5. Internal Differentiation: The Offices

Chapter 4 focused on the organisation's differentiation *to* the environment and its differentiation *of* the environment. The next step of the analysis is to trace the strategies of *internal* differentiation and the emergence of subsystems within Advice Company. With this aim, Chapter 5 characterises the three offices of Advice Company in the city and describes their meta-function in the organisational structure. The purpose of this chapter is hence to build another layer of understanding of the organisation as a social system. Chapter 6 builds on this differentiation and zooms in on the internal differentiation within the individual offices by tracing the perceived invisible boundaries between departments and teams.

Commencing with an introduction to the internal differentiation of social systems more broadly, the chapter focuses on the role played by the three offices in system differentiation. On the basis of a comparison of each office's access procedures (Section 5.2) and equipment (Section 5.3), the three offices seem to be located on a continuum representing distance to the client, with a hierarchical structure suggesting client centricity as the primary value along which Advice Company orientates. The analysis of the atmosphere as perceived by the employees across the three offices (as presented in Section 5.4), however, indicates a more complex internal differentiation strategy. The analysis reinforces the theoretical framework of Gernot Böhme (1995), who understands "atmospheres as tempered spaces". The ethnographic data illustrates how the client-centric internal differentiation is recreated in the office atmosphere. But at the same time, the analytical category of "atmosphere" allows for a differentiated view of the offices with contradicting notions that suggest ground reality as an opposing value to client centricity and hence the second term of Advice Company's guiding difference.

5.1. Increasing differentiation to reduce complexity

Internal differentiation is a key trait of any social system. Internal sub-systems replicate organisational boundaries with the environment and can therefore use these boundaries to establish a special environment for their operations. Within this "secured" organisational setting, the sub-systems serve as environments to each other. On the one hand, this increases the complexity of the entire organisational system; on the other hand, it reduces the complexity of the sub-system: the sub-system only needs to be concerned with autopoietic reproduction and boundary differentiation to its own system-specific environment, as the reproduction of the whole system is already taken care of. Luhmann describes this reduction of complexity as follows:

> Internal differentiation connects onto the boundaries of the already-differentiated system and treats the bounded domain as a special environment in which further systems can be formed. This internal environment exhibits special complexity reductions, which are secured by the external boundaries; relative to the external world, it is an already-domesticated, already-pacified environment with lessened complexity. (Luhmann 1995a: 189)

While differentiation occurs constantly within an organisation, only a limited number of differentiation forms persist to the extent that they constitute sub-systems (ibid.: 190). Luhmann distinguishes the persistent forms of differentiation into five categories:

> [D]ifferentiation into similar units (segmentation), the differentiation of center/periphery, the differentiation conforming/deviant (official/unofficial, formal/informal), hierarchical differentiation, and functional differentiation. Apparently, the only forms of differentiation able to survive are those that can mobilise processes of deviation-amplification (positive feedback) to their own advantage and keep themselves from being levelled out again. (ibid.: 190)

Besides listing functional and hierarchical sub-systems, Luhmann also describes sub-systems based on differentiation as centre/periphery or conform/deviant. The segmentation of a system into equal units, which is typical for clans, is less prevalent in the organisational context. According to Luhmann, most emerging sub-systems in an organisation – such as discussion groups that come together in an aisle or around a desk – are of short duration and can only be regarded as interaction systems (ibid.: 193).

There are several understandings of the notion of a centre/periphery distinction in the context of organisational structure. One point of view stems from network structure theory and understands the "core" as a cohesive group of core actors, in opposition to peripheral actors, who are loosely connected in their network ties to the core group. Such structures are investigated through social network analysis (e.g. Mintz and Schwartz 1981, Borgatti and Everett 2000). Another approach to the centre/periphery distinction is based on the type of membership to an organisation, whereby permanent, highly skilled employees are considered the core, with their knowledge and skill considered of high value to the organisation and worth securing through membership privileges. In this view, the peripheral workforce is the group of employees on temporary contracts, whose expertise can be bought when needed and who are thought to have a loose relationship with the organisation (Deery and Jago 2002: 342). Recent studies have argued that this bifurcation of the centre/periphery structure is not necessarily valid, as more complex layers of internal workforce differentiation exist, and employees on temporary contracts do not necessarily have higher job changing rates than their permanently employed peers. Gino Cattani and Simone Ferrarini, for example, argue that "peripheral actors are more likely to con tribute fresh perspective to the system and maintain high intrinsic motivations, although they lack the visibility and endorsement necessary to boost their work's recognition" (2008: 827).

An example of an anthropological study in the organisational context that adopts the analytical framework of centre/periphery is Christina Garsten's (1994) ethnography, *Apple World*. Her work investigates the cultural similarities and differences within the three interlinked offices of the technology company Apple. Her field sites include the organisational headquarters in California, the European head office in Paris and the Stockholm city office; along these offices, she traces centre/periphery relationships in conjunction with characteristics of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, her work analyses the way in which the concepts and strategies developed at the organisational headquarters are reinterpreted and undergo additions and modifications across the organisation.

