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The Challenges of Service Work in College Admissions Consulting

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The Challenges of Service Work in College Admissions Consulting

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Management

by

Minh Cao

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Gerardo Okhuysen, Chair
Associate Professor Sharon Koppman
Associate Professor Christopher Bauman

2022

DEDICATION

To

all college students in Vietnam

for their intellect,
compassion,
bravery,
and resilience,

my life-long commitment,
love,
and hope

Out of the chaos would come bliss
That, then, is loveliness, we said
Children in wonder watching the stars
Is the aim and the end.

(*Dylan Thomas*
"Being But Men")

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I am incredibly fortunate to have encountered all of these people. My mother always tells me I was born under a lucky star, and I now have to agree with her on that.

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Interpersonal Relationships at Work; Service Work

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Challenges of Service Work in College Admissions Consulting

by

Minh Cao

Doctor of Philosophy in Management

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Professor Gerardo Okhuysen, Chair

My dissertation presents an ethnographic study of service work at two college admissions consulting firms, Icarus and Sparta (pseudonyms). These firms provide professional consulting services for Asian students applying to colleges and universities in English-speaking countries. My dissertation examines the daily work of the consultants and salespeople at Icarus and Sparta. Specifically, my findings describe how workers at these two firms a) respond to their clients' demands for care and intimacy, b) translate to their clients a realistic understanding of the accessibility of elite academic institutions, and c) mentally escape pressure at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In discussing the findings of my dissertation, I conceptualize the complexity of the interpersonal relationship between service providers and their customers, as well as the socio-cultural values, processes, and activities that shape the challenges of service work.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

My dissertation presents three empirical essays resulting from an ethnographic study that I conducted to partially fulfill the requirements for the Ph.D. degree. The dissertation has six chapters. In Chapter 1, I describe the setting in which my study took place and provide an overview of the findings that I will present in the three empirical essays. In Chapter 2, I detail my ethnographic data collection and methods of data analysis. I then present the data and findings in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 – the three empirical essays resulting from my ethnographic study. Finally, I conclude on the implications of the findings in Chapter 6.

AN OVERVIEW OF MY DISSERTATION

My dissertation describes the work of people at international admissions consulting firms – firms that earned money by providing professional consulting services for international students applying to colleges and universities in English-speaking countries. By detailing the daily work of the consultants and salespeople at these consulting firms, my dissertation explores the complexity of the interpersonal relationship between service providers and their clients, as well as the socio-cultural processes and activities that take place when consultants try to translate foreign knowledge to their clients, or when salespeople try to mentally escape pressure at work. With my dissertation, I hope to enrich our conceptual understanding of how service work can be deeply shaped by various socio-cultural elements and processes. These socio-cultural elements and processes include interpersonal relationships and interactions, outward expressions of cultural values and social class, cultural activities, and even the use of physical items connected to a social life outside of work.

My dissertation is inspired by the ethnographic works that study how globalized economic integration and cultural flows impact the service industry and service work, as well as how societal tensions and pressure shape the daily interactions between service providers and their customers. For example, several ethnographies have underscored the importance and complexity of the relationship between service providers and their customers, as this relationship is explored in the work of the Japanese geisha (Dalby, 2008) and Vietnamese sex workers (Hoang, 2015). Other ethnographic works have examined, in international settings, how the pressure to satisfy "foreign" customer expectations are integrated into the behaviors of local workers as individuals, such as the efforts of local Indian workers at outsourced call centers responding to customers and inquirers in the West (Aneesh, 2012; 2015; Das & Dharwadkar, 2009; Poster, 2013). Joining these conceptual discussions, my dissertation examines how the pressure to satisfy customer demands, as well as the differences in values and belief systems between two different societies, can manifest as challenges in service work, as seen in the highly international setting of college admissions consulting.

THE SETTING OF MY DISSERTATION

College Admissions Consulting Services

College admissions consulting firms make money by providing professional consulting services to high-school students applying to colleges and universities. As the competition for college admissions becomes more and more fierce among applicants aiming for well-known and high-ranked institutions, the use of admissions consulting has become more common among wealthy students (Hamid & Orakwue, 2022; Nietzel, 2021). Consulting firms present themselves as organizations of experts who have substantial work experience as former college admissions officers at prestigious academic institutions. For a fee, these experts employ their former work experiences and expertise to advise applicants on how to present the most competitive profiles for their college applications. For example, the website of a consulting firm based in the United States (US) reads:

> Being accepted into a top college comes down to how you market yourself as an applicant. There are plenty of students with good test scores and grades. In order to be accepted by a top university, an applicant needs to stand out from this enormous and highly qualified crowd. All of our admissions consultants are Former College Admissions Officers, and they work with our college applicants to craft Strategic Positioning Narratives and personal statements that best address their unique backgrounds, interests, and how they will contribute to the college to which they apply.
>
> Our admissions consultants advise on how to best position the college application so as to match it with what each college desires to see in its students. Most importantly, our admissions consultants ensure that student essays, teacher recommendation letters, activity sheets, addendums, and interviews all support this positioning strategy.
>
> (Solomon Admissions, 2022)

With the rise of international students seeking college degrees from institutions in the English-speaking world, many consulting firms specifically target this group of students. Within the setting of my dissertation research, there are many American, British, and Australian consulting firms with local offices in Asia, together with many local firms headquartered in Asian countries. In addition, there are freelance individual consultants who, compared to large firms, offer slightly less expensive services. In my dissertation, I present the data that I collected on two different consulting firms: Icarus, a large firm headquartered in an English-speaking country, and Sparta, a smaller Vietnamese firm.

Icarus

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 discuss the work done by consultants at a large international consulting firm, Icarus. Icarus turns a profit by selling its college admissions consulting services to international students planning to apply to universities and colleges in English-speaking countries. Headquartered in an English-speaking country, the firm operates twenty-eight offices in twenty-three countries, on multiple continents. My observations took place during many online and in-person meetings between consultants and clients in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. My interviews reveal data on customers primarily from these three regions, with Icarus' clients coming from Australia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, India, and China.

At the time of my data collection, because almost all of the students using Icarus' services were teenagers, their parents signed a contract with Icarus to purchase admissions consulting services on their behalf. The contract explained that consultants would meet with parents and students to explain the many steps involved in the college application process, as well as the cultural and systemic differences among educational systems around the world, various academic exams, standardized tests, and extracurricular activities that can help create a successful college application. During these meetings, consultants also spent considerable time asking their students about their academic strengths, personal interests, aspirations, personal histories, and future goals. All of this information helped consultants identify the best academic pathways for their students and advise them on the specific majors and schools they should target. It was also used as material and inspiration for the multiple essays that students needed to write for their college applications.

Every individual student whose parents signed a contract with Icarus was assigned a team of employees, each with a different skill set: a general consultant responsible for communicating with the student and parents during the application process; a specialized strategist responsible for meeting with the student every eight weeks and outlining general directions for the college application; and a few specialized mentors responsible for guiding the student in various fields of extracurricular activities, depending on their specific needs. During their work hours, consultants also exchanged emails with strategists, mentors, and their supervisors to discuss the work that they must do together as a team regarding each individual application. For each student, consultants discussed the number of years the student had until application season, the number of extracurricular activities the student was assigned by the strategist and the mentor, the direction of the application (that is, whether the student's activities and current resume truly matched the student's desired college major, and if the answer was no, what could be done to improve the match, and so on). Consultants also discussed the student's expectations – their "target" and "reach" schools – to determine whether additional academic and extracurricular efforts could help increase the chance of the student realistically getting admitted to these schools, given their qualities and abilities. When certain schools seemed out of reach, consultants discussed ways to persuade the student and their parents to lower their academic expectations, aiming for less competitive colleges in the application process.

Chapter 3 of my dissertation describes consultants' actions and reactions when their relationship with customers, which consultants had expected to be a solely professional relationship, turned out to be much more complex, personal, and demanding than they had ever imagined. Chapter 4 of my dissertation describes the professional aspect of consulting work at Icarus, where consultants tried to translate cultural elements of the top academic institutions in the English-speaking world to their Asian customers. More information on each of these chapters is presented in the next section, "An Overview of the Findings."

Sparta

Chapter 5 of my dissertation continues my exploration of consulting work by focusing on the workplace experiences of salespeople at a second admissions consulting firm, Sparta, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to Icarus, Sparta is a much smaller and more localized firm, headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Besides its admissions consulting services, Sparta offers English, Math, and Computer Programming classes to high school students to increase its revenue. The firm is headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and had thirty-nine offices in major cities across Vietnam. My research at Sparta focused on its Admissions Consulting department, and particularly the salespeople within this department. In the Admissions Consulting department at Sparta, salespeople were responsible for introducing consulting services to potential customers, via numerous conversations on the phone and in person, and then signing contracts with the ones who decided to purchase Sparta's consulting services.

My data on Sparta described how salespeople at Sparta faced an extraordinarily high level of pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. During a global pandemic, very few parents considered sending their teenage children to foreign countries, and Vietnamese parents were no exception. There were deep concerns and fear among the general public in Vietnam concerning the length of international travel restrictions, the personal safety and well-being of Vietnamese citizens in foreign countries, and the strong objection against masks and vaccines raised by extreme groups in Western countries. Salespeople at Sparta, all of whom were assigned monthly sales targets that they were expected to meet, faced great difficulties in trying to sign new contracts with potential customers. Even reaching potential customers on the phone proved difficult due to nonexistent interest from parents. These poor sales results led to poor revenues for the Admissions Consulting department at Sparta. To worsen the firm's overall financial standing, Sparta had to close all its English, Math, and Computer Programming classes due to strict social distancing policies issued by the Vietnamese government. These classes had contributed significantly to Sparta's total revenues prior to the pandemic. All in all, Sparta was facing a dire situation. There were ongoing discussions of downsizing and restructuring at Sparta, which would result in a significant number of layoffs. Many workers in multiple departments at Sparta had already quit by themselves, and for the people who managed to stay through this difficult period, their salaries were at risk of being significantly reduced.

Chapter 5 of my dissertation explores the ways in which salespeople at Sparta faced this tremendous pressure at work. More information on this chapter is presented in the next section, "An Overview of the Findings."

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

In this section, I provide an overview of the findings in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 – the three empirical essays of my dissertation. Specifically, in Chapter 3, I use the lens of paradox theory (Schneider, Bullinger, & Brandl, 2021) to conceptualize the multifaceted relationship between service workers and their customers. In Chapter 4, I describe a process during which "accessibility in higher education" was translated as an institutional concept (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). In Chapter 5, I show how workers, while trying to mentally escape work-related pressure, can enact social connections and cultural activities at work with the use of certain physical objects (Shortt & Izak, 2021).

In Chapter 3, my findings describe the tension that consultants at Icarus faced in their relationship with clients. This tension resulted from the difference between the consultants' and the clients' expectations concerning the relationship. Specifically, consultants at Icarus, as well as the firm itself, wanted personal boundaries, professionalism, and efficiency in all daily interactions and relationships with clients. However, the clients – both the teenage students using consulting services and their parents, who were paying for the services – expected more than professionalism. Icarus' clients wanted to see expressions of personal care, intimate friendship, and social bonding in their interactions with consultants. For example, remembering a student's birthday, favorite food, or favorite movie would serve as evidence that consultants cared about the student. As a result, consultants struggled to navigate the ongoing tension between their own need for professionalism and the clients' demands for care and intimacy in their daily work. In my conceptualization of this ongoing tension, I explain how an incomplete solution for this problem might demonstrate how "indeterminacy" takes place in paradox theory. The paradox, in this case, is the ongoing tension between intimacy and professionalism in the relationship between consultants and their clients. While the management at Icarus readily accepts this tension and actively prepares to face it by arranging a queue of consultants who take turns facing demanding clients, the consultants themselves struggle with attempting to satisfy customer demands while simultaneously trying to protect their own personal boundaries, eventually becoming exhausted. This means that the organization as a whole only arrives at a long-term accommodation of the two elements of a paradox by accepting a perpetual splitting of these two elements at the micro level.

In Chapter 4, my findings describe the process in which consultants at Icarus translated the accessibility of elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world to their clients in Asia. Within the field of education, "accessibility" alone is an institutionally supported concept across various regions of the world, with numerous policies in different countries emphasizing access to education for marginalized groups such as students from low-income backgrounds, ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ students, mentally and physically challenged students, and so on. In Asia, where education is associated with social mobility, the accessibility of the top academic institutions in the English-speaking world has become highly idealized among the public. This idealization of accessibility is supported by mainstream media with countless stories about Asian students from average backgrounds receiving offers of admissions from the Ivy League. During my study, marketing practices in the admissions consulting industry also contributed to this idealization, with websites of consulting firms emphasizing the number of offers their clients had received from elite academic institutions. As a result, most Asian parents came to purchase consulting services at Icarus with an overly optimistic mindset concerning their children's chances of attending the Ivy League. To save clients from disappointment and bitterness at the end of the admissions process, and to save the firm itself from negative feedback and reviews, consultants at Icarus tried their best to lower customer expectations concerning the final admissions results. Consultants achieved this objective by employing a highly purposive process during which they broke down a concept – the accessibility of elite academic institutions – into several building blocks (the selectivity of institutions, the competitiveness of admissions, and the quality of education), and then translated each of these building blocks using calculated frames that clearly showed their clients how inaccessible elite institutions were. By detailing this translation process, I show how a purposive translation of institutional concepts might be performed by organizational actors trying to achieve their objective, and the societal implications of this translation.

In Chapter 5, I present the preliminary findings resulting from my initial attempts of data analysis. My preliminary findings describe the ways in which salespeople at Sparta – a small Vietnamese consulting firm – faced work-related pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic. When local parents, as potential clients, expressed zero interest in sending their children to study in foreign countries, salespeople at Sparta were unable to reach the sales targets that their company had assigned to them. The pressure from upper management, the threat of being laid off, and significant decreases in salaries were clearly felt by all salespeople at Sparta. However, a surprisingly nonchalant attitude could be seen among many workers in the sales unit. My preliminary findings show that during this difficult period, workers in the sales unit used physical objects to enact social connections and cultural activities. These social connections and cultural activities took place at the workplace, but their purposes, as well as the physical objects connected to them, had little to do with work. For example, some workers bought flowers for themselves, displayed these flowers on their desks, and chatted about stories of romantic courtship involving other workers. In another example, many workers became excited about preparing the materials for a traditional costume contest organized as part of the celebration of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. Even when it was not lunch or dinner time, workers often consumed various snacks together and chatted about life and food. My preliminary findings shows that the social connections and cultural activities enacted with the use of non-work physical objects helped workers face work-related pressure in two ways: a) compartmentalizing work-related pressure by separating that pressure from non-work activities, and b) downplaying work-related pressure by putting that pressure in perspective – in comparison to larger and more long-term pictures of life. In presenting these preliminary findings, I strive to conceptualize how the use of physical objects at the workplace might help workers enact a socio-cultural life outside of work, and how various elements of the socio-cultural world might help workers face work-related pressure.

CHAPTER 2

Methods of data collection and analysis

Personally, I like to think of ethnography as equal parts science, art, and craft. Those who see ethnography as a kind of science highlight the fact that ethnographic fieldwork is conceived and conducted systematically. We are concerned with standards of reliability and accuracy, and we contribute to comparative areas of research in order to advance theory. To see ethnography as art recognizes the human— indeed, passionately human—ways in which fieldwork produces knowledge inter-subjectively. In many ways, ethnographic success and failure hangs in the balance of how well relationships with fellow humans are established and nurtured. Approaching ethnography as a craft calls attention to a simple, but profound, fact: while we always get better at doing ethnography, we never perfect it. Like the luthier or the winemaker, the only way for an ethnographer to improve is by constantly honing their craft.

(Bielo, 2015, p. 31-32)

In this chapter, I detail my methods of data collection and analysis. I first describe the ethnographic data collection for this dissertation, which took place at the offices of two different admissions consulting firms in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I then detail the processes of data analysis for the three empirical essays – Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION

My ethnographic data collection at two consulting firms, Icarus and Sparta, lasted for thirteen months, from January 2020 to April 2021. My methods included "hanging out" (Browne & McBride, 2015) as I was seeking to break down barriers, gain acceptance, and nurture relationships with my target research participants – highly busy workers with little time for interviews and little motivation to fill out surveys. Moreover, given the location, many of the interactions occurred in a mix of the local language and English. Ethnography allowed me to adopt a flexible research design, one that embraced serendipitous or chance encounters when seeking to gain access to my research participants and foster feelings of trust in my interactions with them.

During my thirteen months at Icarus and Sparta, I observed various types of meetings that consultants and salespeople had among themselves, with their managers and supervisors, and with their customers. When interviewing, I first conducted open-ended interviews asking consultants and salespeople about their overall challenges at work – these challenges sometimes included internal politics and conflicts with colleagues. Later in the interview process, when workers had revealed topics that they themselves perceived as important, I conducted semi-structured interviews asking further questions about these important topics. For example, I asked consultants about their approach in facing difficult and demanding clients, and I asked salespeople about the pressure they felt when chasing after pre-assigned sales targets. Additionally, I collected archival data in the form of electronic chat threads in which consultants and salespeople discussed, in their internal online system, how to handle certain requests from their clients or solve specific problems. To build rapport and observe consultants and salespeople in their natural, informal states of being, I attended lunches and dinners with these workers, listened to their life stories outside of work, and took part in many of their social activities such as celebrations of traditional holidays or farewell parties. Lastly, I conducted participant observation by a) helping consultants edit documents related to the college application process, and b) acting as a potential mentor to students who wanted to learn about academic research at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Thus, my data included electronic chat threads, interview transcripts, participant observations, and field notes with "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 2008) of my own personal observations.

DATA ANALYSIS

Forming Significant Categories of Data

In line with grounded theory research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), I identified significant categories of content in my data through a cyclic reading and re-reading of the data (electronic chat threads, interview transcripts, and observation notes). For example, among all major categories I identified in my data on consultants at Icarus, there was one that clearly demonstrated workers' affective experiences at work. The category – "exhaustion" – was full of words describing workers' feelings of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (for example: "exhausted," "mental breakdown," "tired," "stressed," "emotionally overwhelmed," "very little sleep," and so forth). Descriptions of exhaustion, as well as related events that may have caused it, constituted a major part of my data for Chapter 3. In another example, a major category of data that I identified was "cultural values" as discussed by consultants in their conversations with clients. This category consisted of words describing the qualities that consultants viewed as necessary and expected for successful college applicants from an American perspective, such as "leadership" and "uniqueness." Conversations on "cultural values" constituted a major part of my data for Chapter 4.

Examining the Tasks Not Listed in the Written Contract in Chapter 3

While examining data on consultants' affective experiences at Icarus, "exhaustion" was revealed as a major category, so I began seeking the causes of and explanations for this exhaustion in interviews and observation notes. As I examined the tasks performed by consultants, I divided them into two groups: (1) tasks that belonged to consultants' official responsibilities – as listed in the written contract with clients, and (2) tasks that were not listed in the written contract. Interestingly, the number of tasks in the second group was much higher. I examined this group more carefully and identified two sub-groups based on the purposes of the tasks. These represented activities in what appeared to be opposite directions: (a) building closeness and personal connections with clients; or (b) keeping distance from clients and upholding the terms in the written contract. For examples of the tasks performed by consultants, please refer to Table 1 below.

