AMBIGUITY AND POWER MICRO-DYNAMICS AT A LIBERATED MANAGEMENT CONSULTING FIRM

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Résumé :

In this paper, we study the intertwinement of ambiguity and power dynamics in a less hierarchical consulting firm. While former research has suggested that less hierarchical organization may produce paradoxical effects, we lack in-depth empirical studies unpacking the mechanisms through which the absence of formal hierarchy may re-centralize decision and increase normative control. To tackle this issue, we carried on a 5-year autoethnography at a consulting firm which doesn't apply ranks or formal status to its consultants, has no premises and fosters an entrepreneurial business model in which any employee can promote their own projects. Based on this rich insider data set, we show how the structural void generates ambiguity regarding the locus of authority and appropriate behaviors, which in turn puts consultants in a situation of dependency towards the partners and those who understand the informal rules. We also show the emergence of an informal, and yet coercive, "power constellation" which unfolds around a power core embodied by the partners. Such power constellation illustrates the *center-periphery* dynamics of organizing, a type of informal structure that is dominant in all kinds of human systems but has not been studied inside organizations.

Mots-clés : less hierarchical organizations, liberation management, consulting, ethnography

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this early-stage draft, we study the intertwinement of ambiguity and power dynamics in a less hierarchical consulting firm. Less hierarchical organizations challenge the command-and-control principles of formal hierarchy to decentralize authority and provide more freedom to arguably empowered employees (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In Europe, the trend has been booming under the label "liberation management" with notorious practice-based accounts such as those by Getz (2009) or Robertson (2015). However, scholars contend that there are in fact very few in-depth studies of liberated organizations beyond self-promotional accounts (Briere, Coutrot, & Linhart, 2021), and we still know little about what happens in companies that strive to get rid of formal structures. This is the topic that we tackle in this paper. Former research, from various scholarly traditions, has argued that *"whenever in common types of organizations formal hierarchy decreases, informal hierarchy increases"* (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011), and suggested that less hierarchical organizations may produce paradoxical effects. Barker (1993), for instance, showed how members of self-managing teams progressively developed a system of value-based normative rules that controlled their actions more fully and completely that the former hierarchical system. Courpasson (2000), for his part, have long suggested that there are ways of governing through "soft domination", especially in the case of professional elites (such as consultants) whose system is largely based on autonomy. More drastically, critical scholars have described "liberation management" as a managerial fad which reinforces normative control and accelerates "capitalist exploitation" (Briere et al., 2021). While we do not adopt a critical stance in this paper, we join former research in their investigation of the paradoxical effects of managerial liberation. Therefore, we ask: *what are the mechanisms through which less hierarchical organizations recreate a more centralized and coercive set of informal rules and dynamics?* In other words, we seek to trace the specific mechanisms and power dynamics through which the liberation process may increase normative control.

To tackle this question, we conducted a five-year ethnography at a "liberated" consulting boutique that we call Meta. The very job of consulting, in which teams of young and well-educated people work in project mode for various clients, is especially suited to this structureless, post-bureaucratic organizing. Several accounts of liberation have been actually drawn from consulting practice, including the seminal work from Tom Peters who first coined the term "liberation management" (Peters, 1992). The particularity of Meta, beyond the culture of autonomy that dominates such type of expert work, is that the firm doesn't apply any kind of ranks or formal status to its consultant, has no premises and fosters an entrepreneurial business model in which any employee can push forward their own ideas and projects. During five years, one author of the paper worked as a full-time consultant for Meta, participating in all the activities that populate consulting life, and grasping the power relations at play from the inside. This extreme participant observer position allowed us to offer a detailed account of the mechanisms and effects of liberation at the firm level, while capturing the individual trajectories of the consultants through time. It also allowed us to make sense of the dynamics with the interpretative grid of the participants themselves, when they might have been harder to capture for the traditional external observer.

Our main contribution at that stage is to show how the liberation process generates different forms of ambiguity that creates dependencies among consultants and allows the partners to re-centralize decision making and increase normative control. We also show that the structural void left by the relative absence of structure leads to the emergence of a "power constellation" composed of concentric circles of employees that unfold around a power core embodied by the partners. Despite its informality, this constellation remains extremely coercive for consultants, and recalls to some extent a courtesan or clique system (Stenger, 2017) based upon quality of the relationship with the partners and the commitment to defending the culture of the firm and the privileged position of the power core. Finally, we unpack the micro-dynamics and practices through which some consultants strive in this power constellation, while others are progressively demised. In doing so, we provide novel insights on the center-periphery social structure which has been surprisingly left uninvestigated by organization theory.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Less hierarchical organizations are those who strive to adapt the traditional and formal hierarchy based on command control principles for decentralizing authority, rebalancing relationships between lower and higher offices (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). These encompass

various well-known forms of organizations from post-bureaucratic ones such as network organizations (Powell, 1990) to organizational democracies (Cafferata, 1982). Both scholars and practitioners questioned the limitations of managerial hierarchy for competing in dynamic environments, for solving complex problems which do not fit with routines and for meeting expectations of human resources (McGregor, 1966; Peters, 1992). From this body of work, numerous concepts and less hierarchical organization templates emerged such as "liberated companies" (Getz, 2009), "holacracy" (Robertson, 2015) or "humanocracy" (Hamel & Zanini, 2020).

Beyond the variety of labels, less hierarchical organizations rely on two main design features aligned with their decentralizing authority goal. First, less hierarchical organizations revise traditional structures, adopting flat hierarchy practices in order to foster flexibility. Previous work emphasizes that hierarchical control is not the only way for coordinating tasks (Mintzberg, 1979), advocating that horizontal relations or continual learning in organizations allow to better address challenges related to uncertain and rapid changing environments (Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006). Research exploring organizing principles alternative to managerial hierarchy highlights that both market and community principles could replace top down authority (Ouchi, 1980). For example, Morning Star, a leading American tomatoes processing firm, experienced a dynamic coordination system based on market-like bilateral contracts among employees that ruled responsibilities, activities, goals and performance assessment (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). On the other hand, adopting community principle, organizations achieve coordination relying on trust and close relationships between individuals (Adler, 2001). *"Connectedness"* and the *"unity of the tribe"* were, for instance, Tony Hsieh's main concerns as he considered them as basics for Zappos', a leading shoes online store, functioning (Askin, Petriglieri, & Lockard, 2016).