Luhmann's distinction of centre/periphery suggests a geographical slope in a hierarchical order; this differentiation might be suitable for a client-centric organisation such as Advice Company. Yet such a differentiation might limit the perspectives one can take on internal differentiation. Therefore, in this chapter, my analysis will focus on the extent to which Advice Company's internal structure repeats the system-environment differentiation based on

the guiding difference client centricity / ground reality. To provide insight into this first aspect of the black box of organisational functioning, I start with an analysis of the differential access procedures across the three offices.

5.2. Access procedures: From elaborate to basic

As illustrated in Section 4.1.1, access to the main office is granted only when one passes three gates that gradually differentiate access based on one's formal relationship to the organisation. Both the elaborate access procedures and the type of office building at the main office provide insight into the organisation's internal differentiation relative to the other two offices of Advice Company in the city. The names I have given the three offices are partially terms used by my interlocutors. There was no consistent nomenclature for the three offices, but the most broadly used terms referred to the names of the districts in the city in which the different offices were located. Another naming strategy was to refer to the acronyms of the main department or function at the location, such as the "TFA office" (fictional acronym). A third strategy named the office in reference to the company operating or renting the building. All the names derived from those three strategies might have threatened to accidently disclose the identity of Advice Company. Therefore I have decided to take "main office" and "city office" as names for the first two offices. These are both terms which were used by my interlocutors, albeit not as often as the first naming strategy I described. "Street office" is a term I have given to the third office, as all local terms were not sufficiently confidential.

5.2.1. The city office

Advice Company's second-largest office, with about 250 employees, is located in the centre of the city in a compound of several office buildings in which various organisations are based. The compound is significantly smaller than the one that hosts the main office and there are two options for entering the compound: one can enter from the main street as a pedestrian or via the alternative entry from a side road, through which it is easier to avoid the heavy traffic and to reach the employee parking lot. At both entries sits a security guard, who checks individuals for a badge issued by one of the companies on-site. Advice Company's office is located in one of the four flat buildings on the compound and previously served as the main office several years ago, before

the main office moved to its current location. This location history will become relevant in section 5.4, in my analysis of the perceived office atmospheres. There, I will show how the memories of the main office employees of their former workplace play a major role in shaping their image of the current city office.

After passing one of these first gates, one must walk 50 or 100 metres, respectively, to the Advice Company office entrance. A small placard of about 40x20 centimetres indicates the company name next to the sliding doors, which lead into the reception area – a room of approximately 5x12 metres. In the reception area, white tiles line the floor and the walls are faced with dark brown wooden panels garnished with white, illuminated plates on which posters of the latest global Advice Company internal image campaigns are displayed: "Commit to Grow" or "Strive for Big Impact" are written next to images of smartly dressed 20-somethings from all ethnic origins. Behind a dark brown wooden counter with a glass top featuring a small fresh flower decoration sits a man wearing a uniform of a white shirt and a police-style hat. The counter has a small hip-level annex to the left, on which a guest book is left open. Next to the counter is a seating area with two black leather sofas and a chair arranged around a low table. On both ends of the reception area, doors lead to the actual workspace, which is – similar to the set-up of the main office – invisible from the reception. The neat appearance of the desk, with the illuminated posters, is disrupted by a blue, cheap looking plastic rack that is overloaded with papers and a standing fan on the right side.

When I came to this office for the first time I accompanied Poorva, who was primarily located in the main office but travelled to the city office regularly for meetings with the staff there, for whom she was the main HR contact. Hence, my entry was probably easier than what a completely new person would have experienced. But even taking this into account, the access procedure was much simpler than the procedure in place for accessing the main office. Poorva and I arrived by taxi at the side street entry of the compound and she told me to take out the "Consultant" badge I had been given by the main office's receptionist. With this in hand, I passed through the gate and hardly caught a glance from the two security guards who were standing around a small table in the booth next to the barrier. When we reached the office building and entered through the sliding doors into the reception area, the watchman smiled at us and opened a drawer to fetch me a "Visitor" badge before my patron for the day could tell him: "Frauke is our intern at the main office and she will come here for the next three months, okay?" He smiled

again at me, passed the badge over the counter and told me to return it in the evening. Then I signed in to the visitor's book and Poorva and I swiped our badges on the card reader to open the surprisingly narrow door into the office area.

Over the next weeks, I happened to arrive several times together with Aranjit, a colleague I had accompanied at the main office before. From this I learned that there is indeed no distinction made between the type of visitor arriving at the city office. Both Aranjit and I had to register by writing into the very same book and we both received the same "Visitors" badge to pass through the doors. Furthermore, in this office, swiping the badge served solely to open the door and not to track entry and exit. When colleagues went for *chai* breaks at the stall on the street, they would ask around to make sure at least one person in their group had a badge to open the door for the others when they returned. In contrast to the main office, in this office, the doors are unlocked from the inside by pressing a button rather than swiping a badge. It is very apparent that this access procedure is significantly less complex and distinctive than the procedure in place at the main office: not only are there fewer gates to pass through and a reception desk guarded by only one person (instead of two), but no distinction in badge is made between the employees located in this office and everybody else, regardless of their relationship with the organisation.