Types of tasks	**Examples of tasks**
Within official responsibilities (Listed in the written contract)	Explain to students and parents the college application process in the United States Research application requirements for students planning to major in Arts Discuss a student's academic capabilities with the student's strategist
Outside of official responsibilities (Not listed in the written contract)	
Building closeness with clients	Take students out for lunch and dinner Chat with students about romantic relationships Listen to a mother's complaints about her son's rebellious attitude towards her
Keeping distance from clients	Explain to a father why Icarus is not responsible for publicly promoting an event that his son is organizing Ask a mother to stop sending text messages at 10 PM Explain to a mother why it is impossible to pick up the phone while in another meeting

Table 1: Examples of the tasks performed by consultants

At this stage of my analysis, it became clear that many of the tasks that consultants had to perform outside of their official responsibilities involved their relationship and daily interactions with their clients. Thus, I focused on the "conditions and consequences" (Manicas, 2009, p. 3) or "antecedents and consequences" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 110) of every action that consultants took towards their clients. By examining the antecedents and consequences of each action, I was able to categorize various types of actions that either a) satisfied demands for personal connection and intimacy, or b) rebuilt personal boundaries in the relationship between consultants and their clients. I detail these actions and their consequences in Chapter 3.

Mapping the Translation of Admissions Elements in Chapter 4

Moving away from the affective experiences of consultants at Icarus, when I examined the data on topics that were closely related to the college admissions process, the majority of my data revealed conversations in which consultants translated to their clients the "reality" that not all good students from Asia would be admitted by elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world. In their explanations, consultants used various categories of information such as "cultural values," "financial background," "social class," "the level of achievement," "the measurability of achievement," and so forth. As I examined the list of categories, I attempted to identify the possible connections among them. I started by questioning the purpose of every individual category. Specifically, I questioned how each category could help establish the "reality" that consultants tried to translate – the "reality" that not all good students from Asia would be admitted by elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world.

As I performed the above examination, I discovered that some categories served the same purpose. For example, “cultural values,” “financial background,” and “social class” all served the purpose of reinforcing the selectivity of academic institutions. Meanwhile, “the level of achievement” and “the measurability of achievement” served the purpose of reinforcing the competitiveness of admissions. I grouped the categories serving the same purpose into one element. For example, “cultural values,” “financial background,” and “social class” belonged to the element “the selectivity of academic institutions.” “The level of achievement” and “the measurability of achievement” belonged to the element “the competitiveness of admissions.” Using this method, a third element, “the quality of education,” was formed during the analysis. For an overview of the three elements to be translated, please refer to Table 2 below. I detail these three elements in Chapter 4.

Elements	**Categories**	**Examples of data**
The selectivity of institutions	Cultural values	“leadership,” “entrepreneurial spirit,” “uniqueness,” “stand out from the crowd”
	Financial background	“total family income,” “expected contribution from your parents,” “wealthy families”
	Social class	“her parents are doctors,” “social connections to successful businesspeople,” “attending prestigious high schools,” “social status”
The competitiveness of admissions	The level of achievement	“perfect SAT scores,” “first prize in national competitions,” “first prize in international competitions”
	The measurability of achievement	“measurable,” “you need numbers,” “quantify everything,” “a funding

		event that raised 12,658 Australian dollars”
The quality of education	The nuances of the ranking reports for academic institutions	“general ranking,” “ranked by majors and fields of study,” “ranking doesn’t mean everything”
	The fit between students and institutions	“your daughter is suited for big cities,” “research universities don’t care about undergraduate students,” “your son might prefer smaller classes at liberal arts colleges”

Table 2: The three elements to be translated

Identifying the Role of Physical Objects in Chapter 5

Chapter 5 offers my preliminary analysis of the data on salespeople at Sparta, the second consulting firm. My very first attempt at data analysis revealed an overwhelming presence of categories of data on non-work physical objects such as flowers and food, as well as conversations and activities that did not revolve around work. This was an interesting discovery, as it was somewhat unusual to see such a strong presence of non-work objects and non-work activities in my data on people at work. As I was examining the various categories of data on these non-work objects and activities, I started to question the purpose of these physical objects. I conducted focused coding specifically to assign a definite meaning or purpose to every object as its usage was showed in the data. With this focused coding, I discovered various links between the purpose of these objects and the non-work activities and conversations that took place among workers. In general, the physical objects helped workers start and sustain non-work activities and conversations. For example, the consuming of food created an opportunity for workers to gather and talk about daily life outside of work, and flowers on one's desk would serve as an excuse to chat about romantic dating.

At this point, after I had achieved an understanding of the use of non-work physical objects, I started to question the non-work activities and conversations that took place so frequently among the workers. I examined the data from my observation notes carefully, focusing on the contexts of these activities and conversations. I recognized that when workers talked about non-work topics or participated in non-work activities, my observation notes recorded that these workers mostly seemed calm, nonchalant, and even happy, despite my own notes detailing the difficulties surrounding Sparta as a company during the COVID-19 pandemic, and my recordings of the occasions in which salespeople were harshly criticized by their managers for poor sales figures. With this realization, I decided to conduct another round of focused coding to understand workers' experience of pressure during this time. In my focused coding, for every non-work conversation and activity, I asked, "How did workers discuss pressure, or the absence of pressure, amidst this particular conversation or activity?" In this second round of coding, I discovered that from workers' viewpoint, the primary benefit of non-work conversations and activities was to help them actively escape work-related pressure. Specifically, my data revealed two major ways in which workers actively escaped work-related pressure: workers either discussed their work-related pressure as isolated and separated from non-work activities, or compared their work-related pressure to other activities, events, and life stories that they perceived as more significant, thus downplaying their own pressure at work.

In short, with my initial attempts to analyze the data on salespeople at Sparta, I discovered that non-work physical objects helped workers start and sustain non-work conversations and activities, and these non-work conversations and activities in turn helped workers face pressure at work. I detail these preliminary findings in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 3

The realm of the ridiculous: Straddling intimacy and professionalism in admissions consulting

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present my study on the relationship between service providers and their customers at an admissions consulting firm called Icarus. My findings in this chapter describe a tension in the relationship between consultants at Icarus and their clients – both the students using consulting services and their parents, who paid for the services. Icarus' clients demanded personal care and associated this care with intimacy and personal connections. For example, knowing a child's favorite types of food and movies would serve as evidence that one truly cared about the child. Meanwhile, Icarus as a firm prioritized efficiency and the professional nature of its consulting services, and the consultants desired personal boundaries in their relationships with customers. The consultants at Icarus joined the firm expecting to do only consulting work. However, the clients' fierce demands for intimacy and personal connections became a challenge that the consultants had to learn to navigate on their own.

In conceptualizing the challenge faced by consultants at Icarus, I employ the lens of organizational paradox. Paradox in organizational contexts is defined as a tension created when opposing elements or tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity through reflection or interaction (Ford & Backoff, 1988). In my study, I conceptualize intimacy and professionalism as two elements forming the paradoxical tension faced by consultants in their relationship with clients. Viewing these consultants as service workers, I ask: "How do service workers' affective experiences and relationships with customers affect organizational paradox?" While answering this question, I contribute to the literature on paradox by describing the process in which individual workers came to accept the indeterminacy of a paradox they had been experiencing after trying, unsuccessfully, to accommodate each element of the paradox in isolation, and realizing that there was no definite solution to the situation. In the next sections, I present my critique of the paradox literature, focusing on the missing affective experiences and human relationships in the literature on organizational paradox. I follow this discussion with a description of my research settings and methods of data collection and analysis. I then present my findings on the process of accepting indeterminacy among service workers. I end this chapter with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Definition of Organizational Paradox

In the management literature, a paradox is a "persistent" tension (Cunha & Clegg, 2018, p.15) between "interdependent elements" (Smith et al., 2017). It is most important to note that paradoxical tensions tend to persist; they cannot be resolved, but they can be recognized, understood, and accommodated (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). While many other dominant organizational theories are based on the belief that opposites are temporary and can be unified, resolved, or ignored, paradox theory challenges this belief by presenting co-existing and interwoven contradictions – or paradoxes – as pervasive, persistent, and inherent in organizational contexts (Keller & Lewis, 2016). Every paradox constitutes an inseparable whole, where individual elements cannot be fully described in isolation without considering the state of other entangled elements (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

Empirical studies have often examined paradoxical tensions as caused by "competing demands" (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016; Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). To illustrate this point, I use Smith's study (2014) on senior leaders at a Fortune 500 firm. The "paradoxical tensions" in this study were described as competing demands for limited resources faced by senior executives. Smith (2014, p. 1607) wrote:

> Senior leaders viewed existing products and innovation as contradictory, yet both necessary for long-term success. They noted inherent contradictions within each issue impervious to resolution. For example, leaders pointed to short-term and long-term paradoxes in allocating resources. Senior leaders wanted to achieve performance in the long term, but doing so depended on short-term success. Investing in the innovation often involved short-term costs for long-term benefits.

The paradox here was shaped by the competing long-term and short-term demands, e.g. "Are you better off breaking with the past and going with something different in development and marketing or not?" (p. 1601), and thus making "trade-offs" was a vital part of the decision-making process that was viewed by senior executives and the author as "paradoxical." One general manager noted, "The trick was always how to allocate money" (p. 1601) while another leader said, "The tradeoffs were fairly headcount based" (p. 1601). What makes the tension "paradoxical" in Smith's study (2014) is the fact that the firm had limited resources ("money," "headcount," etc.), and thus there were "trade-offs" to make, ensuring that the two competing demands, short-term performance versus long-term success, were strategically accommodated.

It is also worth noting that the "tension" in paradox theory could be caused by the competing elements forming the situation itself, and not necessarily by the actions performed to navigate the situation. To illustrate this point, I use Schneider and colleagues' study (2020) on frontline employees at a fashion retail company. In their interactions with customers, these employees faced two problems. The first was limited resources: limited time, energy, and capacity to respond to all customer requests. The second problem was that numerous customers expected high-quality service, as if these frontline employees had been personal fashion consultants at bridal salons. The paradox, in this case, lies in the competition between the two elements forming the situation that the frontline employees were facing: 1) limited resources versus 2) customer expectations. This situation is similar to my own research setting, in which the consultants at Icarus struggled to navigate the tension between two elements: 1) their own limited resources versus 2) clients' demands for care, personal connections, and intimacy. In the next sections, I present my critique of the paradox literature and explain how my study will fill the gaps in the existing literature on organizational paradox.

The Need to Study Organizational Paradox as Daily Pressure Felt by Workers

My critique of the paradox literature focuses on the lack of studies exploring paradox as daily pressures, real-life burdens, and exhausting demands that need to be continually navigated by individual workers at the micro level. Indeed, empirical studies on organizational paradoxes tend to say little about people's daily life experiences and emotions, choosing to focus instead on rational economic principles, market logic, abstract rationales, and decisions made by top executives. For example, Smith's study (2014) discusses resource trade-offs in the form of decisions made by top executives. Schneider and colleagues (2020) present data on customers' demands and workers' responses, but the authors examine this data from a rational perspective, seeking to squarely align workers' perceptions of and reactions to customer requests with the company's policies, economic principles, and industry practices. In another example, Pollach and colleagues (2021), while analyzing the corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports published by American banks, describe how banking industry practices and principles of ethics shape paradoxical tensions between the self-proclaimed ethical behaviors of the banks and their responsibility for the 2008 financial crisis. However, the authors do not mention banking workers' daily lived experiences and personal reflections on the financial crisis as part of the banks' self-presentations and communication of guilt. Also using an abstract framework, Berti and Simpson (2019) argue that paradox theory should pay more attention to power and domination effects as opposed to individuals' free will in facing paradoxical tensions. Other studies on paradox (Halgin et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019) also focus on firms' behaviors and industry changes without mentioning workers' daily experiences of those macro-level behaviors and changes. Overall, the literature on paradox has displayed a bias for abstract and rational mechanisms while neglecting the intricacies of the human condition, or people's lived experiences.

Objecting to this bias, Pradies and colleagues (2021) make a conceptual argument for more studies on the lived experiences by stating that many organizational paradoxes can become salient due to aspects of human life that have little to do with work. The authors discuss, for example, how mothers try to work from home while navigating the paradoxical tension generated by two competing demands: (1) their responsibilities as a worker at work and (2) their children's continuous expectations when their mothers are physically present at home. Similarly, Padavic and colleagues (2020) argue for more studies on the "emotional landscape" in people's experiences of organizational paradox.

Pamphile (2021) argues that we need to examine how workers "relate" to other people, seeking support and encouragement in friendships and other types of personal relationships while trying to navigate tensions generated by conflicting organizational goals and personal values. Many other scholars (e.g., Jarrett & Vince, 2017; Schad et al., 2016; Thompson & Willmott, 2016) agree that a focus on emotional experiences and affective dynamics will help us fully understand the human factors that shape people's responses to organizational paradox. Overall, there is conceptual agreement on the need for more empirical studies on how organizational paradox is felt by individual workers as daily pressures, real-life burdens, and exhausting demands that must constantly be navigated.

Few scholars have responded to these conceptual calls for more studies on the daily experiences of workers in light of organizational paradox. One exception is Branicki, Kalfa, and Brammer (2021), who explore how organizational responses to the Covid-19 pandemic are shaped by the ways Human Resources (HR) managers process a paradox of two competing demands: (1) protecting workers' safety and (2) maintaining economic activities. In their methods of analysis, the authors examine "routines common among HR managers… that shaped their response to the tensions experienced" and "interactions that HR managers had, with a particular focus on who they were interacting with, as well as the consequences of these interactions as they pertained to the organizational response to the Covid-19 pandemic" (Branicki, Kalfa, & Brammer, 2021, p. 416). However, even in this study by Branicki and colleagues (2021), there remains a lack of in-depth exploration of HR managers' daily affective experiences, such as stress, exhaustion, and other emotions during the pandemic. My study will fill this gap in the paradox literature by exploring how clients' demands became a burden that service workers must bear at the consulting firm Icarus and how feelings of pressure, stress, and exhaustion resulting from this burden were expressed daily.

Workers' Affective Experiences and The Indeterminacy of Paradox

I argue that workers' affective experiences matter greatly in studies on organizational paradox because these experiences reflect how organizational tensions might be solved or left unsolved by workers at the micro level. This is important because in the rare management studies in which workers' affective experiences of tensions are discussed, they tend to be described as solvable challenges instead of insoluble and persistent tensions. This reveals a tendency to view difficult affective experiences as temporary challenges that workers can eventually overcome. For example, Wright and colleagues (2021) present a study on healthcare workers at the Emergency Department (ED) of a large public hospital in a major Australian metropolis during the Ebola outbreaks in 2014. As the authors report, patients in the ED often had serious injuries or illness, but were also sometimes victims of domestic violence, victims of rape, alcoholics, people with dementia who assaulted their nurses, as well as people who had tested positive for the Ebola virus. The study focused on the various emotions experienced by healthcare workers when they faced two tensions: (1) the tension between social inclusion – an institutional belief supposedly applying to all patients, no matter their circumstances – and finite organizational resources, and (2) the tension between social inclusion and safety, as the ED was threatened by the Ebola virus. As the authors showed in this study, "moral emotions" such as empathy and compassion eventually helped hospital workers control feelings of fear in an effort to be inclusive towards all patients, thus successfully upholding the institutional belief of social inclusion in their work practice.

In showing the solvability of workers' affective experiences of organizational tensions, Wright and colleagues (2021) play down the possibility that difficult affective experiences might persist and therefore prevent a solution to these tensions. Indeed, the belief in the solvability of tensions can be seen in many studies on organizational paradox, particularly ones that focus on organizational strategy. Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2013) study organizations facing competing strategic demands at the macro level. The authors conclude that there are four types of organizational responses to paradoxical tensions caused by competing demands. These four types of responses are: a) "Suppressing" (prioritizing one element over the other element of a paradox), b) "Opposing" (Engaging in active confrontation that polarizes paradoxical elements), c) "Splitting" (separating and compartmentalizing the two elements, trying to process one element at a time), and d) "Adjusting" (accommodating both elements simultaneously). The authors argue that "Adjusting" is the only type of response that leads to long-term relief from paradoxical tensions, while the other three types of response only lead to short-term relief from tensions. Because paradoxical tensions are persistent, in order to achieve long-term success, organizations need to arrive at "Adjusting." The authors argue that there are many ways to get to "Adjusting," and organizations may try other types of response ("Opposing" or "Splitting, for example) before realizing that "Adjusting" – simultaneously accommodating both elements – is the only right course of action because it is the only response that leads to long-term relief from tensions.

Some scholars would disagree with this conclusion on the possibility of long-term relief from tension, or the belief that the two elements of a paradoxical tension can always be simultaneously accommodated. For example, Wenzel and colleagues (2019) describe a situation of insoluble, persistent tensions felt by workers in their daily work practice. The authors present a study on a state-run German prison hosting male youths between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, who had been sentenced for a variety of crimes, from shoplifting to rape and murder. The government supervisor formulated two main goals for the prison's operations: (1) punishment, which involved tasks such as locking inmates away and maintaining security according to strict regulations, and (2) rehabilitation, which implied tasks such as therapeutic treatments and day-to-day care. The government supervisor issued a directive stating that "all employees" were to contribute to the achievement of "both goals at all times." The prison director passed on this directive to all employees, simply asking every one of them to fulfill both punishment and rehabilitation in their daily work. This vague instruction sowed the seeds for the experience of paradoxical tensions among prison employees – some of whom were correctional officers and others were therapists. Correctional officers advocated for "discipline," "social detachment," "authority," and "distance" in their daily interactions with the inmates. These officers argued that punishment was the basis of all prison activities and interactions. Meanwhile, therapists argued for "nurture," "social attachment," "self-determination," and "empathy" in viewing the inmates as human beings capable of self-development. These arguments cast rehabilitation as essential for helping the inmates return to acceptable behavior in day-to-day interactions, but also opening them up to punishment by correctional officers. The authors show how the tension between punishment and rehabilitation led to countless daily meetings and discussions in which the two groups of employees “combat[ted] each other” to arrive at agreements on “how to deal with the inmates.” As a result, the prevailing paradoxical tension was “reproduced” every day.

While Wenzel and colleagues (2019) do not elaborate on workers’ affective experiences in their study, I argue that their findings suggest a fascinating yet unacknowledged situation: organizational paradoxes stemming from interpersonal relationships. An important vessel for paradoxical tensions in the above study was the relationship between prisoners and prison employees. In their meetings, employees debated how to approach their relationship with the inmates: whether compassionate, nurturing, and empathetical behaviors should be prioritized, or a distant, authoritarian approach should be applied. This tension between rehabilitation and punishment suggests, in my view, a tension between two opposing perspectives: (1) a compassionate, empathetical, and nurturing perspective and (2) a pragmatic, detached, and perhaps more “professional” perspective, regarding a human relationship. While prison employees discussed “how to deal with the inmates,” they were discussing the nature and direction of their relationship with the inmates. These workers were trying to answer unspoken questions such as “Where is this relationship heading?” and “What is appropriate and what is inappropriate in this relationship?” This tension, as exhibited in the relationship between workers and the beneficiaries of their work, is not widely studied in the management literature, and quite minimally examined in the paradox literature, despite what Pradies and colleagues (2021) have argued – many organizational paradoxes become more salient because workers are humans with feelings.