Second, less hierarchical organizations increase autonomy, influence and responsibilities of employees. Indeed, discarding managerial hierarchy, these organizations give more freedom, i.e. individual-level autonomy and organizational-level decision-making power (Barker, 1993). Valve, a video games editor, is also a famous example of less hierarchical organization as employees can, thanks to an internal voting process, freely choose projects they would like to work on and thus games the firm develop (Foss & Dobrajska, 2015). Giving freedom to employees and relying on their autonomy for running the firm do not mean to discard any formal rules of organizing. Rather, this puts the emphasis on the importance of tasks allocation as well as of clarification of roles and responsibilities (Martela,

2019). For example, adopting Holacracy principles, while remaining very flexible, roles at Zappos were well-defined, highly formalized and evolved regularly through dedicated meetings. Thanks to these practices, people performed several roles, could regularly shift from one to another and propose new policies that would be collectively discussed (Bernstein, Bunch, Canner, & Lee, 2016).

Organizations who adopt less hierarchical features intend benefits regarding teams' effectiveness as well as their own survival. Previous research acknowledges that the adoption of less hierarchical practices contribute to increase employees' motivation and satisfaction as well as their engagement toward the organization (Cordery, Mueller, & Smith, 1991). For instance, the former CEO of Favi, a French copper-alloy foundry and also a compelling example of "liberated companies", consider employees commitment to the firm as crucial, illustrating this with the story of Christine, a janitor at Favi, who spontaneously went to the airport to take care of quality auditor which came to visit the firm (Getz, 2009). While human resources' broad satisfaction in their jobs increases their loyalty (Martela, 2019), it also directly contribute to the organization's performance as it allows to cut significant costs related to the removal of middle management (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). This allows Buurtzorg, a self-organized teams nursing services company, to offer care services which are 20% cheaper than its competitors as well as having both employees and customers more satisfied (Martela, 2019). In this line, through freedom and responsibilities that Favi gives to its employees, the firm reached "exceptional [production] quality" and "on-time delivery" results as well as achieved an "impressive growth" (Getz, 2009 p. 33). Finally, less hierarchical organizing principles are acknowledged as ways for organizations to ensure their survival in dynamic environments. In this line, flexibility and knowledge creation are key drivers for durability (Volberda, 1996).

As Tom Peters (1992) argues, consultancy firms are the archetype of what he called "liberation management", adopting less hierarchical organizing principles due to the nature of their work (e.g. project-based organizing, flat hierarchy). Indeed, as knowledge intensive firms, the production of consulting companies' outputs relies on complex knowledge sharing and creation (Nordenflycht, 2010). Working together, knowledge workers in these firms have the capacity to develop new solutions in order to address and solve complex problems (Robertson & Swan, 2003).

However, consultancy firms encounter a strong dilemma between autonomy and control (Starbuck, 1992). On the one hand, because of the fluid, complex and uncertain nature

of their work, consultants require to be granted a high-level of autonomy (Robertson & Swan, 2003). Indeed, creating new solutions for complex issues demands to facilitate innovation, flexibility and knowledge creation that can't be performed without autonomy (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998). On the other hand, meeting production imperatives also requires coordinated actions and sharing knowledge, that implies to develop organizational routines and a form of control (Starbuck, 1992). In sum, consultancy firms need to find the right balance between autonomy and control and thus have to create a culture of what is called 'responsible autonomy' (Maister, 2012; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Moreover, this necessity is reinforced by the fact that while this kind of firm is dependent of its workforce, consultancy is a high volatile industry regarding human resources. Thus, to foster resources' loyalty and commitment, consultancy firms should better manage people through trust, open and fluid relations rather than with restrictive ones (Costas, 2012).

Consequently, resolving the autonomy-control dilemma encourages consultancy firms to perform control mechanisms that rely on normative processes and social control rather than on the managerial hierarchy (Alvesson, 1993; Kunda, 1992). Based on collective understandings and corporate culture within the firm, normative control ensures both workers' autonomy and control, and also serves to self-discipline as it allows making people inclined to do voluntarily what the firm want (Robertson & Swan, 1998). In other words, through normative control, consultants can be trusted to work in the interests of the firm. For example, Robertson and Swan (2003)'s inquiry at consulting firm shows how consultants develop and promote an organizational norm themselves that spares their autonomy and strengthens their identity as experts while reinforcing their loyalty and commitment to the firm.

While normative control in consulting firms supposedly allows balancing autonomy and control for improving organizational performance, it can also engender negative effects. Previous research acknowledges that the main drawback of a control system relying on normative processes is that it creates an informal hierarchy, especially when the official hierarchical structure is flat (Nelson, 2001; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Culture and socialization processes cannot only be considered as instrumental for reaching the organization's goals, people's interactions rely on unofficial mechanisms that create new hierarchical orders (Alvesson, 1993). This is especially true in consulting firms as informal hierarchical structures and processes reflect workers' enactment of autonomy and self-organizing which are required due to the nature of their work (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011).

Consequently, while normative control initially aims at preserving flat structures and hierarchy-free relations between employees, in fact, it can exacerbate control. For instance, Costas (2012)'s inquiry at a global consulting firm demonstrates how a "culture of friendship" – supposedly based on freedom and openness – initially aiming at setting intimate and egalitarian relations, in fact, reinforces control and creates informal layers of hierarchy. Informal forms of control could put pressure on workers and be harmful as much as formal ones. For example, Kunda (1992) shows that employees can experience burnout as continuously attempting to meet expectations of normative processes. While deviant effects of normative control are well informed in the literature, we still lack of knowledge about the mechanisms and power dynamics that foster informal hierarchy in less hierarchical organizations. This study, therefore, addresses the following research question: *what are the mechanisms through which less hierarchical organizations recreate a more centralized and coercive set of informal rules and dynamics?*

3. METHOD

In order to capture *from the inside* the power dynamics at Meta Consulting we adopted an auto-ethnographic approach that leverages the experience of one of the authors as a long-term consultant for the company. Reminiscent of Clifford Geertz (1973)'s advice, autoethnography allows us to describe not only the facts and practices, but the meaning they have for the participants. This choice of method was motivated by a recent stream of research which encourages researchers to "relax the taboo of telling their own story" (Anteby, 2013) and emphasizes the value of autoethnography for grasping the minutiae of power relations within organizations (Alvesson, 2009). In order to balance personal involvement with professional distance, we built an insider/outsider research team (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010), with a third other author being more oriented towards challenging the data and building theory.