The symbolic rather than primary functional meaning of this procedure is marked by the fact that, during a few weeks when I had to arrive at the office very early (at 7.30am), I found "my" visitor badge (I always got one with the number 6 written on the back) lying on the counter on top of the visitor book next to the pen. Thus, I was able to grant myself access to the office without having to wait for the uniformed receptionist to return from checking on the cleaning staff.

5.2.2. The street office

The third and smallest office of Advice Company was only six kilometres away from my home, yet it took me almost 90 minutes to travel there by rickshaw due to the heavily trafficked roads of the morning rush hour. On my first day at the office, there was no opportunity for me to accompany a colleague. However, my interlocutors at the main office had given me instructions on finding the office location. Once the rickshaw driver dropped me off at the

landmark building[1], I walked up and down the road a few times looking for the office. Just when I was starting to feel lost and slightly uncomfortable, I finally recognised a building that corresponded with the description I had been given and eventually spotted the small sign with Advice Company's name on it. Despite the directions and description I had been given, my imagination did not match what I saw: a small, two-storey brick building with a veranda and a one-metre high wall separating the property from the street. A big sign informed potentially willing investors of the planned reconstruction of the building; indeed, as I learned later, a department was scheduled to move to a different location in the next year. When I arrived at the veranda, a motorcycle was parked at the building's wall and three men in shirts and business trousers were gathered for a cigarette break. When I approached the group and asked for entry, they looked seemingly irritated and one reacted by questioning with whom I had come. I later learned that a *farlang* (foreigner) was not such a rare species in the office, but an unaccompanied (i.e. uncontrolled) one was absolutely uncommon. Hence, the situation required informal access control, as exhibited through the colleagues' attentive questions. When I informed them that I was on my own and named the contact person I had been emailing over the past days, one of the men hesitantly pointed to the open door to the right, through which I entered.

Once my eyes adjusted to the sudden gloominess, I detected a hallway and a small desk at which a security guard sat, beneath a narrow staircase leading to the upper level. Before I could explain my presence to the watchman, one of the men leaned his head through the doorway and said a few words in Marathi, of which I only caught the name of my contact person. I imagine he said something like "She's here to see Rahesh", as the watchman reached out with his right arm and pushed open a door without a handle, indicating that I could enter. With another step downwards through the doorway, I found myself standing in the office area directly in front of Rahesh's desk. Rahesh greeted me and introduced me to his team.

In contrast to the previously described offices, this third one does not have a formal access procedure for entry to the office area, and employees only wear their badges when visiting one of the other two offices. The differentiation of this office is not marked by access procedures and visible distinctions such as different types of badges. Rather it is exhibited by the bisection of territorial

1 It is common to navigate rikshaw drivers to a prominent or well-known building/station/market/junction close to the desired destination.

space: the ground level is dedicated to Advice Company's employees while the upstairs provides the work area for freelancers. There are no signs to indicate these territories, but they are distinct in their differences in equipment, and the boundaries are reiterated several times per day. An example of this was given in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2, when a freelancer's entry into the Advice Company's employee area was perceived by a manager as a border infringement, and strongly communicated as such.

5.2.3. The production of differentiation through access procedures

When comparing access procedures across the three offices, it becomes apparent that the main office is not only characterised by its role as the functional headquarters of Advice Company in India (by hosting the top management positions and the largest number of employees across the largest physical space). In addition, the elaborate entry procedures imply that the office is the most client-centric of the Advice Company India offices and that it is an achievement for a person to reach here. This is where contact with clients is managed and physically takes place, and where people are "corporate" and "strategic", as described by their colleagues in other offices (see Section 5.4.1). It might be a coincidence that the main office is located on the sixth floor of the building – several floors higher than the city and the street office, and for many employees, representing countless steps up the career ladder. The office is seen as a place of career advancement – a place where "client interaction happens" and a place where employees can "directly influence projects" and do not have to sit "handcuffed behind the wall", as remarked by Sameer, an employee at the city office (see Section 10.5). The main office also stands in contrast to the street office – the two-storey brick building and the site associated with the "ground reality". The street office hosts the "simple people" – those who "prefer to be with my freelance people and not the big bosses there", as stated by Rohan, who was located at this office. While not everybody in the main office is a top manager and/or in direct contact with clients, the teams in the other two offices, by definition, have a supportive downstream function that is further away from the client, and hence less prestigious within the client-centric organisation.

5.3. Inside the offices: Differences in space and equipment

This internal differentiation of the three offices along the continuum of client centricity is not only manifested in the access procedures, but also in the different physical characteristics of the offices.

5.3.1. Inside the main office

When the frosted glass door at the reception opens – following the "beep" of the card reader panel – one passes along a 20-metre-long walkway from which doors open into a main meeting room with a capacity of 50 people. On the left side, an A2-sized poster announces the 30 winners of the annual performance awards, with pictures, names, designations and the names of the awards won. These awards feature in the annual performance grading system (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3), and nominations are made at a town hall meeting at the main office. To be nominated for an award, one must receive a grade of "outstanding performance" in one's job, and this performance is often validated by several project-related awards that are awarded over the course of the year. At the end of the walkway, the office area emerges with its stunning 180-degree view of the surrounding commercial and residential buildings.