Part of the challenge is that, in general, the literature is missing clear descriptions of the micro-level processes through which workers come to recognize that paradoxical tensions are persistent and possibly insoluble. In their study, Wenzel and colleagues (2019) mention an important finding: employees at the German youth prison eventually accepted the unresolved tension between punishment and rehabilitation but nested it in "indeterminacy," a state of reaching temporary rather than permanent agreements in responding to paradox. One prison employee highlighted this "indeterminacy":

> From the morning to the evening, we constantly try to figure out how we can get things solved and clarified. But once you turn around, it was wrong again or a new issue emerged… There's at least one conflict every day here.
>
> (Wenzel et al., 2019, p. 63)

Thus, all negotiated agreements in this case were temporary at best. However, the authors do not elaborate on what factors led to this surrender and recognition of "indeterminacy" among prison employees. In general, even though the overall literature on organizational paradox agrees and stresses that paradoxes are persistent (Fairhurst et al., 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016), no studies have elaborated on the micro-level factors and mechanisms behind workers' acceptance of indeterminacy, especially considering their daily affective experiences and relationships with other people. In other words, no studies have explored the mechanisms behind the recognition of "indeterminacy" from workers' perspectives. My study attempts to fill this gap in the literature of organizational paradox by showing how workers' affective experiences in interpersonal relationships, especially feelings of being overwhelmed and exhaustion, might lead to their acceptance of the indeterminacy of paradoxical tensions.

Organizational Paradox in Service Work

The tension between punishment and rehabilitation as described above by Wenzel and colleagues (2019) is widely recognized and studied in the criminology literature. Several works in the field of criminology (e.g. Crewe, 2011; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2019; Liebling, 2011; Nylander et al., 2011; Santorso, 2021) have discussed the relationship between prison workers and inmates, focusing on how prison workers experience and respond to the opposing demands for both "nurture" and "discipline" in their interactions with inmates. However, in the field of management, the interpersonal relationship between workers and the beneficiaries of their work – a vital element of service work – remains unexplored, especially in paradox studies. The service industry provides potentially rich data on the daily experiences of workers, and yet few management studies have attempted to elaborate on how service workers experience organizational paradox within their relationships with customers. Even fewer management studies have explored how tensions in this kind of relationship might be shaped by customers' demands. Meanwhile, in a conceptual argument, Gaim and Clegg (2021) suggest that in studying organizational paradox, we should perhaps put the focus not only on the organization itself, but also on the demands exhibited by its customers and beneficiaries, and how these demands shape paradoxical tensions. In their argument, the authors ask a provocative question: "What if we start from others' demands?"

One aspect that has not been mentioned in the paradox literature is how "others' demands" can sometimes be unreasonable, which tends to be an issue in service work, especially work that involves the maintenance of intimate relationships. In the field of sociology, Ehrenreich and colleagues (2003) discuss the profession of nannies as a result of the commodification of personal relationships: many parents hire nannies rather than sending their children to daycare precisely because they want their children to have intimate, caring relationships with the nannies who care for them. On the one hand, a nanny may carry out the work of care, and thus enter into a sort of intimacy with the children, but the caring engenders no mutual obligations, generates no entry into a community, and guarantees no long-term relationship – just payment. On the other hand, the authors argue, a nanny may care for a child over many years, spending many more hours with that child than the legal parent, but should the employer decide to terminate the relationship, the worker will have no further right to see the child. As far as the employers are concerned, money expresses the full extent of their obligation to the nannies. I see a paradoxical tension in the demand for nannies to be caring all the time and yet able to terminate their relationship with a child as soon as the contract ends. This demand denies the depth of the nannies' feelings for the children, as well as the human connection between the children and their nannies.

Underscoring the role of human connection in service work, Hochschild (1983) shows that in the airline industry, the friendliness exhibited by flight attendants as a commodity is both expected and demanded by passengers; this friendliness is thus advertised aggressively by airlines – using billboards and posters with flight attendants showing big smiles – as part of the purchased service. Hochschild (1983) describes how one flight attendant spent seven years fighting against the customer satisfaction survey implemented by his airlines, not because this flight attendant lacked enthusiasm at work or did not want to act friendly towards customers, but simply because he was not able to act friendly towards seven hundred people – many of whom were impolite – every single day. I argue that a paradoxical tension exists in the daily work of flight attendants: for every individual passenger, the demand for friendliness is understandable, but this demand becomes overwhelming with the number of passengers on every flight, as it means that each flight attendant might need to be friendly toward seven hundred people a day.

In the above study on flight attendants, Hochschild's contribution includes the ideas of "emotion management" and "emotional labor." "Emotion management" is a reference to how people actively shape and direct their feelings, to accommodate the societal norms about the appropriate type and amount of feeling that should be experienced in a particular situation. In other words, emotion management occurs as people work to accommodate societal norms. This work involves attempts to: a) align privately felt emotions with normative expectations, or b) bring the outward expression of emotion in line with normative expectations. Hochschild (1983) refers to the first process as "deep acting" and the second as "surface acting," aiming to convey that the first involves an attempt to change what is privately felt, while the second focuses on what is publicly displayed. For Hochschild (1983), however, emotion management is essentially a private act, influenced by broad cultural and social norms about what is appropriate to feel and express, but not directly regulated by other people or organizations. "Emotional labor," by contrast, is Hochschild's term for this process when it moves from the private realm to the public world of work. Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display," calling attention to how people manage their own feelings as a way to create a particular emotional state in another person (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Hochschild (1983) sees emotion management and emotional labor as increasingly relevant in the service industry, arguing that in many types of service work, the success of the work depends heavily on workers' ability to manage their emotions.

Since Hochschild (1983), the topic of emotional labor in particular has been examined with many empirical studies and interesting debates. For example, there is zero evidence for a positive correlation between store employees' display of positive emotions towards customers and store sales, according to an empirical study by Sutton and Rafaeli (1988). In a few studies that suggest emotional labor can help increase sales, there is also strong evidence that emotional labor leads to burnout and high levels of stress for service workers and salespeople (Han et al., 2018; Klein, 2021). In addition, there are conceptual arguments that companies' requirement for emotional labor is an unfair labor practice from a justice standpoint, because employees who are asked to perform emotional labor tend to be undervalued and undermined by organizational policies, and disrespected by customers in daily interactions (Grandey, Rupp, & Brice, 2015). Overall, while the positive effect of emotional labor in the service industry might be observable, its negative effect and the challenges it brings to workers and organizations are also clearly evidenced (Carlson et al., 2012; Montgomery et al., 2006), particularly when the work context involves prolonged relationships and frequent interactions between service workers and their customers, such as the work of teachers (Akın et al., 2014; Yilmaz, Altinkurt, & Güner, 2015) and nurses (Zaghini et al., 2020). A part of my own study in this chapter will join the above studies in exploring the challenge of emotional labor in a setting that involves prolonged relationships and frequent interactions between service workers and their customers.

However, in many occupations, the challenges of service work do not only lie in the demands for emotional labor and the associated burnout that workers experience. The challenges of service work also manifest in the erosion of personal boundaries and erratic work hours, which might lead to an almost all-encompassing invasion of workers' private life and a transformation of interpersonal relationships. This kind of all-encompassing invasion can be seen in the work of nannies (Macdonald, 1998), residential staff at nursing homes (Dodson & Zincavage, 2007), and sex workers (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010). Indeed, for workers in these professions, displaying socially appropriate emotions and facial expressions is not the only challenge in their daily work. The need to stay up late at night for work, as well as the potential ambiguity in the nature of the relationship between nannies and the children they care for, or sex workers and their frequent, long-term customers, are major challenges faced by service workers in these contexts. In other words, the intimacy needed in these professions manifests itself beyond emotion and emotional labor, covering many other aspects of life, such as personal boundaries, temporality, and one's attitude towards particular personal relationships. Setting aside the intimacy aspect in the caring professions and sex work, even in the relatively light-hearted context of management consulting as a service, issues of work-life balance and temporal boundaries have been raised in the management literature (Han & Zhao, 2012; Parkes & Langford, 2008). The literature on emotional labor thus is insufficient in fully explaining the intricacies of the challenges of service work. My study in this chapter strives to fully document these challenges, as the intimacy demanded in service work is accommodated not only via emotional labor but also in workers' approach towards the nature of the relationship, personal boundaries, and work hours.

Overall, I have identified two major gaps in the management literature. The first gap is that the conceptualization of organizational paradox has not assessed workers' daily affective experiences, thus leaving unexplored spaces concerning the human factors shaping organizational paradox. The second gap is that the paradox literature has not considered the demands expressed by the beneficiaries of an organization's work, as well as the relationships between workers and the beneficiaries of their work, even though these demands and relationships may influence the paradoxical tensions faced by workers, especially those in the service industry. I have also explained how the literature on emotional labor is insufficient to conceptualize all the challenges of service work as these challenges are shaped by factors beyond emotion. My study in this chapter will fill these gaps in the literature by exploring how customer demands shape workers' experiences of organizational paradox and workers' eventual acceptance of the paradox's indeterminacy, as demonstrated by workers' relationships with their customers. In the next section, I describe the setting of this chapter – a service provider whose workers struggled daily to accommodate customer demands.

RESEARCH SETTING

The Tension between Intimacy and Professionalism in Service Work at Icarus

Icarus, as a company, provides professional consulting services for college applicants. My field notes show that "professional consulting services" were clearly advertised and emphasized in every conversation that salespeople at Icarus had with potential customers. Icarus also prided itself on being "professional": its technology was well-developed, with multiple online platforms serving students' various needs and assisting consultants in organizing and coordinating their work activities. For instance, meetings between clients and consultants had to be booked and recorded in the Icarus virtual system. The company had clear contracts with consultants and customers, stating that consultants would work diligently on the customers' college applications, but they would also have the right to protect their boundaries: consultants could take up to 48 hours to reply to any message or demand from customers, could report abusive clients to their supervisors, did not work on the weekends, and could observe all public holidays as they deemed fit.

However, the challenge Icarus faced was in providing satisfactory services to its customers, many of whom were particularly difficult. Even after customers signed a contract, they retained the right to terminate it and request a refund if they found the service dissatisfying. This generated pressure on the consultants at Icarus to provide outstanding service or risk losing their customers and their jobs. In a preliminary interview, a consultant recalled a particularly difficult moment in his career, when a customer requested a contract termination:

> This wealthy father was angry because a staff member at Icarus had made a mistake in an email sent to him. I honestly can't remember what the mistake was – it was such a tiny mistake. But the father wanted to terminate the contract. He emailed us, saying 'I'll come to talk to you guys, and after our conversation, I will decide whether my lawyer needs to work with you on the contract termination.' So, he came to our office with a voice recorder and a notebook. He started stomping around our meeting room, looking extremely angry while asking us questions like 'Do you know my son's favorite food?' 'Do you know my son's favorite movie?' 'Do you know my son's birthday?' Every time we said we didn't know, he would make this half-mocking, half-screaming sound 'HA!' and take note of our 'I don't know' answer for each question. Then he would conclude: 'You guys don't care about my son at all!' Of course, he ended up terminating the contract. I will forever be haunted by that scene – the angry father stomping around our meeting room, interrogating us about his son's favorite food.

This illustrates a common situation experienced by consultants at Icarus: they must satisfy the customer's demand for care, which may entail knowing minute details about a child's personal life, as that knowledge would have served as evidence of a caring attitude. This example also shows how "intimacy" was closely associated with "care" in this customer's mind: not knowing his son's birthday, favorite food, or favorite movie served as evidence that the consultants did not care about his son. Another consultant stated in an interview: "What most parents wanted for their children was actually a close friend and a devoted mentor, not quite a consultant." This statement hinted at the link between intimacy and care in the customers' mind. However, most consultants who came to work at Icarus had expected to do consulting work, not care work. Consequently, the clients' intense demand for personal care came as a surprise to new consultants, who eventually found themselves learning, with difficulty, to navigate this demand. Satisfying this demand was essential to Icarus' success, not only because the company needed to prevent contract termination and retain its current customers, but also because Icarus' growth relied heavily on word-of-mouth marketing. One consultant stated: "We get a lot of new customers via referrals. Previous customers recommend our service to their acquaintances… It is vital that we receive good ratings from customers." In short, Icarus' success depended heavily on its ability to satisfy the customers' demands, which generated numerous tensions in the daily work activities of its consultants. Consultants struggled and exhausted themselves on a daily basis in order to balance intimacy and professionalism – two elements that form a tension – in their relationships and interactions with customers. Considering how the tension between these two elements tended to persist no matter how hard consultants tried to accommodate each element, Icarus was an excellent setting to study organizational paradox in light of workers' experiences and how these experiences shaped the paradox's indeterminacy.

FINDINGS

In this section, I present my findings on the paradoxical tensions between two elements – professionalism and intimacy – faced by consultants at Icarus, and how consultants tried to accommodate these two competing elements. On the one hand, the admissions consulting work at Icarus was supposed to include, strictly speaking, the offering of strategic advice concerning the college application process, as advertised by the firm itself and clearly stated in contracts with clients. On the other hand, this consulting work resulted in every consultant wrestling daily with clients' demands for affection, care, and personal bonding. Specifically, the parents paying for Icarus' services expected their children to be deeply cared for, almost in the same way that one would expect a caring attitude from nannies; and teenage students similarly wanted friendship and personal connections with consultants. These demands, completely out of tune with Icarus' definition of consulting work and completely unsupported by contract terms, were seen by many consultants as "ridiculous," in one consultant's exact words. "But you can't argue with these parents. You must listen to them. What could you even say to a father who gets mad because his daughter is not properly cared for?" Another consultant exclaimed. The paradox that consultants at Icarus faced in their work was a persistent tension between the impartial consulting service that Icarus had promised to deliver and the demand for personal care and social bonding that its clients constantly expressed.

Consultants at Icarus sensed this persistent tension before they felt the pressure generated by it. In training sessions, new consultants at Icarus were taught two things: First, they were advised by their more experienced colleagues on how to treat "difficult and particular clients": "You must listen to their rants sometimes, there's no other way," "You must answer the phone when they call, even at 10 PM," "Expect to meet with them on the weekend," and so on. Second, new consultants received tips on how to "maintain boundaries" and "avoid burnout": "Turn off all notifications on WhatsApp so that their messages don't reach you too early," "Don't work seven days a week; try to give yourself at least one day off," "Reach out to your supervisor when you encounter a serious problem; don't try to handle everything by yourself." It soon became clear to consultants that they needed to balance the clients' perception of care, associated with intimacy, and their own need for fair and rational work, supported by the company's belief in professionalism. This paradoxical tension between intimacy and professionalism shaped workers' experiences and struggles in their daily work activities, particularly their relationships and interactions with customers. In my findings, I present the process of accepting indeterminacy, a process in which consultants at Icarus first fostered intimacy and then tried to rebuild boundaries in their relationship with clients, and eventually became exhausted and accepted the indeterminacy of the paradoxical tension between intimacy and professionalism – two elements of a paradox.

Pressure from Element 1 of Paradox and Actions to Accommodate Element 1

In their daily work, consultants at Icarus faced tremendous pressure from customers to exhibit a high level of personal care, which customers often associated with intimacy. In this section, I show how the pressure for intimacy – Element 1 of the paradox – was accommodated in consultants' various actions and reactions.

Accommodate Element 1 – Intimacy – in the nature of the relationship. In interviews, as part of the conversation on how to care for clients, consultants spoke about various efforts to present an approachable image and even build personal connections with their clients, both parents and children. Some of these efforts were more reserved, expressed as polite reactions to something that the clients did. Other efforts were more proactive, such as reaching out to teenagers and offering to take them out for lunch. In the following interview excerpts, two consultants talked about how they had established personal connections with their clients – the first consultant in a more reserved manner, while the second one in a more proactive way:

> Consultant 1: Parents know they can't take their anger and disappointment out on their kids, so they take those feelings out on us. I became a safe haven for them to pour out their negative emotions towards their kids. But some parents were very nice to me and actually treated me like a friend. One mother was a doctor. When she knew I was having a sore throat, she would call me repeatedly on the phone just to schedule a time to come and give me some rare medicine and high-quality Manuka honey, and I accepted it.
>
> Consultant 2: I try to be close to my students. I take some of my students out for lunches or coffee and ask them about their personal life, their hobbies, dating, current events, etc. We just chat about non-academic topics... I want them to trust me… I want to appear caring towards them.

It is worth noting, once again, that the consultants' job description did not mention any responsibility related to these aspects of customers' personal life, unless it was highly relevant to the college application. "Our official responsibilities are strictly limited to the college application, which is clearly listed in the contract with clients," one consultant stated and then elaborated: "The contract says that if you pay X amount for the Basic Package, you get one strategist, one consultant, and one mentor, and they will be all working on your college application to produce the best application possible." As such, the nature of the relationship between the consultants and their clients was presented as solely professional. However, as I have shown earlier, there were parents who wanted consultants to know about their children's favorite food and movies, and act as if they were the children's friends. To these parents, this served as evidence of a caring attitude. A tension arose as it dawned on consultants that what the customers wanted was different from what the consultants themselves had expected in their relationship with customers. Consultants knew they had to satisfy the clients' demand for care. Consequently, aspects of customers' personal life, such as parent-child relationships, healthcare, hobbies, dating, and current events were discussed in informal conversations as if between friends. This made the relationship between the consultants and their clients appear more personal and intimate. The nature of the relationship looked as if it could change from one between service providers and their customers to one between friends.

It could be challenging to accommodate requests for intimacy and navigate the divide between personal life and professionalism in a professional relationship. My conversation with an 18-year-old student, whom I got to know while doing participant observation as a mentor providing resources on academic research, demonstrates this challenge. The student began a conversation:

> Student: "Sister, do you have sexual fantasies?"
>
> Me: "Yes. I do."
>
> Student: "Can you share with me one of those fantasies?"
>
> Me: "Mister, we're sitting right in the middle of the Icarus office, and the staff here introduced me to you so that I could answer your questions on academic research. On that note, as a researcher, I'm so glad you're eighteen years old. As a woman, I'm so glad you're a gay man."
>
> Student: "I do think of you as a friend; that's why I'm asking these questions."
>
> Me: "Our friendship is progressing faster than I expected."
>
> Student: "How about I share with you my sexual fantasies?"
>
> Me: "Do you often have this conversation with your friends?"
>
> Student: "Only with my closest friends."

Upon hearing about this incident, one consultant at Icarus laughed: "That boy must have considered you a very close friend." Another consultant said: "We all have moments like that while working with the students here." The consultants were very familiar with requests for, or expectations of, friendship from students and seemed somewhat comfortable accommodating those requests and expectations. When I, as a participant observant and a researcher, reflected on the conversation with the student, it was easy to see the conversation was leaning too much towards the intimate side; and yet, that intimacy was exactly what the student wanted to have. I felt uneasy about the conversation as it transgressed my personal boundaries, but I also told myself that I was satisfying a customer's need for friendship. A consultant described the situation by noting "that boy is lonely; he's gay and his parents are homophobic, so he doesn't like to stay at home and comes to our office very often as a result." For me, this made it seem like being friends with him was not the wrong thing to do. However, it is also easy to imagine how overwhelming these conversations can become: I was chatting with one student, while each individual consultant at Icarus was responsible for more than fifty students at any given time. This data demonstrates, at the surface level, the tension between two things: a) what the customers wanted – personal connections and intimacy – and b) what the consultants told me they wanted and constantly discussed among themselves – personal boundaries and a distinction between work and personal life.

Accommodate Element 1 – Intimacy – in work responsibilities. In addition to being a trusted listener to the parents and a friend to the teenagers, consultants at Icarus often took on other tasks not listed in their job description. The following interview excerpt and observation notes from my interactions with two different consultants offer examples of such tasks.