DATA COLLECTION

Our study emerged from two prior research carried on at Meta, one led by the first author "on normative systems in less hierarchical consulting firms", and one led by the second author on "business model innovation in consulting firms". In 2018, while the first author led a first round of interviews with Meta consultants for his project, he met with the second author who had been conducting a long-term ethnography for a PhD dissertation. Their work converged toward unpacking the tensions and dynamics resulting from Meta's original organizing principles, which blended formal features with adhocratic principles.

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Meta consulting is a mid-size consulting boutique, created in 2011, which comprises approximately 50 consultants for a turnover of 8 M euros. Meta provides general managerial and IT advice to a range of large groups in the French market. Its founding partners, François and Amélie, had recently left a mainstream consulting firm, structured around the traditional up or out system, and wanted to "create something different" (Amélie, interview, 01/07/2018) with a "community atmosphere where consultants would be focused helping their clients and each other" (François, interview, 20/12/2018). The very job of consulting, the partner thought, where teams of young and well-educated people work in goal-oriented project mode for very different clients, was particularly adapted to this kind of structureless, post-bureaucratic organizing. Their ambition for Meta, therefore, was to create a one-of-kind "liberated" (see Getz, 2009) consulting firm.

In this line, the founding partners made significant organizing choices for Meta. First, they got rid of consultants' ranks and other formal status. Consultants' roles and leadership positions may shift across assignments according to the client's needs. What's notable is that younger consultants can be put in a position of leading more experienced ones on specific assignments. Second, Meta does not have physical offices. As partners wanted to "foster agility" and "avoid that the routine would set in" (François, interview, 20/12/2018) they encourage consultants to meet "where they need" (Amélie, interview, 01/07/2018), i.e., at their clients' offices or in public places such as hotels bar or restaurants. Third, the partners strove to develop a "new and very open business model that breaks from the traditions of the consulting industry" (François, interview, 15/03/2017). In this line, they encourage and foster intrapreneurship from consultants, collaboration with start-ups, research and development or the development of new consulting services for small businesses. The partners consider that "bottom-up initiatives" and new ideas "coming from the outside our world" contribute to "shaping the identity and activities" at Meta (Amélie, field notes, strategic retreat, 4/12/2018). Finally, consultants do not manage any individual P&L to "avoid they compete with each other for status and advancement" (François, interview, 20/12/2018). Thus, the partners are the only ones who manage Meta's business performance.

Data collection at Meta spanned over 6 years and comprised observations, interviews, and archival data. The company gave us unlimited access to the data providing that all names remained anonymous. In terms of observations, the second author was a full-time consultant at Meta for 6 years with unlimited access to all the events that populate consulting life, including consulting assignments, firm development, corporate events and socializing with

colleagues. His field observations comprise 431 single-spaced pages of field notes, including verbatim transcripts of conversations where possible. The second author also audio-recorded and transcribed 49 work meetings (73 hours and 2182 single-spaced pages). After the six-year ethnographic experience, the research team kept close ties with the field engaging in informal conversations with founding partners and consultants to gather additional data. The ethnographic observation was supported by 37 formal interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018 by the first and second authors with consultants at all levels of experience. Formal interviews consisted of semi-structured conversations about decision-making, organization of work and career development at Meta; they were electronically recorded and generated 573 single-spaced pages of transcripts in total. Finally, we collected electronic and paper documents produced and used by Meta consultants, such as corporate presentations, mission statement, commercial offer, hiring grid, emails and more. This material represented 1.8 GB of data and allowed us to triangulate the findings and build stronger interpretations (Charmaz, 2006).

DATA ANALYSIS

The coding of the data involved several rounds of analysis. We first created a raw narrative focusing on Meta's structural features as a "liberated consulting firm" and their effect on consultants' work. While the research team challenged this narrative, we focused on a more systematic axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) probing into on "the type of ambiguities" as well as "the power constellation" resulting from the structural features at Meta. For each circle of the power constellation, we further analyzed "the relations with the core", "the power dynamics with the employees" and "the role of each circle in perpetuating the firm's culture". Beyond this coding at the level of the company, we also coded the trajectory of each consultant to identify trajectories and individual strategies that are more or less successful in Meta's context.

4. FINDINGS

Meta is at the same time *very controlled* and *very liberated* creating a constant ambiguity as to how consultants should behave within the organization. Very controlled insofar that partners have unlimited discretionary power over decision-making and consultants are discouraged to question the decisions they make. Besides, several internal work processes such as performance appraisals and expense management are strictly formalized and monitored. Very liberated, insofar that there are no ranks or hierarchy, project management processes are flexible, and the work setting is fully decentralized. The culture of the organization, too,

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ostensibly promotes self-initiative and equality between the consultants – who are called the "Metapreneurs". At Meta, the widespread ambiguity deriving from the tension between control and liberation is evident in areas such as the (1) "locus of authority", the (2) corporate culture, and the (3) mutual perception boss/employees.

FORMS OF AMBIGUITY AT META CONSULTING

Ambiguity regarding the locus of authority

At Meta, most consultant express their difficulties in understanding the firm's informal power structure and positioning themselves within such structure. While they all acknowledge a fuzziness in the demarcation of power between employees, their perspective varies depending on their level of experience and history within the firm. Young and inexperienced consultants are probably the most vocal about the ambiguous power structure, as they mention "being lost" in the rankless system. While some ask for more guidance and "visibility on their trajectory within the firm", other complain about being brushed off by experienced colleagues when trying to assert their professional authority – this suggesting that some employees are *in effect* more powerful than others. Young consultants acknowledge that an informal hierarchy exists despite the supposedly flat structure, however, they cannot state it clearly. They usually stop at a sense of disillusion resulting from the discrepancy between their alleged autonomy and the discretionary power of some key players: "it's supposed to be a liberated company, but in the end, it is always the partners who make the decisions, or some of the historical [long-term consultants] eventually". The egalitarian team-family-friend rhetoric, which is very strong in the company, cannot displace the structural inequalities of consultant-partner relations, as well as the inequalities resulting from levels of professional expertise.

As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules. The more experienced consultants who somehow play a "managerial role" tend to be among those, especially because they work closer to the partners. Besides, as they are more costly to the firm, experienced consultants who don't understand these rules will be dismissed rapidly creating some sort of cultural uniformity among middle managers. Indeed, experienced consultants all agree that "although there are no rules, the rules are very clear in the organization" and point to the central role played by François and Amélie in the dynamics of the firm. Their cynicism, as expressed in the former remark, gives them a sense of freedom that allow them to cope with the circumstances outside of their control. Experienced consultants do not interpret, however, the informal rules in the same way, as they tend to

project the normative systems of their former consulting firms into Meta's normative void. In this line, a former consultant from a Big 4 points to the importance of "going by through delivery and billing massive hours" (Consultant 2, interview, 05/12/2017), while a consultant from a management boutique highlights the importance of "remaining close to the partners and adjusting to their emotional expectations" (Consultant 4, interviews, 20/12/2018).