Rows of desks of the same size and style stretch across the carpeted floor, interjected periodically with semi-open chat corners or glass-walled meeting rooms that serve as interactive workspaces. The 461 individually assigned desks are about 120 centimetres wide with 50-centimetre-high walls between them; they mostly feature a fixed monitor, a landline phone and a drawer, which can be locked. The office chairs are also identical and are only sometimes individually marked by an employee's jumper slung over the back or a small cushion on the seat. The desk partition walls allow for individualisation, and employees decorate these with objects belonging to the official organisational context, such as lists of phone numbers or laminated award cards that have been granted by the management team. The desks are, however, also spaces for personal objects and images. Apart from displaying family photos, the employees decorate their desks with decorative objects, cartoons and small figures and images with religious connotations, such as Ganesha miniatures or Catholic rosaries. This latter category of objects not only individualises the desk space but also sends potentially alternative or even competing

messages to official corporate communications (Gavin 2015: 97, Kostera 1997: 174).

A team of women and men in the distinct dress of cleaning workers not only ensure that the two machines serving complimentary coffee and the water dispensers remain clean and well stocked, but they also collect office chairs that are left in aisles and neatly place them back in front of the desks. In addition to the meeting rooms and chat corners, two seating areas with comfortable sofas and chairs are available for informal or spontaneous conversations. The canteen, with 100 seats, serves daily (between 9.00am and 7.00pm) a range of local meals, freshly prepared *chai*, fruit plates and sandwiches. Instant noodle dishes known as *Maggi* (although not necessarily from that brand) are extremely popular amongst the employees as an evening snack around 6.30pm.

The seven flat television screens that line the outer walls of the office display Advice Company's corporate videos and cricket matches. Representing a contrast between work and leisure contexts, the screen in the canteen shows music video clips of the latest Bollywood blockbusters, all on mute. The office has two strategically placed washrooms: one – as already mentioned – directly in front of the reception area and the other right next to the canteen. The latter washroom is placed just past the dirty dishes return rack, so that employees can conveniently wash their hands after lunch. This is standard procedure, as most lunch dishes, consisting of vegetables/meat and *chapatis* (wheat-based pitas), are eaten with the right hand. A firm iron door leads to the "recreation area" – a seemingly unfinished hall that can be turned short-term into a desk area, if required. However, the room is mostly known for hosting a popular table tennis table. After accompanying several colleagues from the Muslim community to this room, I discovered that the office also uses it as a prayer room. At the main office slightly less than 40% of the employees are women and I was told by an HR colleague that this ratio remained fairly stable over the past two years.

5.3.2. Inside the city office

When I first entered the narrow hallway of the city office I was slightly surprised by the smooth and corporate touch that the office radiated, as the stories the main office colleagues told me about the "fun atmosphere" had prepared me to expect a different, less formal, setting (see Section 5.4.2). In this office, a wide, almost windowless hallway leads to several office rooms and a

recreational area equipped with an air hockey table. The other office rooms along the hallway lead to sub-team offices, the main meeting room and the office of the department manager. At the end of the narrow hallway is the central office, with its 10-metre high ceiling. Although the location does not hide its origins as a production site, the efforts to turn it into a corporate office have been effective: the walls are painted white, the tin ceiling is well maintained and three huge posters with Advice Company's logo decorate a massive wall. The main desk area, with 144 seats, is lit by fluorescent lights. Opposite the entrance are meeting rooms and a cafeteria with windows. An open stairway from the desk area leads to a mezzanine in the form of a gallery.

The main areas on both levels of this office have desks placed perpendicularly, forming bays of four. Individual workspaces are created by glass dividers and low walls. Similar to the main office, in this office, each desk has a landline phone and a drawer. Arranged at the side of the main area are small bays separated by shoulder-high partitions, each with a single desk and an extra chair. These provide spaces for team leads and group managers. The head of this entire department – the "Vice President", as Imran whispered when he walked by – sits in an office at the entrance. The building has two washrooms – one on the ground floor and a very small one on the upper level. The cafeteria has about 30 seats, provides complimentary water and coffee and offers breakfast and lunch options. A "wall of fame", while not as prominently located as in the main office, displays the quarter's top performers with their pictures, names and designations. These awards are distributed publicly (i.e. openly in the office), similar to the awards ceremony in the main office, each quarter.

The upper level of the city office is very similar to the ground floor. But the outside walls reveal the former structure of the building. The upper level must have once hosted smaller office cabins for middle managers, as the desk area is interjected by hip-level walls that probably once had glass windows.

While similar to the main office in terms of equipment, the main differentiation between this office and the main office, as perceived by the employees, is the "relaxed atmosphere" of the city office, which I discuss in Section 5.4. Yet this city office also carries an air of wear and tear, or abrasion, with its relics from a previous set-up and the fact that the entire office is a bit too large for the size of the teams that are permanently based there. This results in several empty desks and two temporarily re-located teams that belong to completely different business sections. The employees pointed out to me that basic operating equipment – such as phones or the Internet – could get disconnected

during the heavy monsoon season, when the area outside the office would get flooded. Several years ago, this office hosted client-centric functions such as the organisation's decision-makers and client consulting teams. But that is no longer the case and, accordingly, both access procedures and equipment have been scaled down. Poorva, the HR representative for this office explained that the gender ratio at this location dropped in the last 18 months from over 30% to 25% of female employees. As one of the reasons she mentioned the increased demand for colleagues supporting the US offices and therefore having to work late in the evening.