> Interview excerpt: This mother and her daughter don't get along. They don't talk to each other. So, I become their intermediary. The mother would text me 'Please remind my daughter to register for the SAT test,' and the daughter would text me 'Please tell my mom that I have already registered for the SAT test.' … I do this strange task of conveying what they want to say to each other.
>
> Observation notes: "Do you often help students write these recommendation letters?" I asked while helping Suzy edit the English wording of a recommendation letter to make it less flowery and more succinct. "Yes," Suzy replied, "I do this every application season. Most of the high school teachers in [this country] aren't good at English and don't know how to write recommendation letters for their students. The consultants have to help with the writing. For some students, I let them write the recommendation letters by themselves and then edit the letters. For other students who are less intelligent, I have to sit down with every one of them to brainstorm the ideas for their letters."

Becoming an intermediary between a mother and daughter, or writing and editing recommendation letters that are supposedly confidential and written by others, are the types of responsibilities that, while helping create a good college application, were not part of the consultants' official job responsibilities. While it might be easy to dismiss these tasks as inappropriate or even unethical, it was difficult for consultants to refuse to perform these tasks for two reasons. First, these tasks were reasonable results of the college application process (with standardized tests, recommendation letters, etc.) coupled with distinctive socio-cultural factors (some parents and children do not get along with each other; most local high school teachers are fluent in English). As the consultants' job was to work on the college applications, they had to care about every aspect of the application. The second reason, more closely linked to the customers' demand for care and intimacy, is that one might appear cold and distant when refusing to help with issues between parents and their children. The mother and her daughter in this case needed help with their daily communication and they entrusted the consultant with this task; thus, refusing to help would have stripped feelings of care, trust, and intimacy from the relationship between consultants and their clients. In these situations, the consultants at Icarus had no choice but to take on the additional tasks, even at the cost of their time and energy.

Accommodate Element 1 – Intimacy – in work hours. Consultants at Icarus worked long hours, in part due to the low number of staff members and the high amount of work, which is not dissimilar to other settings. However, another reason for the long hours was the intensity of the requests and expectations from clients, as demonstrated by the interview excerpt below.

> I have phone calls with parents and students until 11 PM daily, and I still need to wake up at 9 AM every day because some [local] mothers start texting me at 7 AM… One time I had a particularly difficult client, a mother who wanted me to research and call each of the schools in her daughter's school list. She was very impatient about it. She texted me at 10:30 PM on a national public holiday to ask me about the school research process. At that time, I was sitting with my new boyfriend – we were out on a date, and I saw the mother's message. I had to pull out my laptop and started to read about the schools, and then, can you imagine it, I asked my boyfriend to pull out his own laptop to help me with the research. He did. We did the school research together. Can you imagine it? 10:30 PM on a national public holiday, when I was on a romantic date…

Most people would not want to work at 10:30 PM on a public holiday, and this consultant was no exception. Many other consultants echoed this frustration, describing how they often received text messages late at night or early in the morning, and how some clients would become angry if consultants did not pick up the phone during their lunchtime. From the consultants' standpoint, the clients were behaving "unprofessionally" when sending text messages or making phone calls to them on public holidays. However, from the clients' standpoint, if the consultants sincerely cared about them and wanted to foster feelings of care and friendship, it should not be a problem to call or text on public holidays. In other words, if the clients could text their friends or personal caregivers on public holidays, they could also text the consultants on public holidays.

Exhaustion and Recognition that Element 1 Cannot Be Accommodated in Isolation

Consultants' efforts to accommodate customer requests and expectations for care and intimacy generated high levels of frustration and exhaustion. These were felt by all consultants at Icarus and were expressed as feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, and angry. Occasionally, these also resulted in breakdowns.

Feeling overwhelmed. Feelings of friendship, intimacy, and personal connection between consultants and their clients did not come without a cost. In the following interview excerpts, the two consultants that I quoted earlier discussed the "overwhelming" feeling that arose when their relationship with clients leaned too strongly towards being friendly:

> Consultant 1: It can be overwhelming because these mothers love to rant… they could rant about anything really. I would often pick up the phone because a mother had one question about the application process, which would take only two minutes to answer, and then I would listen to this mother complain about her son: 'My son is going on a camping trip with his classmates, and he doesn't call home even once. Can you believe it? My son refuses to call me on the phone; he refuses to keep me posted on his daily life… He locks himself in his bedroom whenever he's at home…' And this ranting would go on for half an hour, or maybe an hour if I hadn't cut the mother off.
>
> Consultant 2: It's definitely overwhelming. I have at least 55 students at any given point because new students are always added when I'm done with the old ones… Can you imagine trying to befriend a dozen new kids every single month?

In the data, the consultants clearly described how their relationship with clients could become overwhelming when the relationship leaned heavily towards intimacy and care. For the consultants at Icarus, this feeling of being overwhelmed might have been significantly reduced if each consultant had had fewer clients. However, Icarus tried its best to minimize the number of consultants while acquiring larger numbers of clients, and consequently, the sheer frequency of friendly, personal interactions with clients that they had represented a burden, instead of the joy that human connections might bring. The consultants were overwhelmed by their personal connections with clients, not because they were emotionally distant or uninterested in new friendships, but because they could not manage to fit "a dozen" friendships and a few dozen stories about people's private lives into their monthly work schedules.

Feeling stressed. Burdened with many tasks outside of their official responsibilities and given little time to do them, consultants constantly felt stressed. The interview and observation notes below illustrate this.

> Interview: It's stressful. When you become the intermediary between two people in a tense relationship, as I am between this mother and her daughter, the tension gets transferred to you. I feel the tension and the passive aggressiveness expressed by the mother and the daughter. And I have other things to do. Other responsibilities are still waiting for me.
>
> Observation notes: Suzy talked to me while editing a recommendation letter written by her student. "I know I look really ugly and scary right now. I have this ugly acne on my face because of stress," Suzy said, and started writing violently capitalized sentences as comments directed to what her student had written in a shared Google Document, such as "WHO TOLD YOU TO WRITE THIS SENTENCE?"; "NOBODY NEEDS TO KNOW THIS DETAIL!!". Suzy continues, "I got less than 4 hours of sleep last night and the night before. I was busy working on all of these recommendation letters."

The consultants were aware of their stress – Suzy was also aware of her acne – and yet they were incapable of escaping the numerous tasks entrusted to them. It became clear that many consultants had been deeply affected by their efforts to accommodate client requests and expectations.

Feeling angry. As all consultants experienced constant stress and lack of sleep, their mood was also affected. In interviews and casual conversations with me, consultants often mentioned their "anger" and "grumpy feeling" after fulfilling "ridiculous" requests from clients. One consultant stated: "I become very ill-tempered every application season. I get mad at everyone easily."

Mental breakdowns. The constant stress and anger felt by consultants eventually led to mental breakdowns, as illustrated by the following excerpts from my conversations with consultants.

> Consultant 3 (new employee, on probation): I start to physically tremble when I see messages or missed calls from this one difficult client. I can feel my body literally trembling. I can't allocate part of my workload to any of my colleagues because my colleagues are also dying. They are also as overwhelmed as I am. We have too few consultants and too many clients.
>
> Consultant 4: We would take sleeping pills and see psychiatrists every application season. We were too stressed, and we kept thinking about work, so we couldn't sleep at night.
>
> Consultant 5 (chatting with me, the researcher):
>
> > Consultant: "I had five back-to-back meetings yesterday."
> > Me: "Wow, I admire…"
> > Consultant: "I had a breakdown yesterday too, so don't admire me."

At this point, consultants at Icarus realized that it was impossible to only try to accommodate customer demands for personal care and intimacy. In other words, it was impossible to accommodate Element 1 of the paradox in isolation. Upon this realization, consultants turned to Element 2 of the paradox – professionalism in this case – as a potential solution, in an effort to efficiently handle demands and requests from clients.

Actions to Accommodate Element 2 of Paradox

In this section, I show how consultants tried to uphold professionalism in their relationships and interactions with clients, and the challenges they faced while doing so.

Accommodate Element 2 – Professionalism – in the nature of the relationship.

Consultants often tried to maintain that the nature of their relationship with clients was about professionalism; it was not about friendship, intimacy, or personal connections. The interview excerpt below demonstrates how consultants justified the professional nature of the relationship.

> When these mothers rant on the phone about their personal lives, their children's personal lives, and things that have nothing to do with the application process, I cut them off by saying I have another phone call coming up in a few minutes, so I have to hang up now. I always cite 'business phone calls' – other clients are waiting for me.

Here, the consultant described a tactic that she used to end lengthy chats with many mothers: saying "other clients are waiting for me," thus emphasizing the professional position of the consultant. Many consultants, however, revealed that it was not easy for them to maintain professionalism in the nature of the relationship with clients. One consultant stated: "As a woman, I can empathize with the mother whose son is cold and disrespectful towards her; sometimes I really wanted to listen to her stories." Another consultant stated in an interview about their feelings towards students: "It can be hard… If you interact with a child for long enough, you start to actually care about the child. You want to feed the child because you care… That's how I feel towards my students." Another consultant echoed this feeling: "It is difficult to not feel bad or saddened when you see the kids receive bad admissions results and become really sad; after all, I was part of the application process." Overall, consultants felt a personal connection to the clients they served. While acting professionally, consultants had to suppress their own affection and feelings of personal connection toward their customers. Feelings of care, intimacy, and personal connections, which might help consultants succeed in satisfying clients' demands, were also barriers that they must overcome while doing this work.

Accommodate Element 2 – Professionalism – in work responsibilities. One of the major causes of stress for consultants was the high number of unexpected tasks that they had to do, as entrusted by their clients, outside of their official responsibilities. Two consultants described the situations in which they tried to uphold professionalism while discussing their work responsibilities with clients.

> Consultant 4: I tried to explain to the father that it wasn't Icarus' responsibility to publicly promote the fund-raising event that his son was organizing, and it certainly wasn't *my* responsibility – it wasn't even in the contract… I tried to explain in a very gentle and polite way… The father understood, but he was still very angry. He said something like 'I'm extremely disappointed. But it's okay. I now know I expected too much from you guys.'
>
> Consultant 5: The mother was mad at me because her daughter had missed a deadline to register for an art class, which would have been helpful for her intended college major in Art. I explained to the mother that I wasn't responsible for tracking every deadline of every single event that might have helped with the kid's college application; such a thing was certainly not stated anywhere in the contract.

In the data above, two consultants attempted to explain to customers why their work responsibilities did not involve fulfilling certain requests or expectations from their clients. These two consultants, in trying to justify the scopes of their responsibilities, cited the written contract. However, their efforts to justify limits to work responsibilities might not always succeed. One consultant noted: "There's really no way out of it. Sometimes you just have to sit through the conversation and hear these angry people talk because they won't ever take any reasoning." In other words, citing the contract would not always be helpful because agitated clients would not always listen to justification. These incidents represented an emotional tension that consultants at Icarus faced in doing their work:

because the care demanded by the students was quite personal, their loving parents might feel hurt and rejected by attempts to deny responsibilities by the consultant, especially after having paid a large fee for the service.

Accommodate Element 2 – Professionalism – during work hours. The following interview excerpt provides an example of how a consultant tried to uphold professional standards in approaching her work hours with a client.

> This mother called me on the phone and yelled at me because I hadn't picked up the phone the first time she called, and because she thought Icarus had wrongly charged her for extra tutoring hours that her son received… I composed a Google Spreadsheet with all of the details on the tutoring hours that her son had used, to prove to her that the charges were all correct. I emailed that Google Spreadsheet to her and said: 'I will update this Google Spreadsheet every month, using the data from Icarus online system, so that you can see how exactly the tutoring hours were spent. Also, I keep the call histories of the countless lengthy and regular phone calls that I had with you, and I can call my phone service provider if you need a more detailed list. I did my best to answer the phone when you called, even though I had another 57 customers calling me too. There's no term in the contract that says I have to respond to your phone calls 24/7.'

Many other consultants shared similar stories in interviews, detailing how they had to explain to clients that it was inappropriate to call or text consultants late at night or early in the morning. However, as the clients did not give up on their demands, efforts to uphold professionalism did not help the situation, and, as I will show, these efforts created even more conflicts and exhaustion, once again, for the consultants.

Exhaustion, Again, and Recognition that Element 2 Cannot Be Accommodated in Isolation

As consultants tried to uphold professional standards in their relationship with clients, their attempts faced significant risks and challenges considering clients' reactions.

Facing clients' dissatisfaction. In their efforts to justify the professional nature of their relationship with clients, consultants face a familiar, major challenge – a challenge that had shaped everything Icarus had been doing: the clients, all of whom had been paying and asking for "a caring attitude," expected more than "professionalism" in their relationship with Icarus. In the following interview excerpts, the two consultants from my earlier analysis talk about the harsh reactions from clients when the work was not as expected.

> Consultant 1: The mother who wanted to terminate the contract said she really liked me because I was very caring and attentive, but she wanted everyone else in the team [country manager, salesperson, strategist, mentor, etc.] to be like me – caring and loving towards her son, just like a highly attentive personal coach and a very good friend towards the kid. Everyone else cannot be like me. People are busy; they have their own jobs to do… So, we had to let this mother terminate her contract.
>
> Consultant 2: Sometimes I get very difficult clients who will get quite upset if I tell them I'm too busy to chat. They say things like 'If you don't have time to talk, why are you even here? Your company should go out of business!' They get really nasty and rude. With these clients, I must pick up the phone when the client calls for the first time in the day, and then if the client wants to rant, I ask the client to call back later on the same day, at a time that I know I will be less stressed and more available to chat.

As shown above, consultants often faced unpleasant reactions and dissatisfaction when they refused to let their relationship with clients shift towards intimacy. The need to earn customer satisfaction, vital to Icarus' business, as well as the desire to avoid conflict, can make it tempting for consultants to accommodate demands for a more personal and intimate relationship – to be friends with the students and pretend to listen to the mothers' complaints on the phone. Speaking of her experiences, Consultant 1 stated: "I know not everyone in my team can be friends with the kid, but that very friendship is often what parents want for their children, and so I myself always try to act friendly towards the kid whenever I can." Meanwhile, Consultant 2 described her decision to listen to the clients' rants: "Clients may complain about me with the company if I don't listen to their rants. A mother even complained that my tone of voice didn't sound caring enough, and my sentences were too short to be considered warm and friendly." Overall, consultants felt strong pressure to retain clients and keep their jobs at the company, which could be thwarted by their efforts to uphold professionalism in their relationship with clients.

Facing unpleasant emotions. For consultants, the explanation of "limited responsibilities" while upholding professionalism and the resulting reactions from clients could be emotionally taxing. In the following interview excerpts, I show how two consultants from my earlier analysis faced unpleasant emotions while trying to explain to their clients that a certain task was not their job.

> Consultant 4 (on the angry father and the son who was organizing a fund-raising event): The son was there during the meeting and saw how angry his father was. After the meeting, the son asked me in a concerned manner: 'Are you okay? I'm sorry my father was so angry; it was so scary for you, right?' After hearing that question, I burst into tears and I couldn't stop crying, thinking about how even a little boy had pitied me.
>
> Consultant 5 (on the angry mother and the daughter who had missed a deadline to register for an art class): The mother would send me very angry messages on WhatsApp, and I would try to keep calm while reading those messages. The daughter said to me: 'My mom is really mad at me, but she wants to rant at someone else, so please don't get mad at her, and please don't reply to her messages immediately. Please just let her rant.' So, that's what I did.

As seen in the data, it could be quite challenging for consultants to face their clients' emotions while explaining the limited scope of their work responsibilities. For these consultants, the anger expressed by the clients made it difficult to stay calm during the conversation. In many ways, the work done by these consultants was strongly affected by human emotions: not only did consultants need to fight their own feelings of personal connection and affection towards their customers when maintaining professionalism, but they also faced the clients' negative emotional reactions every time they tried to justify the limits of their work responsibilities. Sometimes, it was easier for these consultants to do additional tasks than to try to explain why these tasks were not part of their workload.

Facing the bureaucracy of organization. One challenge that consultants might not have expected was the need to do the justification and explanation of professionalism not only for themselves but also for their colleagues. In the following observation note and interview excerpt, two different consultants describe how their colleagues' behaviors could become burdens for others.

> Observation notes (describing an internal chat thread in the Icarus virtual system on an incident involving a strategist and his boundaries): A strategist maintained very good boundaries in terms of work hours: he followed a 48-hours reply rule and never responded to emails on the weekend. A mother once emailed the strategist on a Friday evening about a perceived emergency, and she did not receive his reply immediately. The mother questioned the strategist' 48-hours boundary. Consequently, a consultant in the same country had to spend her whole Saturday afternoon trying to calm the mother down in light of this strategist' perceived "carelessness."
>
> Interview (on an incident involving a customer): This client wasn't supposed to call the country manager to complain to begin with… The client should only call the country manager if she cannot reach both me and my supervisor in the service delivery team. However, the country manager made a call back so quickly to this client, and now the client will expect even more immediate responses from the service delivery team in the future.

Most of the time, Icarus' approach functioned effectively: the strategist provided general directions for college applications; mentors guided students on how to optimize extracurricular activities; consultants communicated with parents and students daily to answer questions; and each country manager oversaw office activities, recruitment and training, sales figures, salaries, and budgets for that country. However, in the observation notes describing the internal chat thread, the strategists' professionalism became the burden that another consultant must shoulder by spending "her whole Saturday afternoon" explaining those boundaries to the customer. In the interview excerpt, the country manager's extremely prompt response risked encouraging the client's expectation of consultants, which inevitably increased the pressure and stress felt by the consultants.

Recognition of Indeterminacy and Organizational Impact

Eventually, consultants at Icarus became exhausted from the setbacks they encountered while trying to accommodate both elements – intimacy and professionalism – of the paradox. The following excerpts from my conversations with consultants show their exhaustion and resulting withdrawal.

> Consultant 1: About this particularly difficult customer that I had, I told my supervisor that he needs to take actions and assign someone else to replace me because I'm too exhausted… I basically withdrew from all interactions with this customer.
>
> Consultant 2 (has already quit, is now working a completely different job at an NGO): At one point I became very depressed and mentally exhausted, and I knew I couldn't do it anymore, so I quit.
>
> Consultant 3: I surrender. I'm quitting in July, for real, for real.
>
> Consultant 4: Eventually, I accepted that this job was crazy, and if I just bear with it for a few years, I will get promoted. But there is no solution to satisfying customer demands while not exhausting yourself; you just need to accept that you will be exhausted sometimes.
>
> Consultant 5: I just go with the flow… Case-by-case, I would say… When I have easy customers who don't expect much, I try to do less and save my energy for difficult interactions with insane customers… When I get too exhausted, I take a few days off and turn off my cell phone so that customers can't reach me.

This data shows that consultants accepted the indeterminacy of the paradox – that the tension between intimacy and professionalism could only be accommodated on a short-term, case-by-case, day-to-day basis, but it could never be resolved permanently.

Interestingly, my interviews with the supervisors and managers reveal a similar acceptance of the indeterminacy of the paradox and the short-term nature of all actions and solutions, as well as an acceptance of employee withdrawal and quitting. All supervisors and managers stated that they had backup plans: for each difficult and demanding client, the managers planned staffing with two or three different consultants, as one manager explained to me, "so that when one feels exhausted, another can replace that exhausted one." This acknowledgment of surrender and acceptance of withdrawal and quitting showed that both workers and their managers had come to accept the indeterminacy of the tension between intimacy and professionalism as two elements of a paradox: no matter what workers did, it would not be right, the setbacks from leaning towards either element of the paradox would be exhausting for the workers, and thus the tension between the two elements could not be permanently resolved. All actions and solutions needed to be specific to the individual customer request. All people involved admitted the short-term nature of their efforts and solutions. Both employees and managers knew that in the long run, the tension between intimacy and professionalism could not be solved. The top management at Icarus only accommodated the paradox by planning for a queue of consultants and accepting a high turnover rate. When one consultant became exhausted, another took on the work of facing the two elements of the paradox. At Icarus, as with any other company, as soon as the old staff quit, new staff was hired, and the cycle repeated itself.