Founding partners, for their part, have a hard time admitting that they exert discretionary power within the firm, which they see, on the contrary, as being shared with the employees: "I think that any employee who wants to take the lead can and any good idea that will be brought to us will have a chance to grow" (Amélie, interview, 01/07/2018). In practice, however, we observed partners making unilateral decision and adopting an authoritarian management style on many occasions, including, for instance, when controlling consultants' expenses and work schedules. In a debate with consultants as to how the firm should reimburse meal expenses, François mentioned for instance: "we already said that we do not cover such kinds of expenses. It is not a debate; it is our policy. And let me say that your behavior is stupid: asking a hundred times will not change anything!" (field notes, 21/10/2014).

Partners encourage self-organizing teams to generate knew knowledge and lead certain aspects of the business, yet they operate a strong control over the allocation of resources. For instance, partners claim that "anybody can undertake any initiative at Meta as long as there are synergies with consulting activities" (François, interview, 20/12/2018) and define their own role as "support providers" (Amélie, field notes, team meeting, 11/07/2018) for other's projects. At the same time, consultants remark for their part that:

> *"Every decision that engages resources for Meta has to be greenlighted by the partners. While there is no official greenlighting process for internal projects, their silence to your requests is meant to trigger a feeling that you are not supported and undermine your motivation to the point that you will withdraw your idea yourself" (Consultant 3, interview, 6/12/2018).*

Ambiguity regarding the "Meta way"

Most consultants agree, regardless of their level of experience, that there is a "confusion regarding the core values, strategy and key objectives of the firm" (Director 2, interview, 07/12/2017). Such ambiguity go as far as impeding "inexperienced consultants to make sense of all the initiatives and projects going on and therefore describing their own work environment" (Consultant 2, interview, 05/12/2017). What is striking is that partners themselves seem to maintain the confusion as they refuse to commit on a clear strategy – to the point that some consultants see this as a form of abdication by leadership masquerading as

empowerment. For instance, during the yearly strategic retreat, as partners were pressured by employees to elaborate on the firm strategy, they handpicked a few consultants that they considered "knew well Meta and its culture" and asked them to "present the firm's strategy and steer the discussion with the rest of the group about it" (François, field notes, phone call, 4/12/2017). As the consultants opposed that it was the leaders' role to present their strategy, the partners decided to project a slide with a "pot-pourri of ideas", while "letting the room read it silently" and arguing that "strategy is what everyone makes of it" (Field notes, strategic retreat, 8/12/2017). It seems that the partners have rationalized the strategic ambiguity as they turn their lack of guidelines into a positive "opportunistic" and "entrepreneurial" strategy: "we do not want to get trap into a clear plan, our strategy is to grow and to innovate, and to stay aligned with our core values" (Field notes, strategic retreat, 8/12/2017).

The core values of the firm do not seem to be much clearer. For example, despite constant references across the firm to the 'Meta Way' of working there was considerable ambiguity regarding what constituted the 'Meta Way' and consultants had difficulty in articulating the 'Meta Way'. While their sense of "being special" was occasionally justified through positive arguments referring to the "absence of rank", or the "family approach" of the firm, it was mostly justified through *negative* arguments referring to "the difference with traditional consulting firms" (François, interview, 15/03/2017). More broadly, the "Meta Way" was presented as relational and experienced within the group: "There is definitely a "Meta Way" that is unique, but it is hard to explain. But I can tell you right away if somebody will fit or not" (Consultant 1, interview, 5/12/2017). The notion of being "Meta Compliant" was used by consultants to define such fit, without ever being precisely qualified. The expression itself was created a few years after the creation of the firm, in a period of intense recruitment during which the partners could no longer directly socialize the new recruits to the culture.

The floating signifier of corporate values and the strategic ambiguity regarding corporate culture is somehow leveraged by partners to control the employees through recruitment and performance appraisal processes. On several occasions, employees were dismissed for not being "Meta Compliant" although, once again, no clear explanations of such compliance were ever formulated. Once again, more experienced consultants often approached this ambivalence with a hint of cynicism, arguing that the only compliance there is "is being liked by François and Amélie" and "you can fall from hero to zero very rapidly for whatever reason" (Consultant 7, interview, 6/12/2017).

Ambiguity regarding the mutual perception boss/employee

The third form of ambiguity amounts to a widespread misunderstanding between the partners' expectations towards consultants and the consultants' interpretation of what the partners expect from them, and vice versa. Beyond the partners' close entourage, the labor relations at Meta seem rather tense, as both "management" and "employees" point towards a breach of reciprocity in their mutual relationship.

Partners tend to blame consultants for "hiding behind their grandiloquent desires such as a 'sense of purpose' or a 'neat business strategy'" (François, field notes, 11/07/2018). They complain about younger consultants not taking initiatives and responsibility, despite the means that they are given to shape Meta to their own image. As a partner mentions for instance:

It is rather funny because, in the end, I think that, in our heads at least, we have the impression that we are giving our consultants freedom on everything: new initiatives, financing, new activities, things, and so on. Actually, there aren't many respondents. There aren't many people who say, "I propose this, or I propose that", really new things. (Amélie, interview, 1/07/2018)

In the partners' discourse, there is also a generation gap between them and the rest of the consultants, whose behavior is symptomatic of the "millennial generation" who demands impactful work instantly, without committing to working long hours and taking the responsibilities that comes with it.

On the other side, consultants, especially juniors, blame the partners for not giving them a proper direction, for the firm but also their own trajectory. They systematically condemn partners for their lack of "vision", for not "being explicit on what they expect" and claim that there is a need for more "storytelling" in the leadership (Consultant 8, field notes, team meeting, 11/07/2018). They also argue that the level of commitment required by François and Amélie only make sense for those who take a share in the ownership of the firm, while they cannot be expected to commit as much. The ambiguity regarding François and Amélie's ambition also triggered harsher criticisms from consultants who considered that they "use nice discourse to exploit us and make profit, as any partners of a consulting firm would do" (Consultant 10, field notes, 6/03/2018). During our time at Meta Consulting, 8 junior consultants decided to hand their resignation at the same time, representing 20% of the workforce of the company. While such a massive departure stunned the partners, they set a debrief meeting during which the misunderstanding between management and employees with respect to mutual expectation was especially telling, as junior consultants explained "discovering for the first time the partners' motivations behind the rankless system and

several of the strategic initiatives of the firm" (Consultant 6, field notes, team meeting, 11/07/2018).