5.3.3. Inside the street office

Located in a two-storey brick house of approximately 150 square metres on each level, the street office is characterised by a strict division between the ground floor and the upper level. The air conditioned ground floor features two office rooms with desk bays, computers and other office equipment such as printers, phones and office chairs. The two upstairs rooms are of comparable size, but equipped strikingly differently, with 40-centimetre wide plain tables set up along the walls, and white plastic chairs. Three phones and a printer complete the setting, together with a tiny room for meetings. There is no air conditioning and there are no individual workspaces. While the ground floor constitutes the office space for Advice Company's employees, the upstairs rooms comprise the work environment provided for freelancers. This special interaction space for the organisation with its environment is not, in itself, opposed to client centricity, as the meeting room facilities for clients have a similar function (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2).

The difference in the status of the street office – not only due to its freelancer area upstairs – becomes salient when one compares its Advice Company internal work area to that of the other two offices. The first striking aspect of this smallest office is the lack of space. The desks form five bays of six workspaces, with three desks on each side. There are a total of 30 workspaces, equipped with fixed flat screen monitors, a keypad on a drawer beneath the deep desk and a fixed computer tower on the floor. The bays are barely wide enough to accommodate two office chairs, back to back. When both opposing workspaces are in use, employees must take care that the backs of their office chairs do not permanently bump against each other. The neighbouring room provides another 20 very similar spaces. The desks are only partially assigned to individual colleagues, as they are meant to cater for multiple users. About

one-third of the seats are shared amongst team members who are not permanently based in the office and only come in to quickly check their emails or to join a conference call. Landline phones are shared between three desks, which results in such devices being frequently passed along the desk row.

Team leads each have a dedicated, separate cubicle with their own desk and phone, but their desk spaces are frequently shared with team members who wish to join teleconferences or discuss projects. A small office with a door is reserved for the head of department, who is primarily located at the main office but sometimes works from this branch. There is no water dispenser or coffee machine and no space for lunch breaks at this office. At lunch time, small groups of two to five colleagues congregate at a desk and unpack their *dabbah* – a behaviour that would result in an immediate rebuke from the reception's security officer at the main office. A sink is available for employees to wash their hands after lunch and smoking is permitted on the terrace and in the backyard. The building has two washrooms, one on the ground floor and one upstairs, which seem to be separated by gender (with men on the ground level and ladies upstairs). But I was also told that the ground floor toilet is for managers and the upper floor toilet is for everyone else. The seemingly unresolved nature of this topic was reflected in my interlocutors' frequent suggestions that we go to an adjacent commercial area for a walk after lunch so they could use the washroom there. According to Deepika from the HR team only 15% of Advice Company's employees at this office are women, a number the organisation wished to increase.

The Internet connection was reportedly shaky and under direct threat during the monsoon season – a circumstance that regularly impeded communication with the other offices. However, this was not raised as a major concern. Instead, the employees frequently emphasised the practicality and suitability of the office for interacting with freelancers. The office was therefore positioned at the opposite end of the client centricity scale, with respect to access procedures and equipment.

5.4. Atmospheres as "tempered spaces": Office perceptions

As I illustrated in Sections 5.2 and 5.3, the internal differentiation of Advice Company's offices in the city goes beyond mere segmentation "into similar units" (Luhmann 1995a: 190). The three locations can be distinguished according to the guiding difference of client centricity on the basis of the complexity

of their entry procedures and physical equipment. As a third dimension of the three office sub-systems, I propose a comparison of the different office *atmospheres*. This topic was brought up by the employees, themselves, not only when comparing the offices but also when describing their own workplace – even without direct emphasising its differentiation to the other offices.

While atmosphere is a term that is frequently used in everyday language, its conceptualisation for ethnographic analysis constitutes a challenge due to the multi-sensory dimensions of perception. The motivation for the following analysis stems from an ethnographic case study on the atmosphere of a south Indian village looking at the interconnectedness between persons and environment (Heidemann 2018). Heidemann approached the "challenge of atmospheres"[2] in ethnographic analysis by also drawing on the theoretical groundwork of Gernot Böhme, a scholar who is frequently cited in the anthropology of aesthetics. Böhme argues for a "new phenomenology" that expands the understanding of aesthetics from its sole relation to art and artworks to a general theory of perception. A central element of this is the analysis of the correlation between environmental characteristics (*Umgebungsqualitäten*) and the sensitivities of the people (*Befindlichkeiten*) in these environments. Atmosphere is the concept through which this correlation is manifested (Böhme 1995: 16). To Böhme, atmosphere is both a primary term and an object of study, and it refers to the relationship between the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived:

> The primary themes of sensuality are not the things that we perceive, but what one feels: Atmospheres. When stepping into a room I am tempered through this room in one or another way. Its atmosphere determines my own perception. Only when I have entered, so to speak, into the atmosphere, am I able to identify and discern an object. Atmospheres, how they can be sensed in relation to environments as well as to things or people, are the central theme of aesthetics. Aesthetics seeks to explore the relationship between the qualities of environments and sensitivities. It asks how certain, quite objectively ascertainable characteristics of environments can modify our condition within these environments. (Böhme 2013: 15, own translation)

2 Title of a workshop at the LMU in Munich chaired by Frank Heidemann and Miriam Hornung in October 2014: http://www.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/personen/professorinnen/heidemann/workshop_atmospheres_2014.pdf.