DISCUSSION

The Discrepancy between Organizational Success and Micro-Level Experiences of Workers in Accommodating a Paradox

My finding on the exhaustion among consultants at Icarus points out the disparate experiences between two groups: the top executives and the consultants at Icarus. The top executives, who did not have to interact with clients daily and only faced their anger infrequently, simply accommodated the paradoxical tension between intimacy and professionalism by making plans to hire new consultants every time a consultant became exhausted and withdrew from interactions with clients. In contrast, consultants at Icarus experienced various kinds of stress and exhaustion while splitting intimacy and professionalism, trying to satisfy clients' demand for intimacy, and then trying to protect and rebuild their personal boundaries. The top management at Icarus was able to accommodate the paradoxical tension between intimacy and professionalism only because it accepted the indeterminacy of this very tension at the micro level among consultants. Within one organization, while the accommodation of a paradox – the "Adjusting" response described by Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2013) – is possible at the organizational level, it might never be achieved at the individual level, among the workers in that organization. In the case of Icarus, the organization as a whole arrived at the "Adjusting" response only by accepting the "Splitting" response – compartmentalizing the elements of a paradox and trying to deal with one element at a time – among individual workers.

Many management studies can be strengthened or expanded with an explicit focus on how macro-level solutions to paradoxical tensions reflect workers' experiences at the micro level. For example, Wenzel and colleagues (2019) pointed out the indeterminacy of the paradoxical tension between punishment and rehabilitation at a German youth prison. This study could be strengthened by pointing out that the daily struggles and frustrations of prison employees at the micro level were vital to the overall success of the prison at the organizational level. Indeed, the government was, ironically, quite pleased with the goal achievement of this youth prison, as Wenzel and colleagues (2019) mention in their study.

Considering workers' struggles at the micro level, more management studies should be conducted on the link between a paradox's indeterminacy and workers' affective experiences. For example, Pamphile (2021) explores how grantmakers working in corporate philanthropy navigated a paradoxical tension between business and societal values when their managers prioritized business over social objectives at the organization level. The findings, as presented by Pamphile (2021), reveal the important role of supportive relationships that grantmakers had with "paradox peers," defined as individuals external to their organization but facing similar paradoxical challenges. Particularly, Pamphile's (2021) findings on how relationships with "paradox peers" helped to relieve tension could be complemented and strengthened with an elaboration of the grant makers' affective experiences while facing the paradox, and how relief of tension might make the paradox appear less unsolvable to grantmakers. Going forward, management scholars can focus on the "relational" aspect of workers' experiences of organizational paradox and conduct studies to explore or even measure the influence of emotions, affective experiences, and relationships with other people on workers' attitudes towards a paradoxical tension and its indeterminacy.

Paradoxical Tensions as Exhibited in Interpersonal Relationships between Service Providers and Their Customers

My study contributes to the literature on organizational paradox by suggesting a new conceptual space to explore organizational paradox: the interpersonal relationship between service providers and their customers. Specifically, my findings on consultants' efforts to erode and rebuild personal boundaries in their relationship with clients show that the relationship itself was the vessel in which all paradoxical tensions took place. An important issue not discussed by Ehrenreich and colleagues (2003) or Hochschild (2012) is a tension that we, as management scholars, may see: in addition to the depth of workers' feelings, there is "work" in "care work." The need to maintain a sense of fairness and professionalism within caring professions adds more complexity to the relationship between service workers and the beneficiaries of their work.

The tension between intimacy and professionalism as experienced by consultants at Icarus suggests questions on how service workers, especially those in "caring professions" – therapists, counselors, teachers, personal attendants, nannies, healthcare workers, and so forth – can respond to the demands for care and personal connections in their relationships with customers while maintaining their professional position and protecting their own interests and wellbeing. Remarking on the idea of "care" as a professional service, Macdonald and Merrill (2002) detail the challenges faced by care workers on a personal level, arguing that the work of care straddles the divide between "activities performed out of love and those performed for pay." On the one hand, if care work was performed purely "out of love," it would be linked to recognition – the acknowledgment, appreciation, approval, and gratitude that care workers may receive from their clients. To achieve this recognition requires deep emotional labor – what Hochschild would call "deep acting" – and a level of psychological investment that might even influence the workers' sense of self and relationships. On the other hand, if care work was performed solely "for pay," it would be linked to redistribution – money and benefits received by workers as compensation for their work. To sustain this redistribution requires the ability to see care work as a result of market transactions so that workers can demand fairness and maintain professionalism in their relationship with customers. However, care work is, of course, both of the above. Most activities in care work are performed for both recognition and redistribution. The constant tension between recognition and redistribution as faced by care workers is, in the author's exact words, “a tension between love and work.”

Commenting on this tension between love and work, Zelizer (2000) discusses the work done by care workers and sex workers as a result of “the purchase of intimacy.” Zelier (2000, p. 835) then asks: “Are markets inherently incompatible with intimacy, or do some forms of market transactions correspond to different forms of intimacy?” This question is fascinating because it covers both elements of “care” – tied to intimacy – and “work” – a result of market transactions. More studies could be conducted on the tension between market and intimacy, or “the purchase of intimacy.” We could start by asking how workers in various professions involving elements of a caring attitude, navigate the tension between love and work while knowing, or perhaps not knowing, that human relationships are vessels in which many organizational tensions take place.

Alternative Explanations

Instead of viewing the struggles of consultants at Icarus as paradoxical tensions, an alternative explanation for my findings could focus on the gendering of service work. This alternative explanation might be applicable because roughly two-thirds of the consultants at Icarus were female at the time of my data collection. In many Asian cultures, it is common to expect women to behave in particular ways in their relationships and interactions with other people (Hennink, Diamond, & Cooper, 1999) – wealthy clients in this case. Existing literature shows that organizational efforts to satisfy customer demands can be part of the process of gendering service work if the customers have gendered assumptions and prejudices (Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2010; Kerfoot & Korczynski, 2005). For example, Nielsen (1982) shows that until the 1970s, airlines in the USA were able to discriminate systematically against flight attendants, on the bases of "sex, marital status, and age" (p. 81). "Use them till their smiles wear out; then get a new bunch" was the policy that had been put into effect by the airlines (p. 81). However, in the 1970s, many labor unions claimed that these practices were illegal. The airlines Pan American fought against this, arguing that their discriminatory practices were legitimate because the overall performance of females in the job of flight attendant was superior to that of males. The airlines submitted a survey, which they claim indicated that there was a clear "passenger preference" for female cabin crew and they offered testimony from a psychiatrist to support their arguments. The psychiatrist argued that male passengers "would generally feel more masculine and thus more at ease in the presence of a young female attendant" (Nielsen, 1982, p. 97). In the case of Icarus, female consultants might have been better at accommodating unreasonable demands from clients, and the clients also might have expected them to do so for cultural reasons. Icarus as an organization might have reinforced the gendering and feminizing of service work, especially when the organization readily arranged a queue of consultants to replace one another every time a consultant became exhausted from trying to accommodate customer demands.

CHAPTER 4

Maybe don't mention Harvard: Translating the accessibility of elite academic institutions

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I describe the process through which consultants at Icarus translated the accessibility of elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world to customers in Asia, who had overly optimistic beliefs concerning the accessibility of these institutions. Viewing "accessibility in higher education" as an institutional concept, I begin the chapter with a review of the literature on the translation and framing of institutional concepts such as non-discriminatory treatment of employees (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002), accountability in education (Hallett, 2010), and corporate social responsibility (Girschik, 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). In my review of the literature, I point out two gaps in our understanding of how institutional concepts can be framed or translated. The first is a lack of studies examining actions that translate and frame institutional concepts at the micro level. The second gap is a lack of studies examining interactions and dialogues between organizational actors doing the translation or framing and their audiences or the beneficiaries of their work. I then describe the findings of my study – a process in which consultants at Icarus translated an institutional concept in their daily work, conversations, and interactions with clients, in a highly purposive and calculated response to the customers' unrealistic expectations concerning the accessibility of elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world. I end the chapter with a discussion of my findings, focusing on how we could expand many studies on translation and framing by examining workers' understandings and experiences of institutional concepts at the micro level, as well as the societal impacts and moral implications of actions to translate institutional concepts to the public.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In my critique of the literature, I point out two gaps in our current understanding of organizational actions to frame and translate institutional concepts. The first gap is that these actions have been mostly studied at the macro level. The second one is that in the rare cases where micro-level interactions are examined, actions to frame and translate institutional concepts are viewed as contained within organizations, instead of being viewed as interactions between workers and external audiences such as the beneficiaries of the work.

The Work of Framing and Translating Institutional Concepts at the Macro Level

In the last two decades, management scholars have paid increasing attention to how organizations approach the framing and translation of institutional concepts. For example, Wright and Nyberg (2017) describe a process in which many firms "translated" a pressing global issue – climate change – into "business as usual," trying to escape the inconvenient aspects of corporate social responsibility in this "translation" process. Wright and Nyberg (2017) show that the "framing" step in this translation process included two major practices: "association" and "disassociation." When firms practiced "association," they linked climate change to their usual, preferred business issues (e.g., an existing and profitable business case), managing risks, and maximizing business opportunities. When firms practiced "disassociation," they ruled out undesirable features of firms' engagement with climate change. The undesirable features included the sacrifice of profits, inconvenient changes in business practices, and the need to follow government regulation, among others.

Noteworthy in the above study are the ideas of "association" and "disassociation," which, to me, suggest that an institutional concept ("corporate social responsibility" in this case) could be broken down into several different elements ("risks," "opportunities," "sacrifices," "regulations" etc.). Thus, I infer that a successful translation might examine each of these elements and strategically place them in different categories ("association" or "disassociation") to finally achieve the firm's objective ("business as usual"). Unfortunately, the process of breaking down an institutional concept and examining each of its constitutive elements is not detailed in the above study.

While the study by Wright and Nyberg (2017) presents excellent descriptions of the framing and translation tactics used by groups of social actors and organizations at the macro level, it leaves many questions unanswered at the micro level. The authors do not make clear how workers within organizations interact with or make sense of institutional concepts such as corporate social responsibility in their daily work activities. Indeed, in Wright and Nyberg (2017)'s study, the two concepts "corporate social responsibility" and "climate change," together with all of their frames, remain detached from workers' daily activities. It is unclear what groups of organizational actors helped shaped these frames for the two concepts, and what challenges or opposition these actors faced when presenting these frames. This lack of details at the micro, interactional level seems to be common among studies on the framing and translation of institutional concepts. Indeed, many management studies on how organizations use framing in institutional contexts (e.g., Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Beckert, 2010; Benner & Tripsas, 2012; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003; Meyer & Höllere, 2010; Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007; Weber & Mayer, 2011) tend to focus on the strategies and tactics used by these organizations at the macro level, saying little on the people within these organizations and their interactions at the micro level.

Critiquing this gap in the literature, Cornelissen and colleagues (2015) advocate for an "interactive model of communication" in studying institutions while emphasizing the manifestation of institutions as performed and negotiated in locally situated interactions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In their proposal, Cornelissen and colleagues (2015, p. 20) argue for the importance of examining "framing" in interactional contexts. The authors write:

> Much of the attractiveness of frames as a construct for management scholars lies in their ability to connect the macrostructural aspects of collective meaning structures with the micro, interactional level where much of the negotiation of meaning takes place.
>
> (Cornelissen et al., 2015, p. 20)

As I have shown, one current gap in management literature is that actions to frame and translate institutional concepts have been mostly studied at the macro level, in the form of firms' reactions to their environments. Nevertheless, rich contexts and ample opportunities exist for studies on translation and framing done at the interactional level among people as organizational actors, since this is the level "where much of the negotiation of meaning takes place" (Cornelissen et al., 2015, p. 20). In the next section, I explore a second gap in management literature: the tendency to study actions to frame and translate institutional concepts as contained within organizations, without connections to external audiences.

Actions To Frame and Translate Institutional Concepts as Contained within Organizations

Only a few management studies in recent years have begun to explore how organizational actors present a certain frame to express their understandings of an institutional concept at the micro level. For example, Creed, Scully, and Austin (2002) analyze the 1996 public debates on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). In particular, the authors describe how different constituents made use of various cultural frames to support or oppose ENDA, considering how ENDA would impact the rights of LGBTQ people and other relevant social actors in the workplace. However, missing from this study is an examination of how the arguments or frames employed by each group – supporters or opponents – affected the other group. In other words, there was neither dialogue nor interaction between the supporters and the opponents.

In a study that deeply explores the interactional aspect of framing, Hallett (2010) describes how teachers at an elementary school, annoyed and exhausted by an aggressive increase in regulations and policies requiring "accountability" in their daily teaching activities, actively reframed "accountability" as "turmoil" in their conversations and interactions with one another and with the school's principal, even attacking and protesting against the newly-appointed principal as the representative of that "turmoil." For instance, Hallett's fieldnotes show that at lunch, a teacher complained that lesson plans had to correspond exactly to teaching activities on specific days, which was "ridiculous" because teachers had to be "flexible." Frustrated, her colleagues agreed that lesson plans were intended to aid substitute teachers, not constrain practice. There was mounting opposition to the increasing requirements for plans and structure in teaching practices. A teacher said: "It's like I'm constantly defending what I'm doing in my classroom." Another one said she wanted a "sane" job and "you'd have to be psycho to stay here more than one or two years." Another teacher said: "It seems like every day somebody else is losing it," and one teacher often mentioned, in interviews with Hallett, seeing a therapist "just for work." At the peak of their frustration, teachers started to mobilize an "Anti-Knox Campaign" – Knox was the name of the newly-appointed principal who was trying to implement accountability policies. In general, Hallett's (2010) study provides excellent ethnographic descriptions of the framing of "accountability" as "turmoil" in teachers' words and actions towards each other as well as the school's principal.

However, the study by Hallett (2010) does not explore the ways in which this framing is manifested in teachers' daily interactions and relationships with the beneficiaries of their work – the students and their parents – who could have played significant roles in the real-life implementation of "accountability" in daily teaching practices. While reading the study, one is left wondering about the various reactions and feedback from the students and parents when changes in teaching practices were implemented, or when teachers actively reframed "accountability" as "turmoil." In more general management terms, while the framing of an institutional concept takes place among service providers (teachers in Hallett's study), one would be curious about the roles and reactions of customers towards a particular frame.

Indeed, interactions between workers and the beneficiaries of their work remain to be explored in many studies on the framing and translation of institutional concepts, despite the potentially significant public impact of the work of framing. For example, Girschik (2020) presents a study on framing at a Danish pharmaceutical firm. The study shows how internal activists – workers within a particular firm, who were especially passionate about solving the rising diabetes problem in the general public – developed various framing tactics to shape business practices in support of efforts to reduce diabetes in the community. Girschik (2020) shows that when the Danish pharmaceutical firm was entering the Indonesian market, internal activists, without contact with the public or pharmaceutical firms in Indonesia, presented a proposal for collective intervention – urging the executives at their firm to join collective efforts fighting diabetes within the Indonesian pharmaceutical industry. However, these internal activists framed the proposal in a way that would significantly reduce the executives' perception of burdens, risks, costs, and responsibilities for their own firm. The proposal stated that "facing this challenge [of rising diabetes cases] compels stakeholders to align their vision in a way that leads to better awareness and improves access, affordability, and quality of care." Although the responsibilities of other firms within the Indonesian market were clearly formulated, the Danish company's responsibilities remained underdefined. All stakeholders in the market, according to the framing above, should contribute in ways that served their interests and that leverage their distinctive capacities. The Danish company's responsibilities, however, were framed as merely complementary and supportive of those of other firms in the Indonesian market. One interesting thing to note about this frame is that it was solely shaped by the internal activists – there was no description of any interaction with the public, external audiences, or business partners in Indonesia. In the Turkish market, the internal activists implemented a similar tactic. Without interactions with Turkish firms or

Turkish citizens, the internal activists framed their own Danish firm's responsibility as a "shared responsibility" linked to all other firms in the market, using explanations such as "we invite both public and private organizations to join us in taking actions to implement sustainable solutions and work with us in our ambition to innovate diabetes care in Turkey." Viewed in this light, this "shared responsibility" was not, in any way, more significant or riskier to fulfill than the actions implemented by other pharmaceutical firms in the same market.

One common perspective demonstrated in the studies by Creed and colleagues (2002), Hallett (2010), and Girschik (2020), as is the case with most management studies on actions to frame and translate institutional concepts, was that the frame and its impacts were viewed as contained within the organization, instead of dynamics between organizational actors and external audiences. Indeed, the evolving frames of institutional concepts are described as they are sustained within groups of like-minded actors (Creed et al., 2002), as they take place only among workers and are shaped by workers themselves (Girschik, 2020), or as they manifest in workers' interactions with their manager – the elementary school teachers' interactions with the principal in the study by Hallett (2010). Thus, missing in these studies are descriptions and examinations of the interactions and dialogues between a) the workers doing the framing and translating, and b) external audiences such as the public, opposing groups, external stakeholders, customers, or other beneficiaries of the firm's work. In fact, when it comes to the study of the Danish pharmaceutical company (Girschik, 2020), because diabetes can affect quite a significant portion of the public, one cannot help but wonder about the activists' interactions with customers and local partners of the Danish firm, as well as local governments in Indonesia and Turkey. In general, plenty of room remains for exploration when it comes to interactions and dialogues between workers and their external audiences.

In the rare studies on framing and translation that view organizational actors in light of their daily interactions with outsiders, actions to frame institutional concepts are described as unintentional, instead of purposeful. Specifically, Reinecke and Ansari (2021) describe an "unintended" shift in frames in their study on "Occupy London," a part of the wave of social movements triggered by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. As described in the study, "Occupy London" initially set out to occupy the London Stock Exchange to protest against the mounting economic inequality between the ultra-rich and the rest of society, using the mobilizing frame of "capitalism is a crisis." However, the protesters in "Occupy London" ended up occupying, and eventually targeting, the Church of England's St. Paul's Cathedral. As a result, a new collective action frame "What would Jesus do?" emerged. According to the authors, when protesters were denied access to the London Stock Exchange building, they settled in the adjacent churchyard of St. Paul's. After one year of interactions and several unintended yet emotionally charged incidents with the church, protesters began to use the frame "What would Jesus do?" to express their anger toward economic inequality. As protesters became embroiled in an unexpected conflict with the Church, City of London bankers were let "off the hook." This study by Reinecke and Ansari (2021) describes in detail factors that led to the development of a frame – such as the sacralization of actions and emotional attachment – and how those factors manifested in interactions between organizational members and outsiders. However, because the case being studied is perceived as an "unintended" shift in framing tactics, it leaves out the strategic shifts in framing tactics that may occur in many institutional contexts, in which workers and actors actively try to present or support certain frames in their interactions with outsiders. In other words, missing in this study is the analysis of intentional actions, which can be vital to how people, in their daily activities, interpret and express institutional meanings and concepts.

In my critique of the literature, I have identified two gaps in our current understanding of organizational actions to frame and translate institutional concepts. The first gap is that these actions have been mostly studied at the macro level (e.g., Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The second gap is that in the rare cases where micro-level interactions are examined, actions to frame and translate institutional concepts are viewed as contained within organizations and groups (Creed et al., 2002; Girschik, 2020; Hallett, 2010), instead of being viewed in dialogues and interactions between workers and external audiences such as customers or other beneficiaries of the work. In the few studies that describe interactions between organizational actors and external audiences (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021), actions and frames arising from these interactions are seen as accidental and unintentional, instead of purposive actions by organizational actors to present and assert their understandings of institutional concepts.