THE POWER CONSTELLATION AT META CONSULTING

At Meta, the structural tension between control and liberation and the seemingly flat structure has generated a power constellation based on concentric circles that gradually unfold around a power center embodied by the founding partners. What is striking is that this idea of "concentric circles of power" is identified by the consultants who themselves use this specific term and qualify each circle with a label. There seems to be two dominant features that shape this center-periphery informal structure: (1) first, *the quality of relationship with the partners* ("do they like you or not") as driven by social proximity, common experiences, and history; (2) second, *the commitment and loyalty to the group* (do you promote the "Meta Way") through engagement in internal projects.

At Meta, there are five concentric circles that define the constellation of power, each circle being populated by consultants with certain characteristics, as exemplified in Figure 1. What is striking is that this constellation is highly informal as it feeds on the structural ambiguity of the firm, while at the same time being extremely coercive for consultants. It somehow recalls a "clan system" which has been described elsewhere as a common organizing pattern for consulting firms. In such system, the heads are all powerful, yet the group values may remain unclear beyond the allegiance to and perpetuation of the clan itself. Another interesting observation is that there is almost no outside-in mobility between the circles: consultants can only follow a path of demotion, as they fail to uphold the partners expectations. Rebels are methodically eliminated for the sake of the group's integrity. Finally, while the power constellation is implicitly driven by consultants' socio-emotional bond with the partner, another "business oriented" normative system seems to be interfering, providing the consultants who perform businesswise a certain level of authority despite their emotional distance from partners. In what follows, we discuss the features and social dynamics of each group within the power constellation, as well as the mobility dynamics between the groups.
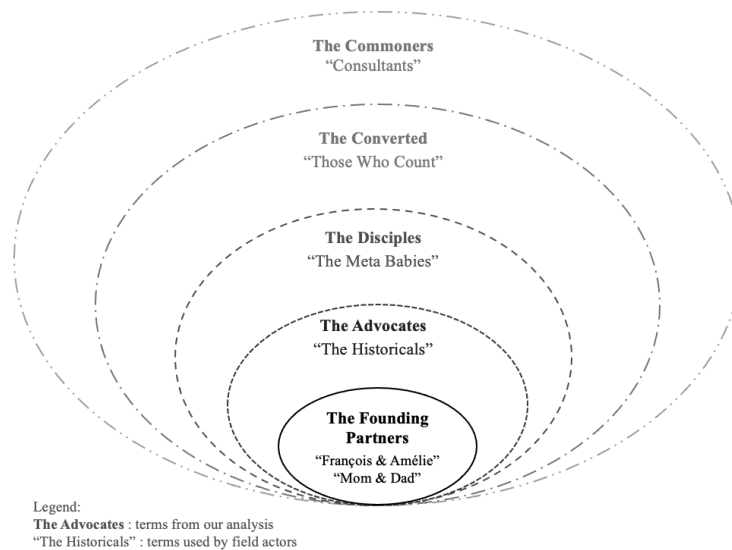
Figure 1: The Power Constellation at Meta

Power Core: The founding partners, called either "François and Amélie" or "Mom and Dad" (2/50 people).

As founders and majority owners of the firm, François and Amélie, the partners, sit at the core of the firm's power constellation. A duo, they have a long-term relation with each-other, as they jointly left the partnership at a larger consulting firm to launch Meta. There is no apparent division of labor between the Partners as they "do fifty-fifty on everything and tend to be interchangeable" (Amélie, interview, 1/07/2018). However, they do have different business styles, somehow gendered, with François being ironically called by consultants "the dad" as he is more authoritative and business oriented, and Amélie, the "Mom", as she is more empathetic and focused on building relations.

While Partners claim that power is shared among employees, they are the ones "who call the shot" and are considered "all powerful" by other consultants (Consultant 3, interview, 6/12/2018), regarding most of the work processes of the firm, including staffing, performance review, project management, business development and so on. Their ownership of the capital makes them the only "official bosses" since the flat hierarchy creates ambiguity around other consultants' official status. Besides, the fact that they are the only ones to do business development gives them decisional power over resources allocation.

François and Amélie do not ostentatiously claim their power as other consultants defer to it tacitly. For instance, while a small team was empowered to organize the yearly team-building seminar "as they wish", the consultants adopted as the main criteria for choosing the event "what the Partners like or not, in terms of food, activities and location" and did their best to anticipate their desires to gain their approval. A consultant explained that they spontaneously

"ruled out destinations such as Scandinavian countries or Balkan States because gastronomy and wines weren't good enough for François and the weather didn't suit Amelie's" (Consultant 9, field notes, 15/02/2016). We observed this kind of behaviors on staffing decisions and several internal projects, such as the production of the website and the crafting of service offers.

The partners' overbearing control seems to be posing problems businesswise, as it limits other consultants' autonomy in areas that are vitals for the firm, such as developing the client base and acquiring new projects. François and Amélie are highly concerned with this: most of their efforts at increasing consultants' autonomy are driven by the will to "share the burden of business development" (Amélie, field notes, 17/11/2016). On four occasions they tried to coopt a third partner but never succeeded, mostly because while these people had high business targets, their power and status within the firm remained low. As Amélie explains herself: "it is really difficult for us to share what we've built with somebody else and find the right fit with our culture" (interview, 1/07/2018).

The partners do not entertain the same level of proximity with all the consultants. They have built close intimacy with the "historicals" and the "Meta babies" but tend to remain distant with other consultants. This runs into the management of the firm, as several employees, for instance, mentioned being totally unaware of what they expect from them or even how to reach them. Several consultants also mentioned the partners' "remarkable capacity to not answering emails and leaving them in the complete dark" (Consultant 3, interview, 6/12/2018). Partners, arguably, do not read these dynamics and the distance some consultants describe. On the contrary, they argue as that "anybody can come to them, and they will be taken in consideration" (Amélie, field notes, 19/04/2017). However, when asked about what he believes other consultants think of him, François remarks:

The only feeling I have, a little diffuse, is that I scare them more than they should be afraid. I mean, I don't know, I feel like there's some kind of vague blockage on one side that doesn't make sense, but that's the way it is (François, interview, 20/12/2018).

First circle: The advocates, called the "Historicals" (6/50 people).