According to Böhme, atmosphere can only be pursued through experience: one must first be exposed to and affectively concerned with it. A room, for example, can have a cheerful or gloomy spirit, but this is not a subjective mood, as such an atmosphere is experienced as quasi-objective and refers to a common state of ego and its environment. In that sense, Böhme defines atmosphere as a "tempered space" (*gestimmter Raum*) that conveys certain sensitivities or vibes (Böhme 2001: 103).

Atmosphere exists in a definable space. It is dependent on the people who are present and experiencing the space with their senses activated by the atmosphere. It is also dependent on the objects present, and their characteristics. Atmospheres exist, they affect the people present and they are quasi-tangible – or at least describable (Rauh 2012: 25). Simone Egger applies the concept of atmosphere to dimensions of reception in urban space and illustrates, through the example of football arenas, how similarly built structures yield specific atmospheres, enriched by a historic depth of memories, achievements and defeats that form a "cumulative texture". In her example of the FC Barcelona football club, atmosphere is expressed through slogans such as "*Más que un club*! [More than a club!]" (Egger 2015: 160). Sebastian Uhrich also applies Böhme's concept to football arenas, yet from the other end, so to speak: his work is geared towards an event-marketing perspective and seeks to identify factors that are regarded relevant for purposively fabricating "good atmosphere" in a stadium (Uhrich 2008: : 69-71).

The application of Böhme's understanding of atmosphere to the context of an ethnographic case study is particularly suitable for confined spaces such as offices. Advice Company's employees across all three locations perceive a distinct atmosphere in each of the three offices, even though the city office and the main office are comparable in their physical set-up. Therefore, I will next relate these notions of atmosphere to Advice Company's internal differentiation strategies. As I sat in each of the offices for extended periods of time, I was reminded of Simone Egger's argument that ethnographic research can be regarded as a constant empathetic record of perceived atmospheres, descriptions of localities and experienced sceneries (2015: 159), and that atmospheres require exposure to be received (Rauh 2012: 106). A practical approach of capturing the atmosphere in these three localities was to triangulate the employees' accounts of their office atmosphere with my own percep-

tions[3], following Thomas Stodulka's quest to acknowledge the epistemic value of the researcher's affective states and emotions as part of ethnographic reality (2014: 86).

5.4.1. Main office: Centre of desire or location of distraction and fear?

The multi-level entry procedures that enclose the main office stand in contrast to the office's obstruction-free open plan office architecture. The interior office space conveys the value of "openness" – which is communicated in the new employee introduction training (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2) – to all who pass through the frosted glass door. Suman, a top-level manager, told me he was proud the office had "made the switch to this open-office culture" when the teams moved from their previous location in the city centre:

> You know, we got rid of all the office cabins and have everybody now in this open office space. This structure has enabled a lot quicker turnaround time of our projects and of issue resolution. When I need five people for a decision, I get up from my desk, fetch them and we go to a cabin to discuss. After 15 minutes the topic is done, it's so simple. And when I am here, I am always approachable for everyone; people can just walk up to my desk.

Indeed, the open plan office was perceived by the employees to facilitate interaction, but their comments held an ambiguous undertone that can be summarised in the seemingly paradoxical statement of consultant Ruchika: "During a busy day in the office I don't get much done…"

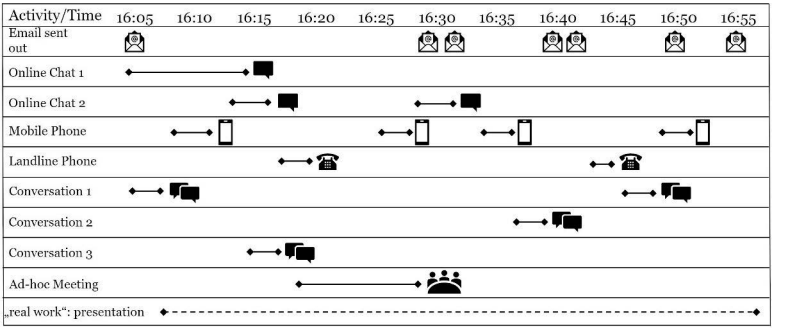
How could a busy atmosphere lead to an employee's perception of not getting "things done"? This question emphasises the fact that work outputs (e.g. presentations and documents) are the sole focus of attention in Advice Company, as most of the annual performance measurement items centre on these deliverables. There is an official assumption about how such outputs are produced, as mirrored in the quote of top-manager Suman, who conveyed an idea of how employees in this office structured their workday "so simply" in order to progress their tasks. Yet what really happens up to the point that the final presentation or documentation is delivered remains in the "black box of