My study will fill the above gaps in the literature. In my study, I ask: "How do workers translate their own understandings of institutional concepts in interactions with external audiences?" In answering this question, my study in this chapter describes the work of translating an institutional concept, as this work is shaped by workers' interactions with their customers, and how this translation is done as highly intentional actions at the micro level in response to challenges created by the macro environment. Specifically, the findings of this chapter describe how admissions consultants at Icarus, in their daily work with clients, strategically employed a multi-step translation process to assert their understanding of a concept that had become idealized among the public: the accessibility of elite academic institutions.

RESEARCH SETTING

The Idealized Accessibility of Elite Academic Institutions

One major challenge in the work of admissions consultants at Icarus is depicted in the observation notes below:

> It was 3:30 PM at the Vietnam office of Icarus. A middle-aged female client stepped into a meeting room with two consultants at Icarus. The woman, slim and pale-skinned, wore a white silk dress and black high-heels. For someone who had only been residing in Vietnam, the lady spoke excellent English. She introduced herself as a doctor at a large public hospital. Her husband was a doctor, too. The couple had a daughter, their only child. The daughter was an intelligent child currently in Grade 10 at a prestigious high school. "My daughter doesn't know what she wants to do for the future yet; she's very flexible, and she has different topics of interest. She's naturally curious about medicine because my husband and I are both doctors." The lady's voice was calm and gentle, and her manner of speaking was exceedingly polite, almost offsetting the shock resulting from her request. "I know what I want for my daughter. That's why I'm here today. I want my daughter to attend medical school at Harvard. Or Oxford and Cambridge, maybe."

As I later observed the consultants at Icarus discuss the woman's request among themselves, it became clear that this kind of request – one that came from parents hoping to send their children to elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world – was extremely common among Icarus' clients. My interviews with consultants at Icarus confirmed this observation. Consultants told countless stories of how new clients – mostly parents of high school students, and sometimes the students themselves – had been overly optimistic about the chance of admissions for applicants targeting the Ivy League and

Oxbridge. As I will explain, the accessibility of elite English-speaking academic institutions had become widely idealized among the general public in Asia, with outstanding admissions results published by popular newspapers, fictional stories of successful characters depicted in novels and drama series, and marketing tactics used by big and small firms in the college admissions consulting industry.

The public had many reasons to be excited about elite institutions. Within the field of education, "accessibility" alone is an internationally supported institutional concept. The UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education (Coomans, 2008) specifies education as a human right by seeking to ensure "full and equal opportunities for education for all" (Article 1a), binding all countries that signed the Convention to formulate and implement national policies relevant to their specific contexts (Article 4). This objective is facilitated across different regions of the world, through a variety of national policies supporting students from various marginalized backgrounds such as mentally or physically challenged students, women, LGBTQ+ students, students from developing countries, and ethnic minorities (Lee, 2017; Woolfson et al., 2007).

At the regional level, newspapers in Asia often wrote about students from average backgrounds receiving offers of admissions from the top institutions in the United States. For example, the following story appeared in an article (Tan, 2010) published by AsiaOne, an English news, lifestyle, and entertainment aggregator providing content primarily to readers in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

> An Indonesian student was once rejected by Singapore Polytechnic [a vocational school in Singapore, similar to a community college in the United States] … due to a few B grades in high school… But [this student later] … became the first student from this polytechnic school to be accepted into Harvard University with a full scholarship from the Ivy League institution … [This student was the] youngest child

> of a retired mechanic and a housewife who lived in Bintan [an economically underdeveloped island in Indonesia].

Many articles published by popular newspapers in other Asian countries presented similar stories, in which students who came from average backgrounds and with less-than-stellar academic performance somehow successfully applied to and received offers of admissions from Ivy League institutions such as Harvard and Yale. To the public, this type of success story might have generated the impression that the Ivy League was within easy reach. One thing to note is that these popular newspapers, as aggregators of fast and easy-to-read news, did not elaborate on the specific details of the college application process, or the multiple struggles that individual applicants had faced before they received offer letters from Ivy League institutions. The detailed process of admissions remained a mystery to laypeople, while the successful results and full scholarships were emphasized, as these results would help attract public attention to the news.

In popular culture, a similarly hopeful attitude concerning the accessibility of the very top academic institutions seemed pervasive in many parts of Asia. On television, South Korean drama series depicted characters who "attended Harvard law school" and "got degrees from Yale" as the common archetypes of intelligent people (Wikipedia, 2022). Similarly, in Vietnamese fiction, some love stories took place while the main characters were attending the top academic institutions in the United Kingdom (Amazon Books, 2022). Indeed, in many Asian countries where higher education is linked to social mobility (Marginson, 2018; Mok, 2016; Mok & Wu, 2016), it is easy to understand why the accessibility of elite institutions in higher education is so idealized by the populace.

At the industry level, big and small admissions consulting firms in Asia used the names of prestigious institutions in their marketing strategies, boasting that their customers had received offers of admissions from Harvard and the like. For example, the "Result" webpage of an admissions consulting firm based in Hong Kong (Figure 1 below) showed the number of admissions offers that their customers had received using a table listing top-ranked American institutions (*Our results*). In other examples, my observation notes of public outreach events organized by admissions consulting firms with offices in Vietnam showed that the speakers at these events were former admissions officers from Princeton University and Stanford University. These speakers introduced themselves to the audience – the public – specifically highlighting their former work experience as college admissions officers at prestigious academic institutions and then explaining the process of admissions at their schools.

US News & World Report Ranking	School Name	# of Offers
1	Princeton University	1
2	Columbia University	2
2	Harvard University	1
5	Yale University	2
6	University of Chicago	1
8	University of Pennsylvania	1

Figure 1: The "Result" webpage of an admissions consulting firm

As aspirations for higher education and beliefs in the accessibility of the top academic institutions spread among the Asian public, it was no surprise that the wealthy parents purchasing Icarus' services would insist that consultants help their children submit applications to Ivy League and Oxbridge schools, or other elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world. This request became a major challenge to consultants at Icarus: according to one consultant at Icarus, "of course, almost everyone is going to be rejected by Harvard." The consultants' goal thus was to adjust customer expectations to make them fit with "reality." "Reality" in this case was defined by the final admissions results. Even though "reality" varied according to the specific situation at hand, it tended to be much less rosy than what the students and their parents had expected.

As one consultant at Icarus clearly stated, when working with clients on the college application process, "it is all about managing customer expectations." Customer expectations could be seen in the list of "target schools" that the students and their parents had in mind, as well as the clients' confidence in the chance of admissions. The list of "target schools" initially would often contain famous names such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, if the applicant was aiming for American institutions, or Oxford and Cambridge if the applicant was aiming for British institutions. According to my interviews with consultants and my observation notes of meetings between consultants and clients, not only did clients tend to fill their lists of "target schools" with distinguished names from the Ivy League, but clients also tended to have a level of confidence that was higher than the consultants' when it came to the chance of admissions. Eventually, "reality" was reflected in the final admissions results that the students received at the end of the application process. This "reality" would often match the consultants' initial perception of "reality" – there were lower-ranked and less prestigious schools that clients should have considered, and the "target schools" should have been viewed by clients as "reach schools" because the chance of admissions to these schools was negligible. To prevent clients from aiming for a list of schools that were impossible to reach and then regretting their choices, consultants at Icarus spent most of their work time debunking the idealized accessibility of elite academic institutions by translating a realistic understanding of this accessibility to their clients.

FINDINGS

To save clients from bitterness, anger, and disappointment at the end of the admissions process, "managing expectations" became crucial during the consulting process. As consultants at Icarus explained, they would succeed in managing customer expectations if they could: a) persuade clients to accept the extremely low probability that common applicants would get admitted by elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world, and then b) persuade clients to change the schools in their "target" lists to more "realistic" schools, or possibly still keep a few top-tier choices, but add more "realistic" schools to these lists.

As it became inherently clear through the consultants' daily work, the solution to the problem described above was the highly organized translation of an institutional concept: accessibility in higher education. My findings show that in their daily interactions and conversations with customers, the consultants at Icarus broke down the concept of "accessibility" into three "building blocks" (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), and purposively translated each of these building blocks into a way that would serve their objective: to lower customer expectations concerning the final admissions results. The three building blocks were:

The Selectivity of Institutions: Does your whole family have what it takes to apply to these schools?

The Competitiveness of Admissions: How stressed out will your children be while trying to apply to these schools?

The Quality of Education: What schools are "good (enough)" considering all your needs?

In this section, I detail the translation process – consultants' work in translating each of the above building blocks.

The Translation Process

Translate the Selectivity of Institutions. In this section, I show how consultants translate the first building block of "accessibility" – the selectivity of institutions – to their customers using framing tactics focusing on a) cultural values, b) financial background, and c) social class.

Cultural values. In showcasing their cultural values in college applications, most, if not all, parents and students seemed to believe that applicants could simply present themselves as they were in the applications. For students from Asian countries, common profiles tended to display strong collectivism, sentimentalism, strong influence from family, missing and/or unclear individual purpose, personal identities as defined and shaped by relationships with other people, and unfamiliarity with American writing styles, as demonstrated by application essays. For example, a raw piece of writing by a Vietnamese student, with comments from a consultant, took this form:

> Growing up, I did not know what to do with my life. To be honest, I still don't know now. I have no particular passion or interest. I like art, but I don't know what I like about it. *[Consultant's note: these details will NOT impress admissions officers.]* There is something about art that softens the harshness and cruelty of our earthly existence as ignorant beings… *[Consultant's note: abundant use of flowery language]* However, my family runs a small business selling fragrant incense. This incense business is an important part of my family tradition, and somebody in my family has to inherit and continue this business. I figure that person might as well be me, even though I myself am not very interested in incense. *[Consultant's note: this is not a legitimate reason; you need a different reason.]* My beloved Grandmother thought of an innovative way to infuse essential oil into incense, to make it smell better for longer. *[Consultant's note: very sudden switch to a story about Grandmother, without any hint in advance for the reader]* My beloved Grandmother passed away five years ago… *[Consultant's note: unnecessarily continuing a lengthy story on Grandmother for the next three paragraphs]* Therefore, I am applying to be a Business Management major at your university. *[Consultant's note: sudden conclusion, without any detail explaining why you are suited for Business Management]*

In the writing sample above, the consultant in charge of this particular student concluded that the student's way of thinking did not match the sense of self-direction and self-understanding that American colleges and universities would want for their Business Management programs, and the writing style did not match the clearly structured arguments that would be expected in college application essays. The consultant's work then was to fix this piece of writing and the student's way of thinking, so that it matches what consultants believed to be the common American standard. This would result in a significant amount of work in translating and explaining the appropriate image of an excellent applicant from a Western perspective.

Indeed, my observation notes show that consultants repeated certain keywords in their advice to students on how to present certain cultural values in their application essays and profiles. The four keywords that were repeated the most often were "leadership," "entrepreneurial spirit," "uniqueness," and "individual." Other examples include repeated sentences in consultants' advice to students on how to build their profiles and how to write application essays: “You need to stand out by having your own achievements, your own passion, and your own interests,” “No, you can’t say you apply to this major because your family expects you to do so… you must present your goals and purposes as an individual,” “I will help you edit this essay to make it more succinct and to the point, less flowery, and less emotional…. Omit all of these sentimental words.”

Financial background. According to consultants at Icarus, most clients, at least initially, tended to be optimistic about the prospect of “good students” receiving scholarships and financial aid from the top academic institutions in the United States, mostly due to the numerous success stories published by the media – stories depicting students from financially challenged backgrounds receiving full scholarships from prestigious academic institutions. In general, clients’ initial understanding of the matter was that scholarships and financial aid would be widely available to students, as long as their academic performance was good enough.

Consultants at Icarus disagreed with these hopeful and naïve ideas, stating that customers’ understanding of the matter did not fit “reality” according to what consultants knew about academic institutions in the United States. Consultants thus worked to translate a complex reality concerning financial requirements during the college admissions process. In their meetings with students and parents, consultants explained the concept of “EFC: Expected Family Contribution” – a specific number that every individual student would need to calculate and write into their college application. This number would tell the college admissions officers the amount of money a family could afford to pay for a student, considering the student’s family income and liabilities, and the student’s college tuition and fees, should they receive an offer of admissions. My observation notes show that during conversations on the EFC, consultants offered frank advice and explanation to students and their parents, dampening the hope for financial aid and scholarships. Examples include repeated sentences in strategists' advice to students: "We're not wasting time applying to colleges with a tuition higher than your EFC," "Colleges need money… Their major source of income is tuition. If your family is financially comfortable, your application looks better in the eyes of admissions officers."

Social class. According to consultants at Icarus, most customers' initial understanding of the application process was that this process had nothing to do with social class. However, all consultants at Icarus shared a clear understanding that in general, students from wealthy families, regardless of their actual academic performance and intelligence, would fare better in the application process. Indeed, a consultant explained this harsh reality in an interview:

> Our successful applicants tend to be from wealthy families; they are well-spoken, fluent in English, and they understand the cultural values of the English-speaking world, all of which makes it much easier for them to build an excellent application. It's not because they are more intelligent than impoverished students; it's because their families can afford to purchase more sophisticated forms of education for them and to pay for their trips abroad to broaden their perspectives… Also, on your profile as an applicant: How do you prove your leadership abilities? You organize events, you do internships, you do impactful stuff, right? Now, how do you promote your events or find internships while still a high school student? How do you even learn to organize events? Your parents or family members need to be businesspeople or know someone who does business; they need to have connections to powerful people at a certain hospital for you to get an internship at that hospital… If your parents are wealthy, powerful, or familiar with the business world, they are more likely to understand that in order to gain something, they need to invest, and they are more willing and more able to invest.

When asked whether consultants would directly use the same framing when talking to parents and students from poor families, a consultant said: "Yes. We say the same things to our customers. I don't allow my customers to see the world through rose-colored glasses."

In other words, consultants readily asserted a harsh frame of institutional selectivity while explaining to customers how the divides caused by social class would significantly affect admissions results.

Summarizing the importance of financial wealth and social class in the admissions process, one highly experienced consultant said in an interview:

> Between a very smart and diligent kid from a working-class family, and a lazy kid who is not as intelligent but whose parents are wealthy businesspeople or doctors… The rich, lazy kid has a much higher chance of being admitted by elite institutions. Why? Because I've been in this industry for long enough to really know what's going on… I don't want my clients to waste their time dreaming about how a kid from a working-class family will be among the extremely rare low-income students that Harvard chooses to admit after filling ninety-nine percent of its class with legacies, athletes, and the children of wealth, status, and power.

With this straightforward advice from consultants at Icarus, clients came to accept the selectivity of elite academic institutions, seeing that the requirements for applications to good colleges were difficult to fulfill for students from culturally and financially challenged backgrounds. To illustrate this acceptance, an interview excerpt is shown below. In this interview, a consultant summarized a situation in which a potential customer – a high school student – accepted the consultants' translation of institutional selectivity, and consequently gave up on using Icarus' services.

> There was a girl from a poor province in the mountains in the North of Vietnam… She saw our advertisements on Facebook, and she gave us a call. She was curious about what we said in our ads – that we could help Vietnamese students apply for admissions and scholarships at good colleges in the US. This girl was intelligent and hardworking… getting very good grades at her high school. However, it was a normal high school in a poor province in the mountains! With the type of environment in which she grew up and went to school, it would take forever for her English to be as good as the kids in the city. We needed good SAT scores, and she had not even heard of the word 'SAT' before. We needed good extracurricular activities, and her high school did not provide ample opportunities for that – it was a tiny high school. We needed a decent EFC – at least 20,000 USD per year – and her family had zero money; she was so poor, I think their total family income was less

> than 5,000 USD per year. Even if Icarus had provided her with free consulting services as charity, her family would still need to have something to count towards the EFC because most colleges in the US would want that, in addition to extracurricular activities and SAT scores… We translated all of that to her… We went through the list of requirements – SAT scores, English skills, extracurriculars, EFC, etc. We said that the kind of environment and background she had just made it very difficult for Icarus to realistically deliver our services. And the girl understood. She did not call us back.

Further explaining his perspectives on "the Vietnamese girl from the mountains," the consultant added a statement on his experience with successful applicants:

> Within the Vietnamese market, our successful applicants have been from either Ha Noi [the capital of Vietnam] or Ho Chi Minh City [the most economically developed city of Vietnam], and most of them attended prestigious high schools in those two cities.

Another consultant added in a separate interview:

> We're sure admissions officers at the top academic institutions in the US have taken a mental note of the fact that every time they admit someone from Vietnam, that applicant comes from a big city. They may even have the same list of prestigious high schools as we do. How would they view an applicant from an unknown high school in a poor province?

It was apparent that consultants at Icarus strongly believed that wealth and social class would help their customers in overcoming the selectivity of elite academic institutions. It was also clear that consultants did not hesitate to assert this frame of wealth and social class in their conversations with clients while explaining how inaccessible elite institutions could be to students from culturally and financially disadvantaged backgrounds. As conversations of this kind repeatedly took place between consultants and their customers, customers came to realize the selectivity of elite academic institutions, and thus accepted that Asian students from challenging backgrounds would be at "severe disadvantages" and sometimes "did not even have what it took" to apply to elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world. Overall, by using framing tactics focusing on cultural values, financial backgrounds, and social class, consultants successfully translated a highly selective image of elite academic institutions to their clients.

Translate the Competitiveness of Admissions. In this section, I show how consultants translate the second building block of "accessibility" – the competitiveness of admissions – to their clients, using framing tactics focusing on a) the level of achievement needed for an applicant profile, and b) the measurability of achievement.

The level of achievement. According to consultants at Icarus, clients tended to think that the achievements listed in the curriculum vitae of an applicant should simply be reflections of the applicant's capabilities, hobbies, and abilities. Thus, most clients thought it would be completely fine to have a less-than-perfect SAT score or a common hobby such as photography.

With their understanding and experience of how competitive college admissions could be at elite institutions, consultants disagreed with their clients and consequently spent a considerable amount of time trying to translate the level of achievement needed for a successful college application. In their conversations with customers, consultants constantly reinforced the extremely high standards for what could be called "achievement." For example, my observation notes record an incident in which a consultant frowned upon a mother's remark that her son's love for photography should be mentioned in the application essay. "Unless your son's photos are featured in the National Geographic magazine, photography as a hobby is not worth mentioning; it won't strengthen his profile at all" was the reply from the consultant to the mother.

In another example, my observation notes show how Michael, a highly experienced consultant and former college admissions officer, translated the competitiveness of admissions for Tom, a student trying to apply to Yale, by reading details from a real-life college application saved in Icarus' electronic library:

> "Okay, I will read some of the achievements listed in this curriculum vitae. I'm also sharing my screen with you, so you can also read these details by yourself. This is a real application by one of our previous clients at Icarus. This girl applied to Yale, to the same major as your intended major – Computer Science, and she was rejected." Michael said to Tom, and then started to read the details in the curriculum vitae as he scrolled his laptop mouse cursor. "This girl had an SAT score of 1600 out of 1600; was president of two clubs during high school, spoke three different languages, won first prize in national contests in the fields of Math AND Physics, played the piano AND the flute, volunteered to teach English to children in developing countries every summer during her high school years… Not trying to pressure you, but I needed to remind you that applicants with achievements at this level were rejected by Yale."