The first power circle of firm's constellation is populated by the partner's main *advocates*, i.e., experienced consultants who are loyal to François and Amélie, support their managerial decisions and promote the culture of the firm. These consultants own about 1% of the firm's equity, perform managerial and coaching roles, and are identified as senior managers in the "non-official ranking of the firm". All advocates have had a long-time, personal relationship

with the partners and knew them prior to the creation of Meta. Therefore, they are routinely called "the historicals" by consultants. Advocates have a special status: they interact with the partner on a regular basis and with a level of intimacy like no other employees (extra-work diners, gifts, etc.).

Advocates are not necessarily the most performant consultants in terms of billable and expertise, for their skills and networks are highly redundant with that of the partners. Their promotion to equity owners was extremely slow (in their forties, or mid-forties) and they were often depicted by other consultants as "lieutenants who will never make partners but don't see it" (Consultant 12, field notes, 7/06/2017). However, the advocates play a key role in spreading Meta's culture among employees, especially through the coaching process. While they seem to understand the latent power dynamic and to have carved for themselves a space in which they are able to operate, advocates do not willingly speak about it. For instance, despite repeated attempts, none of them accepted to answer our questions during the interview process. To our knowledge, advocates are never cynical: they do not criticize Meta or the partners publicly, often buffering other consultants' criticisms.

Advocates are the most loyal consultants, and their position involves sacrifices. They commit to Meta's most difficult, sometimes low value-added assignments and do not hesitate to work extra-long hours and to do the "partners' dirty work" (Consultant 11, field notes, 2/12/2016). This loyalty is not always rewarded in kind as advocates are often subject to the "tough love" of partners, which somehow keep them in a subordinate position, and with a relatively low level of autonomy.

For instance, Helen, an advocate, was appointed leader of a 10 consultants' team at Spectra, one of Meta's most important assignment. The context was that of a low value-added IT project, in a remote place and a highly political context. Despite her success in growing the account, François kept micro-managing her, "shadowing her every move and always siding with the client when there was a disagreement" (Consultant 15, field notes, 26/11/2015). While the team complained about the low value-added tasks they were performing, Helen took the role of François' henchman to shut down any kind of criticism. The work climate became very tense, and soon she was marginalized by other consultants (e.g., people never had lunch with her or only interacted with her when they had to, in a very formal style) while many considered her as "a bulldog who do not let anything get in her way" (Consultant 14, field notes, 20/01/2016). While her reputation was being tarnished, she never complained and took "all the blames upon herself to protect François" (Field notes, 24/11/2016). The junior

consultants that left the firm simultaneously in 2017 were all staffed at Spectra. Talking about "prison break" was a joke running through the firm to describe consultants' efforts to flee from Helen and Spectra, should they have to leave the company to succeed.

Similarly, Thomas, an advocate, was appointed on a "high stake and risky assignment at SpaceComp, an Airplane company" (Thomas, field notes, 22/03/2016), regarding the turnaround of the IT system. This project could be an entry point for a larger assignment that "could give work to Meta's consultants for years" (François, field notes, team meeting, 07/04/2016). Managing two other consultants, Thomas was the official account manager of the assignment, which was especially trying due to an abusive client that would treat them as pairs of hands and "make them work like dogs". As Helen had experienced at Spectra, François remained closely involved with the client, micro-managing Thomas and controlling the operational work. Despite the consultants' best efforts, the assignment ended up being a failure, and Meta was excluded from the larger IT program. François was furious and publicly humiliated Thomas and his team with a remarkable severity. Consultants report that he "lambasted them", called them "amateurs" (Consultant 13, field notes, 13/01/2017) and issued them with an ultimatum "to set an action plan to overcome their incompetence otherwise… [threatening silence]" (Consultant 11, field notes, 2/12/2016). The two consultants from the team quit Meta the following month while Thomas "kept a low profile" and was appointed on a "second-grade assignment". One year later, he, too, quit Meta and "everybody knew the SpaceCom assignment disaster influenced his decision" (Consultant 13, field notes, 11/12/2017).

Second circle: The disciples, called the "Meta babies" (5/50 people).

The second power circle of firm's comprises what can be considered as the *disciples* of the partners, i.e., novice consultants who started their carrier at Meta and have been deeply socialized to its culture, to the point of being called "the Meta babies" by other consultants. Disciples have a very close emotional and mentoring relationship with the partners, who treat them with special care. The partners often present them to others as "role models" and high potentials that embody the firm's culture. They commonly ask them to "make public presentations" and "lead workshops during strategic retreats". In Amélie's words, "they are our rising stars, but we do not tell them like that" (interview, 1/07/2018).

The dynamic of the relationship between the partners and the "Meta babies" is unique in several ways. First, despite their junior position and low level of experience, they have direct and unlimited access to the partners, often navigating in their closest circles during informal

events (lunches, parties, etc.). Second, Meta Babies are given a remarkable freedom of speech and are somehow the most vocal about Meta's culture and practices – good or bad. Therefore, "Meta babies" are sometimes used by other consultants as spokesperson to voice the group disapproval, "since François better listens to you and you can speak to him in a way that we cannot" (Consultant 17, field notes, 5/07/2017). Third, "Meta babies" often benefit from very individualized, "special treatments", regarding work arrangements. These are often described as "favouritism" by other consultants. For instance, the partners went at length to give Pearl, a Meta Baby who decided to create her own non-consulting business, enough job flexibility so she could pursue her dream while remaining involved in the firm (including part-time, remote work, administrative task exemptions, etc.). Such flexibility was never given to anyone else and even explicitly refused to an historical. In the same line, Tony, another Meta baby, was given a two-month work permission to pursue a personal project in a foreign country.

This special treatment does not go without reciprocity, and "Meta babies" have gained the partners' trust by demonstrating their commitment to the firm. Both Pearl and Tony, for instance, came from prestigious business schools and joined "the Meta's project by choice" (Amélie, interview, 1/07/2018) while they had other job offers from bigger firms. While they never asked for formal rankings or a clear strategic statement, Meta Babies clearly handle the functioning of the firm successfully. It seems that "Meta babies" embody the partner's ideal vision for the consultants they wish to breed within their liberated company: brilliant individuals, with their singularities, who take initiative and are not afraid to commit to the company in their own ways. Indeed, they performed well with their clients, delivering satisfying results and securing business relationships beyond their first assignments. They also took entrepreneurial initiatives that "shaped Meta's identity and business model" (Amélie, interview, 1/07/2018) and carried on these activities by themselves and/or succeeded to get on their own support from other consultants. For instance, while introducing "management research as a main source of inspiration for knowledge management at Meta" (François, strategic retreat, 8/12/2017), Pearl became interested in CSR issues. Therefore, she encouraged other consultants to create an internal team to define Meta's CSR policy. Thanks to her initiative, Meta obtained several CSR labels rewarding its sustainable development actions. While Meta babies are often given special treatments, the partners also argue that "they are the one with whom they are the most challenging and strict to develop their great potential". They are required to "be exemplary at plenary meetings and seminars, and their deliverables must be a notch above that of others" (Field notes, 12/10/2017).