3 While Rauh (2012) suggests an auto-experiential approach as a philosophical methodology to the analysis of atmospheres, I suggest a triangulated approach that combines interlocutors' statements, observed behaviours and anthropologists' own reports of affectual states.

organisational functioning" (Czarniawska 1997) and becomes subsumed under the consultant's diffuse notion of "being busy". In order to get a grip on this seemingly subjective notion of atmosphere in the office I took what I call "activity snapshots" of the colleagues I accompanied: I tracked the flow of information over the duration of an hour through different communication channels such as email, chat, phone calls (on mobile phones or landlines), face-to-face conversations and ad-hoc mini meetings of three to five persons at the interlocutor's desk. I use this data on a broader scale in Chapter 6 (Section 6.1) to illustrate differences in job types between the departments.

To convey a notion of the main office's atmosphere, I combined activity snapshot data with a detailed protocol of events during one of Ruchika's "being busy" phases[4]. Ruchika was a client consultant who also led a team of three junior consultants. The following vignette reproduces an hour of one of Ruchika's workdays, during which I accompanied her. Figure 5 illustrates – in five-minute intervals – the activities that occurred during this hour. Most occurred in dense sequential order, and some even in parallel.

Figure 5: Communication density in the main office



Ruchika had intended to work on a presentation she needed to finish that day. The hour started with her writing a short email to her manager, but this was interrupted when Raveena, one of her mentees, leaned over her desk's

4 Parts of this section have been published in the article "During a busy day I don't get much done" - On the materiality of immaterial labour in a multinational professional services firm (Mörike 2018).

partition wall to ask Ruchika's advice on replying to a particular client's request. They exchanged a few sentences and Ruchika moved her attention back to her screen. An orange blinking bar appeared at the bottom of her desktop, indicating that she had received an online chat message from a colleague. While she started to respond, her mobile phone rang: a client was calling her to discuss the details of a report Ruchika had sent a few days ago. Ruchika got up from her desk and moved to a corner of the office, where she paced, staring with concentration at the carpeted floor. After a few minutes, Ruchika returned to her desk and opened the chat program to find the name of the colleague she was looking for. She double-clicked his name and sent him a question. While she waited for his reply she finished her still open chat conversation from the beginning of the hour and closed the window. When the reply arrived from the colleague she had reached out to, she wrote back, only to realise that the recipient of her message was already standing at her desk. He pulled a vacant chair from a temporarily unattended desk in the adjacent bay and, together, he and Ruchika leaned over her computer screen and discussed the report documentation. When they did not seem to come to a conclusion, Ruchika stretched out her arm to the landline phone and dialled the four-digit number of a fellow client consultant colleague in a parallel team she knew by heart, without picking up the handset. After two ringtones the call was answered with a "Hallo?" on the other side. A conversation started amongst the three colleagues when it became clear that the issue could not be clarified in a few sentences, the colleague on the phone announced to come over in a second. Indeed, a few seconds later, a man appeared from somewhere behind the meeting rooms and joined Ruchika and the other colleague. Now, all three leaned over the screen, discussing the content. One scribbled a few lines on a note pad and Ruchika moved text boxes around in the document.

Then Ruchika's mobile phone rang again. She checked the incoming caller's name, which was blinking on her phone, rose from her chair and waved with her free hand, signalling for the two colleagues at her desk and her teammates at the surrounding desks to lower their voices. While picking up the phone call she again walked over to the corner and the third colleague, who had initially stood behind the two, took her seat. During her absence, he and the other colleague continued to change the file on Ruchika's laptop. After she returned, she leaned for another few minutes between the chairs over the two colleagues working at her desk, while they came to a conclusion. Both of the colleagues stood up to return to their desks and Ruchika took her seat again. She worked on the jointly discussed document for a few minutes

while exchanging chat messages with one of the two colleagues about the project. Then she wrote an email to her team about the client call she had just received and another to a colleague in the accounting team.

Shortly later, she again stood up from her desk, walked away and called back the client who had led to the previous discussion. Once she was back at her desk, her manager casually walked by and asked her about the status of the presentation she was supposed to finish by the end of the day. He also asked if she knew the status of a different project in a critical status. She showed him the presentation slides and they briefly discussed them. When she was on her own again, she wrote two short emails before calling one of the two recipients to announce that she had sent him an email with high priority and she would like him to take care of it today because "the client is expecting me to revert back A.S.A.P."

The moment she hung up the phone, her mentee Raveena rose from her chair and leaned over with a question about how she should approach a task she had been given. Raveena picked up her laptop and leaned it over the partition panel to illustrate her issue. Ruchika's explanation was interrupted by the ringtone of her mobile phone. This time she checked the incoming caller's name and answered the call with "Ek second, thik hai? [One second, okay?]". Ruchika lowered the mobile from her ear down to hip level and continued to instruct her mentee for half a minute. Then she attended to the colleague who was waiting on the mobile phone. He was working from home that day and she forwarded him an email while on the phone with him. Towards the end of the tracking hour, Ruchika finally returned to the presentation slides, only to switch back to the email program a few minutes later to write an email she had "almost forgotten". In total, the hour resulted in 14 conversations and 7 written emails, but only a few clicks in the presentation – her "real work", as she explained to me, which she had meant to work on.