Data from my field notes show similar versions of the above frame being rehashed in meetings between consultants and their clients. For every student, consultants used the same framing tactic of showcasing the details in real-life profiles of former college applicants with perfect SAT scores and extraordinary lists of achievements. Consultants then explained to their students that to have a realistic chance of success in their applications to the top academic institutions in the United States, students would need to aim for SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and achievements of "this caliber." The standards showcased by consultants were impossible to reach for many students who, as a result, slowly came to accept that their profiles were not good enough for the top academic institutions.

The measurability of achievement. According to consultants at Icarus, their customers at first did not expect that the achievements listed in a curriculum vitae would need to be measurable. As a result, explanations from consultants were needed to clarify the importance of measurability. My observation notes record individual consultants repeating the terms “measurable” and “quantify” often in their conversations with each student. The statement “everything you do for your extracurricular activities must be measurable” and its variants were repeated in all conversations on extracurricular activities. For example, the following is an excerpt from my observation notes on a conversation between a consultant and a student, in which the consultant was reading an example of how to list out extracurricular activities in a curriculum vitae:

> Kate quickly read the activities listed in the curriculum vitae shown on her laptop screen. “Fundraising that resulted in 12,879 Singaporean dollars; Rock concert that sold 658 tickets; Smartphone app that was sold to 2 hospitals, each hospital paying 10,000 Singaporean dollars to purchase the license for this app; English class that taught 11 orphan children… See, you need something like that… If you don’t quantify it, the admissions officers won’t be able to see the impact of your work. Everything must be quantified and measurable.” Further explaining why measurability was important, Kate said to her student: “Look, I used to work as an admissions officer at a large public university in California. We had so many applications at the undergraduate level, and there were only a few people working as admissions officers at my institution… I had very little time – only 10 minutes – to read each individual application… and it was so hard to imagine how commendable a random extracurricular activity was, without details on the specific contexts. With numbers, it is easier for admissions officers to gauge the level of achievement.”

Kate’s methods of explaining were repeatedly used by all consultants at Icarus. As consultants translated the competitiveness of college admissions, they often employed a framing tactic that focused on the measurability of achievements, explaining that “numbers” would make certain applications stand out in the eyes of college admissions officers who had only a few minutes to read each application. My data shows extensive use of this framing tactic in all conversations on the competitiveness of admissions. For example, the following field note is an excerpt of an email in which a consultant replied to a mother’s complaint about the consultant’s very straightforward statement that her son, as an applicant, was not going to be admitted to Stanford University, and thus the son should not even waste time applying.

> Allow me to clearly translate the situation: Yasuru is not going to have the kind of achievements and academic results needed to apply to Stanford. All of his current test scores and extracurricular activities have been only decent, with a very slow rate of improvement in SAT scores – a slight increase from 1470 to 1510 in the last 10 months – and nothing particularly impressive in club activities or national exams. He has not won any big contest in any subjects related to his intended major at Stanford. He is already starting Grade 12 this fall, and he will be submitting his college applications in just a few months. With his current profile, it is quite impossible to make a big change with the very little time we have from now – July – to the application deadline – December. Yasuru won't reach the 1600 SAT score or get a first prize in a national contest by December. We should not waste time with his application to Stanford.

According to the consultant, the mother had initially objected to his remarks on her son's application. However, after the consultant repeatedly made use of numbers to support his explanation, the mother came to accept the consultant's judgment. Many other consultants at Icarus confirmed this framing tactic as highly effective. In the end, after consultants had employed framing tactics focusing heavily on exceptionally high levels of achievements and the measurability of achievements, most parents who initially had very high opinions of their children eventually accepted the "reality" as consultants translated it.

Translate Quality of Education. In this section, I show how consultants translate the third "building block" of "accessibility" – the quality of education – using framing tactics focusing on a) the nuances of ranking reports for academic institutions, and b) the fit between students and institutions.

The nuances of ranking reports for academic institutions. According to consultants, most, if not all, customers tended to have myopic views of ranking reports published for higher education institutions. Customers would "read the overall ranking report on US News [& World Report] and that's it," in one consultant's words. As clients only read the simple numbers concerning the ranks of institutions, higher-ranked schools were always better in the eyes of customers. Consequently, the desire to apply to higher-ranked schools was salient among clients, especially ambitious Asian parents who wished for the highest academic achievements for their children, but who did not know the specifics of academic institutions in the English-speaking world.

Consultants worked to translate their knowledge and expertise to clients in this realm, explaining that a high rank did not always equal high quality, and more informative ranking reports existed for various majors and fields in which particular schools specialized. Data from my field notes shows that typical conversations between consultants and their customers included the following statements:

> Big research universities are the worst; I don't know why anyone would want to attend UC Berkeley or Yale as an undergraduate student. I attended Yale for my bachelor's degree. I felt so neglected. The professors only cared about research. They didn't care about undergraduate students at all. You shouldn't want to attend a big university just because it's highly ranked.
>
> I know you want your daughter to pursue graphic design as a career, which means a few specific majors such as Arts, Design, and Communication. Instead of checking general ranking reports, why don't we look at the schools that are highly ranked for these specific majors only?

As consultants translated their own definition of "good schools" using a framing tactic focused on the nuances of ranking, they also explained various types of academic institutions and fields of study to their customers. This explanation proved useful when consultants moved to their next frame, which focused on the fit between students and institutions.

The fit between students and institutions. According to consultants, most customers simply thought that large and famous universities were always better, and consequently did not care much about the fit between individual students and various types of schools. Consultants worked to explain the idea of "fit." In doing so, consultants translated the differences between large universities and small liberal arts colleges, public and private schools, schools that were influenced by religious groups versus secular academic institutions, as well as the different types of cultural and geographic environments in which academic institutions functioned. Typical statements in these explanations included: "Based on your son's personality, he might prefer small liberal arts colleges where there are close communities and smaller classes," "Your daughter seems more suited for big cities and urban environments," and "Your child seems very outgoing and interested in extracurricular activities; we should keep that in mind while deciding on the school list."

My data also shows that many parents accepted the explanation of "fit" not because these parents fully understood the numerous differences among various types of institutions or cultural environments that consultants were translating, but because consultants' framing tactics made parents see that certain environments and academic programs could be isolating, demanding, and exhausting for their children. For example, my field notes describe a meeting in which a consultant succeeded in persuading her customers – two parents – to give up on their original plan of sending their daughter to a highly ranked medical school in the United Kingdom.

> Consultant: "So, we have been working on your daughter's applications to the top medical schools in the UK because that is your number one wish, and we will

definitely keep working on that. However, because the US also has many excellent medical schools, I want to encourage you to also consider the American side of this application, in addition to the UK. Your daughter could attend a four-year college in the US and major in Biology or Chemistry and then apply to medical school once she's done with her undergraduate program. We can add that American option to our plans, in addition to applying directly to medical programs in the UK at the undergraduate level."

> Father: "Why would you want to steer us towards the US?"

> Consultant: "Medical schools in the UK are extremely selective and competitive; I'm sure my colleagues have explained that to you before… These schools can also be quite isolating and demanding. I just met your daughter a few weeks ago; I am not sure whether she would be happy in that kind of environment. I need to repeat… the admissions process is extremely competitive for the top medical schools in the UK. It means the chance of admissions is close to zero, yes, but it also means your daughter will be extremely stressed out during the application process."

> Father: "I understand. Please add the American applications to our plans."

The field notes above are an example of how consultants eventually achieved their organizational objective of managing customer expectations concerning their consulting services. After repeated conversations on the selectivity of institutions and the competitiveness of admissions, parents became more accepting of the idea that their children would not have a realistic chance of getting admitted to the top academic institutions in the English-speaking world. As clients started to change their minds, consultants succeeded in lowering customer expectations concerning admissions results and persuading them to add more "safety schools" to the list. Changes in the school list, with more "safe options" added, would ultimately reduce customers' disappointment with admissions results when the results were published. With highly calculated and purposive actions to frame and translate "accessibility" in higher education, consultants achieved their objective: to align customer expectations with the reality that consultants worked hard to translate.

DISCUSSION

Translating the Building Blocks of an Institutional Concept to Various Audiences

My findings have shown how consultants at Icarus broke down an institutional concept into several building blocks, and how consultants translated each of these building blocks to their customers. This finding suggests the usefulness of building blocks in our conceptual examinations of how workers interact with institutional concepts and the beneficiaries of their work at the micro level. Many studies of firms' strategies at the macro level could be expanded to explore how workers interact with the firm's presentations of institutional meanings and concepts, the frames presented by the firm, and the building blocks of these frames. Studies on the translation and framing of institutional concepts could also be expanded by examining the reactions of clients and external audiences, as well as the changes in behaviors among these audiences. These explorations will strengthen our overall understanding of the micro-level dynamics of institutional processes, by clarifying the various links between organizational strategies towards institutions at the macro level and people's lived experiences and understandings of institutions at the micro level, as impacted by organizational strategies.

For example, in the study by Wright and Nyberg (2017), which describes how firms translated "climate change" and "corporate social responsibility" into "business as usual," many questions could be asked about the reactions of workers within these firms towards this translation. Additional studies could be conducted to examine workers' opinions towards their firm's translation of "corporate social responsibility" as a concept, specifically by examining workers' opinions towards each of the several building blocks of "social responsibility": "risks," "opportunities," "sacrifices," "regulations," and so on. Alternatively, we could break down the concept of "climate change," or "consequences of climate change," into several building blocks such as "extreme weather" and "wildfires," and conduct examinations of workers' experience with and understanding of each of these building blocks. In this light, we could also study the reactions from the public towards the firm's translation of corporate social responsibility. This kind of examination would help us understand people's lived experiences of corporate social responsibility and relevant concepts, as reflected in their daily interactions with various building blocks or elements of the concept itself.

Alternative Explanations

Instead of the translation of institutional concepts, an alternative explanation for the findings in this chapter could be a micro-level process of social reproduction. Social reproduction theory describes the reproduction of existing social relations, structures, and systems (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2019). According to Bourdieu (2018), there are four types of capital that contribute to social reproduction in society: 1) economic capital (money and other financial assets), 2) cultural capital (cultural knowledge that can confer social status and power), 3) social capital (interpersonal relationships and social networks), and 4) symbolic capital (honor, prestige, achievement, and recognition). At Icarus, the process through which consultants translated their knowledge of college admissions to their clients might have been a micro-level process of social reproduction. Indeed, various elements of the admissions process might have emphasized the four types of capital that contributed to social reproduction: 1) the explanation of the importance of financial background in the admissions process might have emphasized the role of economic capital, 2) the discussions on American values such as leadership and individualism in self-expression might have emphasized the role of cultural capital, 3) the conversation on the need for social connections to powerful people such as doctors and successful businesspeople, for the sake of extracurricular activities, might have emphasized the role of social capital, and 4) the demand for extraordinary levels of achievement might have emphasized the role of symbolic capital. By discussing and explaining the roles of these four types of capital in the admissions process, consultants might have reinforced the social divides among students from various cultural and financial backgrounds. Their consulting work thus might have reproduced the existing social structures and systems which separated and compartmentalized different types of applicants into different types of academic institutions. This work also might have reinforced the positions of elite academic institutions at the top of the social order.

CHAPTER 5

First, let's eat cake: Workers' use of physical objects in facing high pressure at work

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present my initial findings on the salespeople at Sparta – a small Vietnamese consulting firm, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I present my data and the preliminary findings that resulted from my initial attempts at data analysis, and then I identify concepts and directions that will guide my future attempts at data analysis. To do so, I start this chapter with a description of the research setting, showing the pressure that salespeople at Sparta faced daily at work, and how this pressure intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. I then describe my initial findings on the various ways in which salespeople at Sparta mentally escape their work-related pressure. In these initial findings, I show that salespeople made use of many physical objects to enact their social connections and cultural activities at work. These social connections and cultural activities helped salespeople face pressure by a) separating work-related pressure from non-work activities, and b) downplaying the importance of work-related pressure by putting that pressure into perspective. I end this chapter with a discussion of these initial findings, proposing concepts and reviewing existing studies that might be helpful for my future data analysis.

RESEARCH SETTING

The Pressure to Chase after Sales Targets at Sparta

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure to chase after sales targets had existed within the sales unit in the admissions consulting department at Sparta. Salespeople constantly received criticism from their manager when their sales figures, individually or collectively, did not reach the monthly targets that the management had assigned to each salesperson and the sales unit as a team. The following field note shows the frequency of the criticism:

> As I walked into the sales office, Ken, a salesperson, ran towards me, looking like a bullied child seeking comfort from a friend. Ken said to me:
>
> "Sister, my sister, you should have come a bit earlier! You could have seen lightning in the blue sky!"
>
> I understood what Ken was referring to. I smiled at him: "You guys got scolded again?"
>
> Ken dragged his words in a sarcastic manner: "Of course! We got scolded again because of the low sales this month. What else could have been waiting for us? Compliments? Our manager becomes more and more aggressive with this scolding. The only reason why I can collect myself after every round of scolding is because I'm used to it."

The data shows how workers in the sales unit were used to receiving criticism from their managers every time their monthly performance did not reach pre-assigned sales targets. In Vietnam, a country with relatively high power-distance in its culture, workers rarely confronted their managers or expressed their objections directly. Most salespeople at Sparta maintained a silent attitude towards their manager, as they received repeated criticism and felt the pressure from upper management to reach sales targets. Sometimes, when the pressure became intolerable, workers would talk among themselves, or to me, whom they had come to see as their confidant. "This morning, our manager scolded us right before the celebration of the Lunar New Year! Unacceptable! Completely unacceptable!" One worker gritted his teeth in anger while chatting with me about pressure at work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure seemed to intensify. Upper management still insisted on assigning monthly targets to its sales unit – targets that were impossible to reach. The manager of the sales unit continued to have meetings with the salespeople, repeatedly asking them to "do better and try harder" in their effort to sign contracts with clients. To make the situation worse, Sparta as a company was facing financial trouble caused by government restrictions and changes in the public attitude towards the idea of studying abroad. The following field notes illustrate the dire nature of the problem and how the salespeople at Sparta reacted to it.

> 2:30 PM in an afternoon in February 2021. The Sparta headquarters office was now re-opened after a short one-month COVID lockdown that the local government had imposed, in which all companies "providing non-essential services" had to close their offices. Of course, guidance for international admissions and plans to study abroad were hardly essential during a global pandemic.
>
> The whole building felt very quiet when I stepped in, mostly because there were fewer people around now. No more English classes at Sparta. The students were no longer here. A large number of staff members, in and out of the Sales department, had already quit. Sparta had fewer people now, and it was in great financial trouble, as were all companies in Vietnam. For Sparta, English classes constituted a large source of revenue and losing those classes due to the existing social distancing guidelines added more severity to an already dire situation caused by the loss of admissions consulting contracts. Downsizing was being considered at Sparta. The sales unit would have to keep a lower headcount, and it might also be re-structured in many ways. Right now, the headcount was already much lower than it used to be. When I started doing research at Sparta, the Sales department alone had about 45 people. Immediately before this one-month lockdown, there were 17 people left. As I walked upstairs to the Sales office, I wondered how many of those 17 people I would actually get to see today. Maybe the number was only 10 or 12 today. For the people who remained in the Sales department, as long as the top executives insisted on a sales target, there would be serious difficulties chasing it with the pandemic still looming.
>
> Yet, when I stepped in, everyone was eating some snacks. There were bowls of sticky rice, spring rolls, summer rolls, pancakes, mangos, and guavas. "You lost weight during the pandemic! That's not fair! We all gained weight! Come, eat!", two salespeople cried and grabbed my arms while still chewing their food. The number of people in this office was indeed only 11, including the two accountants who were

> not responsible for sales or customer service. However, everyone looked nonchalant and content as they were chewing their food together and chatted with one another.

As seen in the field notes, despite the extraordinarily high pressure that salespeople were facing at Sparta, there was observable contentment displayed among these employees, which seemed strange and questionable to me as an outsider. This strange contentment among workers begged the question "How do workers overcome extraordinarily high pressure at work?" In answering this question, my preliminary findings will show how salespeople at Sparta faced work-related pressure with the use of physical objects.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In this section, I present my preliminary findings on the ways in which salespeople at Sparta faced pressure at work. In the first part of the findings, I will show how physical objects helped workers enact social connections and cultural activities at work**.** In the second part, I will show how social connections and cultural activities helped workers face work-related pressure.

Physical Objects Helped Workers Enact Social Connections and Cultural Activities at Work

Physical objects helped workers enact social connections. My data shows that during the stressful times of the pandemic, conversations among workers often involved physical objects that could help workers enact social connections with other people. For example, in the following field notes, two employees discussed a costume competition that they were joining as part of their celebration of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year.

> "Lisa, what do you think about this traditional dress?" Tom asked Lisa, his colleague, while holding up a piece of clothing he had purchased earlier and showing it to her. "Look! I spent quite a bit of money on it."
>
> "Dude, it's really nice! I mean, it's difficult to find a traditional Vietnamese dress for men that looks nice. Your dress has a somewhat modern design; the cut and the fabric are both elegant and fitting."
>
> "It's going to be difficult for you to win against me." Tom said, apparently excited about the prospect of winning.

As seen in the field notes, the men's traditional dress sparked interactions and feelings of competition, which were helping Lisa and Tom enact social connections. This attitude was shared among many workers, and my data shows instances of employees interacting with one another and chatting about non-work topics as they happily prepared the materials and other physical aspects of their competitions.

Among salespeople at Sparta, physical objects and physical space seemed to be important gateways to social interactions. In an interview, a salesperson named Cindy talked about the benefits of her new workspace:

> I never had a desk to myself, let alone a whole cubicle… Now there are very few staff members left, so I have a whole cubicle for myself, right here. I can sit in my cubicle and look outside. I can chat with the people passing by my cubicle. When people see me sitting alone in this cubicle, they tend to come in and chat with me more often. They see that I have the space for myself, and I have enough space for them to come and sit down.

In this interview, Cindy described the role of the cubicle – or the physical space in general – in helping her enact social connections via random conversations with passers-by. This appreciation for random, chatty conversations was shared by many other workers. For example, a worker named Linh, in turn, talked about Cindy in a different interview. In this interview, Linh shared with me how she faced pressure by using the comfort that she found in putting flowers on her desk:

> "Linh, how do you handle the pressure from the very low sales figures?"
>
> "I surround myself with pretty things. For example, I buy flowers for myself." [pointing at the flowers on her desk]
>
> "Do you buy flowers for yourself very often?"
>
> "Yes. Especially these days, when the work is stressful, I buy new flowers every three days and bring them to my office. They bring me comfort. [smiling] Young and single women like Cindy have suitors buy flowers for them. A married woman like me has to buy flowers for herself."
>
> "Cindy receives flowers from her suitors?"
>
> "Yes. Oh my god! You really should have come earlier! You would have had a chance to glance at this young man when he was standing across the street, waiting for Cindy. He was standing across our office… Look at that bouquet on Cindy's desk. He bought it for her this morning. He buys her flowers every week…" [Linh proceeded to tell a 15-minute-long story of how Cindy and this man had met, and how this man had pursued Cindy].

Once again, physical objects – flowers in Linh's case – proved quite helpful in enacting social connections. In this case, the flowers not only brought Linh comfort but also helped to start conversations about other people's lives and personal relationships.

My data shows that food also served as important gateway to social connections. Workers enjoyed eating together, whether or not it was time for a meal. Data from my field notes show how casual gatherings in the name of food were a source of joy for many workers.