What is striking is that while the Meta babies are inexperienced and considered as junior in the "non-official" ranking of the firm, they are very powerful within the firm and can impose their views and control other consultants that are far more experienced. On several occasions, for instance, Tony challenged a coopted partner and was finally attributed some of his tasks. Pearl, for her part, was given managerial roles over more experienced consultants in the internal projects that she led. Another striking observation is that "Meta babies" are very independent and while they claim to profoundly respect and appreciate the partners, they are not necessarily loyal to them. During our time at Meta, indeed, all the Meta babies ended up leaving the company to pursue their own projects.

Third circle: The converted, called "those who counts" (7/50 people).

The third power circle of firm's constellation encompasses experienced consultants who have joined Meta more recently, maximum two years ago, after several years of experience in other consulting firms. Therefore, they have been *converted* to the "Meta Way" throughout their trajectory. For instance, Diego was a manager at Deloitte for 5 years, while Clotilda was Director in a boutique consulting firm for almost 10 years. While this group do not have intimate relationship with the partners, they seem to have earned their respect based on their business performance and acquired a certain level of power and of autonomy. Therefore, they are called "those who counts" by the other consultants. It seems that the converted have a stronger identity than the advocates and the disciples, based on their own expertise and prior experience in other consulting contexts. They are less vulnerable to the group's pressures and keener to a discrete form of cynicism. The converted seem to be navigating very well the power dynamics of the firm although they are prudent in the way they speak about it.

The dynamic of the relationship between the partners and the converted is quite positive albeit different from that of other circles. They succeeded to leverage their previous experiences, especially during the recruitment interviews and in the early stages of their work, to appear as "enriching Meta and its identity" in the eyes of the partners (François, interview, 15/03/2017). For instance, Mary's expertise on compliance processes in the banking industry was valued by François to "develop a new offer" (François, field notes, team meeting, 9/10/2014), and Tiffany's expertise in managing young consultants at a larger consulting firm was considered as "crucial for a boutique like ours" (Amélie, field notes, 14/09/2016). While leveraging their prior experiences to stand out and support Meta's development, converted consultants also "clearly understand the rules of the game" and "continuously show their allegiance to the partners" (Diego, interview, 5/12/2017). For instance, a converted remark:

"At Meta, there is a high stake of being aligned with the partners' vision (…) Because nothing is written, it's important to spend time with them (…) And because they love the food and going to lunches, that is what you have to do" (Kevin, interview, 5/12/2017).

Beyond this engagement with the partners, the converted claim their awareness that "business remains the sinews of war" and that performing with clients is "the first criterion to be praised by the partners" (Clotilda, interview, 19/12/2018). In this line, all of them first "secured [their] positions" within their assignments prior to positioning themselves within the firm. For instance, Tiffany strove to quickly become "essential for the project" (Customer, meeting, 21/09/2017) or Diego "spent [his] a couple of months demonstrating he can get the things done without making too much waves" (interview, 5/12/2017). As a result, the converted have been identified by the partners as potential successors much faster than the advocates. Indeed, the converted were given a portion of the equity faster than historicals and some of them were approached to succeed to the partners: "Amélie told me several times, in several ways such as 'when you will be ready…' or 'in a few years the keys of could be yours' (Thierry, field notes, 26/07/2018).

The dynamics of the relationship between the converted and other circles of the constellation varies significantly. While they do not seem to appreciate them much, they keep a respectful distance with the advocates and avoid confronting them (each group knows the power of the other and therefore promote a form of "entente cordiale"). However, they are really close with the disciples. Indeed, the disciples and the converted have in common that they engage in the promotion of the firm while being reflexive about its culture and their relationships with the partners. As the converted are more experienced than the disciples, a mentoring relationship also tends to develop:

"I really like being coach by Clotilda. She gives real advice to overstep difficulties and is empathetic. It makes a nice change from Thomas (an historical) who was my former coach for which everything is always astounding at Meta. You cannot discuss, he is a 'Meta fundamentalist'" (Antoine, interview, 4/12/2017)

Over the years, disciples and converted seem to have formed an alliance which they entertain through regular and informal meetings (e.g. having drinks, diner and parties together around 8-time a year). This group was exclusively composed of disciples and converted currently working at Meta but also some of those who left. The group was called by themselves and the other consultants the "Metalumni". During these meetings, consultants would discuss about their personal life (e.g. family, vacations, hobbies) but also vent "about their experiences and difficulties at Meta" (Tony, field notes, 3/06/2016), providing a kind of space for catharsis "which makes us feel better and allows to be up and ready on Monday morning" (Jessica,

3/06/2016). Advocates were purposefully left out of this group as other consultants felt that "they would not fit with its spirit" (Laura, 19/05/2017).

Fourth circle: The commoners, no name given by consultants (30/50 people).

The last circle of the power constellation comprises all the consultants that do not seem to be engaged with the partners or deeply committed to the firm, hence we call them the commoners. Contrary to the other groups, they have not been given a specific name by Meta's consultants. We can identify three types of profiles among them. First, people who joined Meta "to keep working as consultants without the pressure of larger firms" (Consultant 17, field notes, 5/07/2017) and thus seek limited working hours and are not engaged in the development of the firm. These mostly stayed at Meta for 2 to 4 years before leaving the consulting career and joining one of their clients' companies. Second, we find among the commoners that have fallen from other circles. These were previously engaged in the development of Meta as they were advocates, disciples or converted but were degraded by the partner because their relationship worn out or because of their poor business performance. For instance, Philip, a consultant with 15 years of experience, was one of the first advocates to join Meta. While he was very engaged in developing the firm during his first years, he stepped back at some point to "focus on his twin newborns" (Philip, field notes, 21/01/2015). He lack of commitment was severely criticized as he was progressively marginalized by the partners and other advocates to become a commoner. Finally, this last circle is also composed of people for whom the partners had "great expectations […] but they did not meet them" (Amélie, interview, 1/07/2018). In other words, these consultants were expected to become disciples or converted but they failed to commit to the firm and build a trust relationship with the partners. For example, while Gérard was hired to develop a specific consulting offer regarding financial services based to his expertise, he never managed to fit in the "Meta way" and failed to meet the partners' business expectations.

