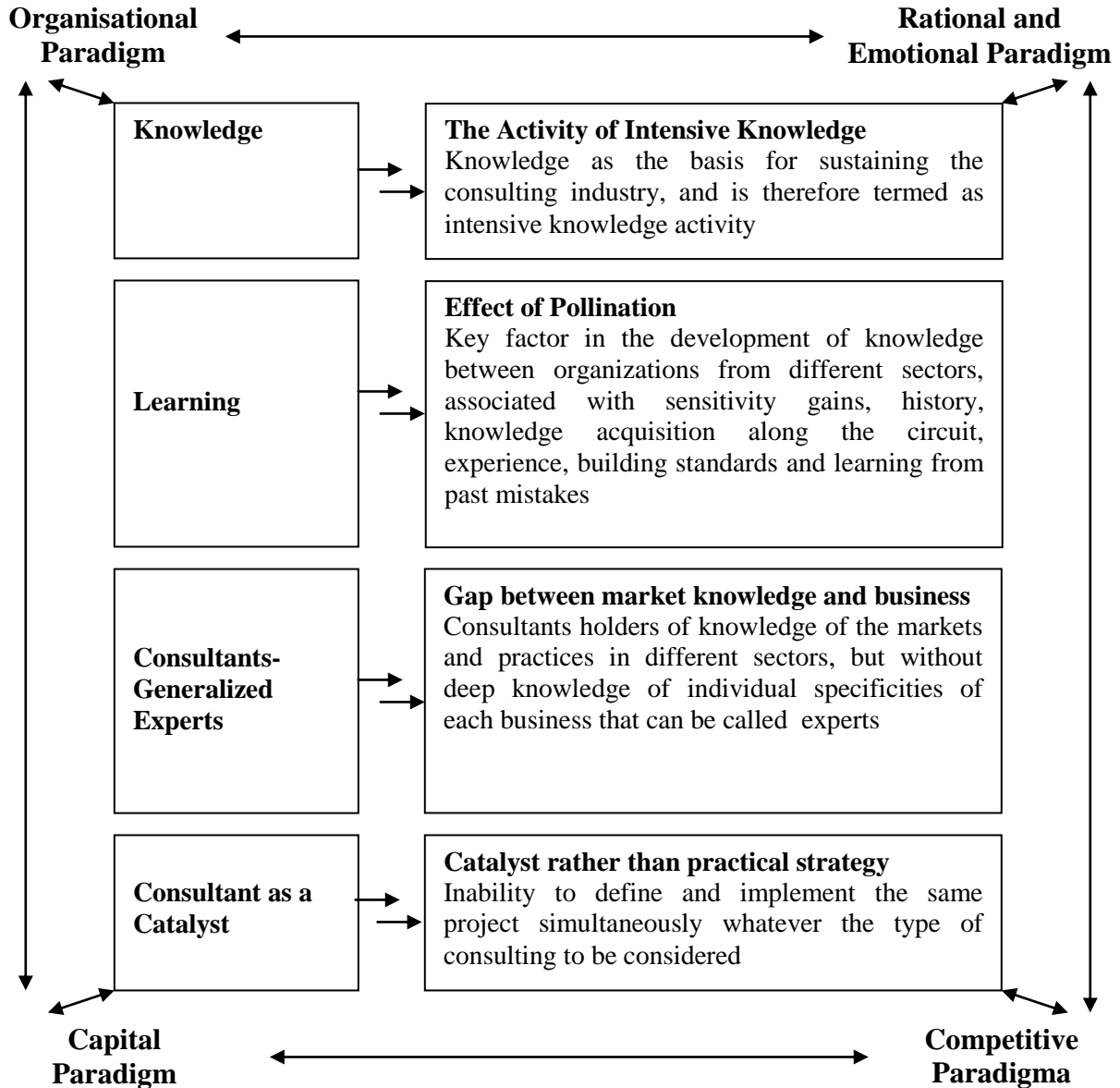
In short, if knowledge is the basis of consulting, if learning is seen as a key factor in the development of this knowledge and even if some consultants call themselves experts, although they are seen by managers as generalized experts for not having a thorough knowledge business that can make them specialists, can

the consultants be called practical strategic as as said by Jarzabkowski (2005), Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), and Whittington Jarzabkowski (2008), and Jarzabkowski Spee (2009) and Whittington (2006). Can we say that consultants are individuals who define and implement strategies (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) in / and organizations, bringing them new and special management tools, new interests, ambitions and resources for their work strategy?

Although the vast majority of management consultants calle themselves "practioners" of strategy, the truth is that they can not be seen this way, and this is due to their, on one hand, responsibility regarding the definition, on the other hand the responsibility towards the implementation by another.

## **6.Final Considerations**

In order to conceptualize all the analyzed data it is possible to build a conceptual framework that allows to contemplate the determinants that constitute the management consulting industry in Portugal, starting with the four paradigms of business and management consulting, identifying a set of basic characteristics which are defined by these four different vertices (Figure 4).



Source: Elaboration by the author

Figure 4: The Portuguese model of determinants that constitute the management consulting industry

The management consulting industry as an activity of knowledge and key factor of development of that knowledge between organizations from different sectors and management consultants as experts and catalysts instead of practical strategy brings the scope of the study research field of strategy-as-practice a new direction in strategic thinking, being clear that the activity of strategic consultants have a really important role in the infrastructure of strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2003) through a set of actions (mediated by strategic practices) management that build this same strategy, such as communications, control, development and human resource management ( Johnson et al., 2003; Aaltonen, 2003), though, management consultants can not be called practical strategy as said by Whittington (2006), Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) and Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) entitle the .

Management consultancy is thus a means of distributing knowledge and new organizational practices (Bechima and Bommen, 2006) referring to sharing the produced knowledge into a reciprocal process that allows you to create and distribute learning capabilities within and between organizations (and Willem Scarbrough, 2002), which may from this complex fusion result into a true construction of legitimacy which may be used by management consultants to be considered as active agents in creating fashions and knowledge management (Ernst and Kieser, 2002).

Although this study does not allow to generalize the findings to other settings or samples, this article aims to fundamentally tackle the lack of studies on the management consulting industry. Therefore, it is necessary to further enter this market and understand this activity, bringing to the academic field a considerable volume of information that brings originality and above all contribute concretely to the development of this field of research.

In short, it is important to extend these studies to a deeper ground so that in the future will be explored the nature of the practices, activities, and relationships of the steps in the consulting industry management, and may include further research in this direction building a model that permits to link all these variables, so that it can identify which ones are most crucial to the success of a project in management consulting. The continuing work of the sector study also should not forget the impact that all this may have down the chain, namely in satisfaction of client companies facing the developed work by the consultants and suggestions for what can be recommended for the improvement of performances that will likely be get.

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