> "What's the occasion today? This is a lot of food." I asked as salespeople handed me various kinds of food when I visited their office and saw them chatting happily while eating together. It was 2:30 PM, very much past lunchtime and too early for dinner.
>
> "Friday, as usual. We always had a small party on Friday afternoon every week, don't you remember?" One person said. Another looked excited as she added: "Here, try this sticky rice! It is really good! It smells like jasmine, and it has coconut, peanuts, and red beans in it. I am so proud of myself for being able to buy this! I thought the seller would go out of business during the lockdown. But they still survive!"

Overall, physical objects such as clothing and accessories, the physical space of an office, or various kinds of food helped employees enact social connections by starting conversations on non-work topics. In the next section, I show how physical objects helped workers enact cultural activities.

Physical objects helped workers enact cultural activities. My data on Sparta shows a strong presence of local cultural beliefs in the workplace. In many cases, workers purposefully used physical objects to perform specific activities that were highly influenced by their cultural beliefs. In the following field notes, I asked a worker named Tony about the fruits on his desk.

> "What are you doing with all of those fruits on your work desk?"
>
> "They are for worshipping. The fruits are part of the ceremony in which I worship the Money God. See this glass-framed calligraphy of the Chinese character 'Prosperity' on my desk? It represents the presence of the Money God. Every time I buy fruits, or any kind of food really, for myself to eat, I place the food in front of this Chinese character as a form of worshipping. I leave the food there for a few hours before I eat it."

This strong focus on spirituality played an important role among many workers. My data shows that spirituality often inspired workers to perform cultural activities at work, even though these activities were not related to their work. In the following field note, a worker named Lee was going to perform a "spiritual cleanse" of his office space by spraying a homemade "disinfectant" in his office.

> "Sister, can you step out of my office for a few seconds? I need to cleanse my office. The spirit of that annoying customer must have been lingering in my office ever since she sat down in my office yesterday. My motorbike broke down and my house got flooded last night. Such terrible luck. If I don't do this cleanse and get rid of that goddamn customer's spirit, the bad luck will continue." Lee said to me while holding a bottle of homemade liquid disinfectant mixed with ginger oil and cinnamon oil. Lee then sprayed that liquid mixture all over his office. "I made this liquid by myself." He continued to explain.

As shown above, the bottle of liquid was important in Lee's enactment of his own cultural beliefs. My observation notes also show that Lee paid special attention to liquid, which he had made himself and carried to work daily. My data shows that other workers displayed similar attention towards the physical objects that reflected their own cultural beliefs. In a separate interview, I talked to Alex, who had organized the traditional costume competition during the Lunar New Year:

> "How did you come up with the idea of the traditional costume competition?"
>
> "Well, I like cultural stuff. The Lunar New Year is all about culture, right? I guess you could do a quiz on Vietnamese culture or something like that, but I'm really into seeing culture being reflected in people's clothing and accessories, and seeing people prepare their clothing in a specific manner. It's much more interesting and fun, especially when we're so depressed during the pandemic."

As seen in the data, Alex emphasized the link between culture and physical objects in his thoughts about the competition as a cultural activity. Additionally, Alex talked about the activity as a way of coping "during the pandemic." In the next section, I will elaborate on how exactly social connections and cultural activities helped workers face work-related pressure.

How Social Connections and Cultural Activities Helped Workers Face Work-Related Pressure

In this part of the findings, I present two different ways in which social connections and cultural activities helped workers face work-related pressure: (1) compartmentalize work-related pressure by separating that pressure from non-work activities, and (2) downplay work-related pressure by putting that pressure in perspective.

Compartmentalize work-related pressure by separating that pressure from non-work activities. My field notes and interview transcripts show that for many workers, non-work activities performed at work could be quite important, especially when those activities involved aspects of personal relationships and interactions. In the following field notes, Lee had come to see me, the researcher, as a friend, and thus proposed a friendly meal during work hours.

> Lee said to me once the "cleansing" of his office was complete: "Sister, what do you feel like eating? I will treat you. Let's eat together to celebrate the cleansing of my office."
>
> I said to Lee: "You're ordering food FOR ME during work hours? You're too kind. Did you sign a contract with a customer today?"
>
> "Not at all. I haven't signed a contract with any customer for the last ten days. But I want to eat with you. Work is work, and meals with friends are meals with friends. Two different things, right? Can't let bad things at work affect your meals with friends. What do you want to eat? First, let's eat cake."

As can be seen in the field notes, Lee chose to focus on a social connection – friendship – at work, after performing non-work activities influenced by his cultural beliefs. His decisions seem to have helped him mentally escape work-related pressure because he could not "let bad things at work affect [his] meals with friends."

Indeed, when employees at Sparta chose to focus on cultural activities and social connections at work, they seemed successful in mentally escaping the pressure created by poor sales results during the pandemic. In the following field notes, workers even appeared happy and excited while preparing for a costume competition during the celebration of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. This was true, even though this Lunar New Year celebration took place during the pandemic when sales figures were very low.

"I must win the Best-Traditional-Costume prize today." Tom said to me.

> “You’ve got competition, Tom. Every single one of your colleagues is going all out on their traditional costumes. I saw Lisa buy an ancient wooden hairpin just to complete her traditional dress.”
>
> “We’ll see. I hear there will be a Catwalk contest. Lisa might be a woman and she might have that hairpin, but I will win the Catwalk contest.” Tom replied. Then he turned to Mary, a colleague and close friend of his. “Mary, do you happen to know where I can buy a decoration cloth for my hair? The thing that Vietnamese men often wore on their hair two hundred years ago, together with the traditional costume. You know the market where they sell it, right? Can you go with me to buy it today, after work?”
>
> “You are all so excited about this.” I said.
>
> “This competition is the reason I woke up this morning.” Tom said and turned to Mary again: “We’re definitely going to the market today, after work. There is life after work.”

As seen in the data, the costume competition seemed to be a valid reason for Tom to separate life from work, as he himself said, “there is life after work.” By choosing to take part in the competition, Tom allowed cultural activities to distract him from the pressure he and his colleagues were facing at work.

Downplay work-related pressure by putting that pressure in perspective. The second way in which social connections helped workers at Sparta face work-related pressure was to put it in perspective, making work-related pressure appear insignificant when compared to more colorful and long-term depictions of life. For example, in an interview, a worker named Rose talked about how she faced work-related pressure. Rose described the random conversations that she had with people passing by her office – conversations that were not at all related to work:

> I enjoy chatting with people… I like listening to stories, like stories of Cindy and her suitors... During this time, when Sparta is facing so many difficulties, it’s nice to remind myself that life is still good… There is a colorful world out there… People are still dating, people are still in love, people are living their lives… I am good at putting things in perspective.

As seen in the data, Rose stated that "chatting with people" and "hearing different stories from different people" helped to remind her that "life is still good." The social connections that Rose enacted with other people in her conversations served as a reminder of "a colorful world out there." This in turn helped Rose put her own work-related pressure "in perspective."

This attitude towards non-work conversations was shared by many other workers. For example, a worker named Cindy, in an interview, described how stories of other people's lives helped her downplay the pressure she felt at work:

> Look at the security guard standing outside our building. He's been chatting with me because my office is close to the main door, where he often stands. He's been at this company for 10 years… He only works as a security guard, but he manages to save up enough to send his two children to college. His wife does not make a lot of money either, I hear. But they are living very happily, now that their children are both doing well in college, and they don't have much to worry about. It is amazing how little you might need for your happiness… When I hear stories like that, I start to think it will be okay even if I lose my job here during the pandemic. It's just temporary, right?

In short, the social connections and cultural activities that workers enacted at work helped them face work-related pressure in two ways: a) compartmentalizing work-related pressure by separating that pressure from non-work activities, and b) downplaying work-related pressure by putting that pressure in perspective.

DISCUSSION

In my discussion of the initial findings, I will a) introduce areas of literature that might be helpful for my conceptualization and future analysis of the initial findings, and b) present my plans for future data analysis. Specifically, I first review management studies that show how physical objects can be used as indicators of workplace identities (Elsbach, 2004; 2009), memory anchors of organizational life (Shortt & Izak, 2021), and expressions of political resistance at work (Taskin, Courpasson, & Donis, 2022). I then suggest a view of these factors – people's identities, memory anchors, and expressions of political resistance – as constituting a socio-cultural world, and I discuss future directions of data analysis, in which I plan to examine in detail how elements of this socio-cultural world influence workers' stress-coping strategies.

Elsbach (2004; 2009) has examined the role of physical objects as indicators of workplace identities. In a qualitative study, Elsbach (2004) shows how employees in corporate office environments interpreted a variety of relatively permanent office decor (e.g., furniture, photos, personal mementos) as indicators of their colleagues' workplace identities (i.e., central, and enduring categorizations regarding employees' status and distinctiveness in the workplace). In another qualitative study, Elsbach (2009) describes how toy car designers displayed their creativity by developing and using "signature styles" through their work. The display of these signature styles – that were not advertised, stamped on products, or even recognized in official corporate marketing communications – allowed designers to affirm their creative, professional identities while designing commodity products within the practical constraints of a corporate context. Elsbach (2009) demonstrates that creative workers used signature styles, primarily, to affirm the identity categorizations of "idealistic" and "independent."

Expanding on the social aspect of physical objects used by workers, Shortt and Izak (2021) discuss physical objects as memory anchors of organizational life. Specifically, the authors propose the concept of "scarred objects" – markedly used physical objects such as scuffed floors and battered desk corners at the workplace – and the role of "scarred objects" as materials for workers' autobiographical archives and memory anchors of organizational life. Using empirical and visual data gathered from a nine-month study involving forty-three hairdressers working at various hair salons, the authors show how "scarred objects," construed as insignificant by some, become integral to hairdressers' sense of memory and continuity of their work and social life at the salons. Shortt and Izak (2021) argue that these "scarred objects" had become "time marks" (Walsh, 2002) and "heritage", providing hairdressers with a sense of embeddedness in an otherwise impermanent and transient working world, typical of the hairdressing profession. The authors argue that "scarred objects" were viewed as highly significant by workers at hair salons because these objects were evident of workers' relationship to organizational life, mediated through workers' memories.

Taskin and Colleagues (2022) show how physical objects can be used to express political resistance at work. In their study, the authors investigate workers' resistance to the introduction of "flex-work" – defined as a combination of shared standardized offices and telework – at a large Belgian organization. The authors show that workers at this organization strongly disliked the new organizational rules emphasizing an austere standardized workplace, such as "No customization," "No plants," "One set of stationery material allowed per four offices," and "Keyboard/mouse stored in the locker." Workers actively resisted this workplace transformation through the purposive use of personal objects. For example, workers purposefully and collectively put their children's drawings on the lockers at the workplace, hung personal photos on the walls, and put sticker notes on their chairs, writing "It's my chair; do not touch my chair!" on these sticker notes. In this study by Taskin and colleagues (2022), workers' use of physical objects demonstrates practices of political resistance by using objects to convey their claims and physically occupy their workspaces. Taskin and colleagues (2022) argue that the "politicality" of physical objects came from the meaning that workers assigned to objects when they chose to use these objects to maintain and assert their bodily presence at work. Overall, the above studies have shown how physical objects can be used as indicators of workplace identities (Elsbach, 2004; 2009), memory anchors of organizational life (Shortt & Izak, 2021), and expressions of political resistance at work (Taskin, Courpasson, & Donis, 2022).

I argue that all the above factors – identities, memories of organizational life, and expressions of political resistance – could represent various parts of a large socio-cultural world carried by individual workers. For each worker, a "socio-cultural world" can be defined as the worker's social life, which is infused with and shaped by cultural backgrounds, personal values, and belief systems. These cultural backgrounds, values, and belief systems are manifested in the individual's daily life activities, relationships, and interactions with other people. In Elsbach's studies (2004; 2009), the categorizations of status and distinctiveness that served as workplace identities only had meanings because they were formed in social comparisons, and the categorizations such as "idealistic" and "independent," are expressed by creative signatures styles, reflected cultural beliefs shared by many workers. In the study by Shortt and Izak (2021), the hairdressers carried in their minds an organizational life full of activities and interactions with other people, and "scarred objects" served as reminders of those activities and interactions. In the study by Taskin and colleagues (2022), workers' political resistance was brought to life because workers had talked and discussed among themselves and with their union representatives, and they had settled on their values and personal preferences before putting up expressions of resistance against changes at their workplace. Indeed, creative signature styles, “scarred objects,” and personal items such as one’s children’s photos and sticker notes reflect microcosms of workers’ social and cultural lives – the cultural values and meanings that workers assigned to certain objects while making sense of their work environment, the social interactions, and activities that workers saw as important, and the collective resistance that was supported and joined by workers’ peers.

My plan for future data analysis is to develop links between my preliminary findings on the use of physical objects at Sparta and the above conceptual discussions on the use of physical objects at work, to find detailed common ground between my initial findings and existing literature. In my initial findings, fragments of a socio-cultural world could be seen in the social connections and cultural activities that workers chose to enact with the use of physical objects. In particular, I have shown how objects such as flowers, traditional clothing, food, and “disinfectant” spray could help workers enact social connections – such as friendship or healthy competition among colleagues – and cultural activities – such as a spiritual cleanse of one’s office or a celebration of a traditional holiday – that in turn allowed workers to mentally escape the pressure they were facing at work. In my future attempts at data analysis, I plan on examining further the conceptual link between the physical objects that workers choose to use at work and the socio-cultural world encompassing workers. I will strive to produce a cross-level examination of how social connections, cultural values, and belief systems at the macro level influence workers’ stress-coping strategies at the micro level.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarize the findings in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, and discuss the implications of these findings. Specifically, I summarize the incomplete solution to paradoxical tensions in Chapter 3, in which an accommodation of the paradox was achieved at the organizational level with an acceptance of indeterminacy at the micro level. I summarize the translation process in Chapter 4, through which consultants translated to their clients a realistic understanding of the accessibility of elite academic institutions in the English-speaking world. I review the use of physical objects in Chapter 5, which helped workers enact social connections and cultural activities, thus mentally escaping work-related pressure. I then discuss the overall implications of these three chapters, in light of how societal values and power struggles can deeply affect service work.

Chapter 3 of my dissertation shows the complexity of the interpersonal relationship between consultants at Icarus and their clients and how certain tensions in this relationship may never fully resolve. Specifically, when consultants at Icarus struggled to navigate the tension between intimacy and professionalism – two elements of the paradox – in their daily interactions with customers, they eventually became exhausted and needed to withdraw from the relationship, either temporarily or permanently. The management at Icarus realized this, and actively arranged a queue of consultants to face demanding customers – when a consultant became exhausted and needed to withdraw from all interactions with a specific customer, another consultant would be available to handle that customer's demands. As a result, the ongoing tension between the two elements of a paradox was permanently accommodated at the organizational level, and the organization as a whole was able to achieve long-term relief from the tension. However, at the micro level, there was absolutely no relief. Every individual consultant perpetually spent their time and energy trying to satisfy customer demands while attempting to protect their own boundaries. The firm was able to achieve long-term relief from a paradoxical tension at the organizational level only because it accepted the indeterminacy of the paradox – no relief for the workers – at the micro level.

Chapter 4 of my dissertation describes the process in which consultants at Icarus translated an institutional concept – "accessibility in higher education" – to their clients, in response to the clients' high and unrealistic expectations concerning the college admissions process. Specifically, consultants broke down the concept into three different building blocks and translated these to their clients, using frames that clearly pointed out the inaccessibility of the top academic institutions in the English-speaking world. While discussing the building blocks of "accessibility," consultants demonstrated that success in the application process depended largely on factors that applicants could not change, such as cultural backgrounds, family income, social class, and so on. Consultants also emphasized the extraordinary levels of achievement required for successful applications to the top academic institutions. As these frames were repeated in most conversations between consultants and their clients, the clients came to accept the social divides and institutional barriers that separated applicants from privileged backgrounds and those from disadvantaged backgrounds in the college admissions process. Consultants also translated to their clients a nuanced view of quality of education using frames that focused on the fit between students and institutions, instead of the ranking and prestige of institutions. With this translation process, consultants achieved their objective of lowering customer expectations concerning the final admissions results and successfully persuaded their clients to add more "safe options" to the lists of schools for which the students were aiming.

The preliminary findings in Chapter 5 describe the various ways in which salespeople at Sparta faced the pressure resulting from extremely low sales figures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, workers in the sales unit used physical objects – flowers, food, clothing, personal accessories, and so on – to enact social connections and cultural activities at work. The purpose of these social connections and cultural activities had little to do with work, but they helped workers mentally escape work-related pressure. By directing workers' minds to larger, more colorful, and more long-term depictions of life, social connections and cultural activities enabled workers to a) compartmentalize work-related pressure by separating that pressure from non-work activities, and b) downplay work-related pressure by putting that pressure in perspective.

Overall, the three empirical essays of my dissertation show the dynamic interactions between various elements of a socio-cultural world – human connection, culture, and social class – and the challenges workers face in service work, as well as how workers may overcome these challenges. In Chapter 3, I show the challenge of human connection – how complex and demanding it can be, and how paradoxical and exhausting it can become. In Chapter 4, I show the challenges of culture and social class – how these two things shape a cold and harsh reality full of social divides, as well as the process through which workers translate this social reality to their customers. In Chapter 5, my preliminary findings detail how the manifestation of social reality can also help workers face work-related challenges:

workers can choose to rely on their own social connections and culture to overcome the mental pressure they face at work.

The findings of my dissertation suggest certain angles to think about when it comes to the relationship between societies – particularly the values and standards that societies nurture and reflect – and the service industry, service work, and work in general. My findings in Chapter 3 show that customers can be unreasonably demanding, causing various sorts of stress and exhaustion for service workers. However, in addition to the demanding attitude often displayed by wealthy people in most societies, it is hard to argue against universal values such as the love and care that parents feel towards their children, and parents' desire and hope that their children will always be loved and treasured by people around them and people working with them. My findings in Chapter 4 show a clash between two societies – a Western one, which shatters hopes of equality with institutional barriers, and an Eastern one, which has its own beliefs and values but finds itself chasing after the values and standards established by the West. Service workers and their customers are thrust into a clash between two societies and can only remove themselves from this conflict by adhering to one set of values and standards – the Western set. Setting aside the "service" aspect, my preliminary findings in Chapter 5 show how "work" in general, and workers' mental health in particular, might benefit from workers' enactment of their own cultural values, and their decision to focus on a socio-cultural world outside of work.

As cliché as it may sound, the findings of my dissertation reflect various power struggles in society. One power struggle was most visible in Chapter 4, where students from Asian countries had to give up their worldviews, perspectives, and cultural values, to follow Western standards upheld by large academic institutions in the English-speaking world. A power struggle was also visible in Chapter 3, where service workers at Icarus needed to try their best to satisfy demands from wealthy customers and obey the directions from the top management, even though upper management never experienced the daily struggles of service workers first-hand. Power struggles seemed largely absent in Chapter 5, but a possible reason was that salespeople at Sparta had decided to escape this struggle – they chose to care more about their social connections and cultural values than they did about plummeting sales figures and the pressure from management to improve these figures. In other words, salespeople's decision to downplay "work" might have helped them escape the power struggles that service workers at Icarus faced.

In a way, my dissertation on service work begs even more questions than provides answers on work and society. As an educator, I wonder what I could do with my service work, as education is a service. I wonder how I can balance my own beliefs and values as they come into contact with my Vietnamese students' beliefs and values, how I could respond to the differences between my perspective and my students' perspectives, how I manage my interpersonal relationship with students, and how I can help my students enact a socio-cultural worldview that both parties believe is good and healthy, not only for their personal development and experiences in the workplace but also for humanity and societal progress. These are the questions that I will spend the next few decades attempting to answer.

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