Commoners' have almost no relationships with the partners. Indeed, direct interactions are scarce as these consultants work full-time on their client's premises, they are managed by those who are close to the center (i.e. advocates, converted) and are not engaged in the internal projects of the firm. They exchange occasionally during monthly meetings but as one of them explains "[they] don't really know each other" (Consultant 20, field notes, 9/06/2017) and therefore struggle to understand "what they [partners] really want" (Consultant 3, interview, 6/12/2017). Relationships are a bit more conflictual with 'fallen-from-other-circles' consultants or those who never met partners' expectations. For instance, Paola, a converted

working at Meta for five years who belonged to the SpaceCorp team which ended up being a failure, "refus[ed] to be humiliated like a child" by François and thus had a "pretty hard fight" with him (Paola, field notes, 19/01/2018). While she stayed at Meta for two years following this event, she never spoke to François again "to say more than hello or goodbye" (Paola, field notes, 1/03/2018) and progressively became a commoner.

Because commoners have never been "in François' and Amélie's good books" (Pearl, field notes, 16/03/2018), they tend to struggle more than others to sell them their intrapreneurial initiatives. For instance, while Rachel was seen as one of the 'Meta babies' during a time, her mitigated performance and her personality which "conflicted with that of François" (Rachel, field notes, 14/04/2016) resulted in her becoming a commoner. Yet, she was very motivated to develop a consulting offer regarding "well-being at work" and deeply committed to the project (e.g. developing her expertise through readings and conferences, framing her offer through presentation documents, pitching her project to partners and colleagues, etc.). Despite her efforts, the partners "never really believed and supported the offer although without refusing it clearly" (Rachel, field notes, 1/12/2017). We observed that while the partners do not rely on the commoners to undertake initiatives, they remain ambiguous when rejecting their initiatives, as they still need them to "feed the machine" (Paola, field notes, 1/03/2018), i.e. performing assignments and earning money.

The commoners do not have specific relationships with the other circles yet the "atmosphere at Meta is always friendly and benevolent" (Consultant 20, field notes, 9/06/2017). What is striking is that commoners often ask the help of other groups to learn "how to gain respect from partners" (Martin, field notes, 14/03/2017). Some disciples and converted, however, argued that they felt uncomfortable answering these questions as it "would mean that these people did something wrong, while it is much more complicated" (Tony, 19/04/2018). Indeed, some commoners suffered from the comparison with other consultants belonging to the more central circles and, in this line, mentioned developing an inferiority complex – "my conclusion is a I lack charisma compared to you" said Martin (field notes, 14/03/2017) to Pearl as he failed selling his project to François and Amélie. Others shifted the blame on their colleagues. For instance, young consultants from the commoners circle cynically named Pearl and Tony as "the favorites". In this line, because commoners struggle to fit with the 'Meta Way' and may develop negative behaviors, advocates, disciples and converted pay close attention that commoners do not develop a "counter-culture" (Tony, field notes, 13/06/2017). For instance, at a team-building seminar, some Meta's commoners were considered deviant

regarding the 'Meta Way' - especially regarding "their way of dressing up, drinking alcohol and their overhaul manners" (Pearl, field notes, 2/06/2017). Therefore, other consultants from the advocates, disciples and converted "pulled them back into line" (Clotilda, field notes, 2/06/2017) by alerting the partners and coaches so they would "strengthen them out".

5. AREAS OF CONTRIBUTION

Offering an in-depth empirical study of a liberated consulting firm - The paper is at a very early stage, but our objective is to offer and in-depth empirical study of a less-hierarchical consulting firm, based on the very detailed insights of a long-term participant observer. To date, this type of study remains scarce. Besides, while former research has unpacked the dynamics of self-managing teams at a micro-level (Barker, 1993) or analysed post-bureaucratic structures at a more macro-level (see Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011), our meso level analysis captures both the dynamics at the firm level (i.e., approx. a group of 50 persons) while tracking the trajectories of each consultant. This perspective also allows us to not separate the analysis of social behaviors hic et nunc with a more structural/historical analysis of change and reproduction – merging the individual identities/trajectories with the collective ones. Our methodological stance, which tracks the dynamics of liberation *from the inside* and involves a deep commitment in the field, makes this analysis possible.

Unpacking the mechanisms through which less hierarchical structures recreate centralization and normative control – We augment the research investigating the paradoxical effects of liberation by unpacking mechanisms through which the lack of structure recreates coercion and normative control. We show how the structural void generates a strong ambiguity regarding the locus of authority and the "Meta way" or, in other words, the mechanisms of progression, decision making and more broadly of social/cultural validation within the firm, which puts a lot of pressure on consultants' behavior. In such context, they continuously strive to grasp cues regarding their position within the "informal ranking system" and how they should behave to progress within the firm. The ambiguity put consultants in a situation of dependency towards the partners (and those who understand the informal rules) since the best way to grasp cues on how to succeed is to "stay close" to the partners, anticipate their needs and desires while developing an intimate relationship with them. This is accentuated by the very "friendship culture" and team-family rhetoric of consulting (Costas, 2012) which encourages informal interactions and a level of proximity in all spheres of life, at work and beyond work. The frontier between personal and professional life is even more blurred when there are no work premises and consultants are encouraged to

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promote their own personal projects within the firm. The partners, for their part, seem to be leveraging the absence of opposable guidelines to justify inconsistent decision making, not commit on strategy and isolating without clear explanations the consultants that may antagonize them of put the group at risk.

Unpacking the power dynamics at Meta and the "center-periphery" type of structuring. The idea that consulting firms, in the absence of formal rules, tend to recreate clique behaviors and courtesans' system (Stenger, 2017) is stimulating and has been explored elsewhere in the literature. The interest of our paper is to delve into the minutiae of such systems without adopting a critical stance in our analysis. More broadly, we hope to investigate the "center-periphery" type of structure which as been described as "frequently observed in large human systems, including tribals and modern societies (…) but has not been studied inside organizations" (Nelson, 2001). In this respect, we identify different types of power circles, structured around different features and principles, each entertaining a singular type of relation with the power core, the other circles, and playing a specific role in promoting Meta's culture. We also traced, through time, the dynamics through which individuals may move between circles and more broadly the dynamics of change and reproduction within center-periphery system. Based on this analysis, we aim at providing general insights on the center-periphery type of structuring, which is dominant in all kinds of post-bureaucratic organizations.

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