When we both sat in the rickshaw that evening (as we were incidentally headed to destinations in the same area that day), Ruchika explained that it had been yet another "of those busy days where you're exhausted in the end and don't really know why, as all the work still remains". She was not aware of the number of communications she had managed in that hour and at a similar scale along the entire day, but she knew she would have to work on the presentation at home that evening.

When the topic was discussed over evening snacks, a colleague who had been with the organisation since before the office had changed locations stated: "This feeling of having done nothing at the end of the day is much

more since we have moved here." This notion of the office as a "great place to coordinate things and meet people, but not to do the real concentration work" was voiced by colleagues from different functions and hierarchy levels. Sujata from the HR department, with a completely different function and work profile from Ruchika, stated:

> To do routine things and coordination I need to be in [the] office, but for creative and concentrated work I want to be at home, have my bed and my things around me, get up and think, continue to work. I need to create that one presentation from scratch for next week; I can't do that in the office. Right now it is quiet, but this is because all of them [she gestures with her arm to the empty desks around her] are in meetings, and our team head is not here. But when he is here you will see that there are people coming to talk to him, they have louder conversations, people on the call…

Her colleague Pallavi got up from her chair and jumped into the conversation: "Oh, yes, you should see it! When my boss is there he always drags me into doing some things I haven't planned for and it all gets turned upside down."

The strategy to simply not be present at the main office for concentrated work tasks was practised in various ways. When I met Aranjit from the main office one early morning at the city office's reception, I asked him if he had a meeting that day at the city office and he replied: „No, I sometimes come here because it is easier to concentrate, when there is urgent work to do. In the main office there are more people approaching me with several work questions, or also non-project related things, that simply distract. Here I can be more focused."

I met Sneha, a member of the accounting team, regularly when I came to the main office on Saturdays. She remarked that she preferred to come in on the weekend for a few hours to quietly work on tasks requiring concentration over a longer period of time, as she was not able to "properly take care of them in the hectic of the week". Raghunandan, a top-level manager, explained to me that he did his "brainwork" from home in the early morning until 9.00am, and then came to the main office to do "all the chatting with the junior people to give them attention, but also to get a feeling for the potential goof-up of a project before it makes its way through all of the hierarchy".

The main office atmosphere, as perceived by the employees who were based there, was marked by a high communication density and interactions fostered by the open plan set-up. This was the place where "things are happening". But this stood in contrast to notions of "real work" – a working mis-

understanding that required constant negotiation. But it was not only the colleagues who permanently worked at the main office who reflected on its atmosphere. Similarly, employees from other offices who occasionally came to the main office contrasted its atmosphere to that of their own office. Payul, who was based at the street office but had to work at the main office every few weeks, remarked: „It is usually very loud and bustling at our place. This is why it is for me always a bit weird to work at the main office, where all is so like muted and I have to speak in such a low voice there."

She also recalled several situations in which colleagues with whom she was collaborating at the main office indicated that she should lower her voice. On my first day at the city office, Ananya asked me about my research. When I told her that I had spent several months at the main office before coming to the city office she said that I must have noticed that the main office was "a much more corporate place" than her office. Noting my questioning expression, she explained:

> **A:** Here it is not very corporate, people are not in formals[5] and we also don't have many meetings. Most of my work is sitting here and talking to the team around me. But as people get more advanced in their career they also have more meetings and this is how the main office is much more corporate.
>
> **FM:** In how far is this corporate?
>
> **A:** Well, the senior managers are all meeting much more people. I also meet people, but they are only my colleagues. But at the main office they must all be having client meetings much more. It is the place where all the managers are and clients come.

Sneha and Payul characterised the main office's atmosphere as a consequence of its employees' advancement along the career ladder, which resulted in seriousness and a more silent code of conduct. Other colleagues, however, sensed an atmosphere of fear at the main office. One morning in the main office I was on my way to the water cooler when I met Devan, a team lead from the city office, where I had accompanied colleagues from his team. Before I could

5 i.e. a formal dress code, consisting of a business suit or at least trousers and a long-sleeved shirt for males and a business costume or suit for females. Alternatively, a three-piece Indian dress, such as a *salwaar kameez* or a *kurti* combination, is sometimes worn.

formulate a question about his perception of the main office, he addressed the topic by himself:

> If you ask me about the differences between the two offices, I'd say that over at the city office is more an atmosphere of fun factor [...] Here [at the main office] it is more an atmosphere of fear. Fear is necessary for success, right? So people pick up the phone a few times per day and shout into the phone that they want this and that right now for their clients. No wonder that when somebody hears that from Monday to Wednesday, he will pick up the phone on Thursday just in the very same way. Given a choice I definitely prefer this office here [main office], because... well, it is nice to have a chilled fun atmosphere for some time, but people here are great, they move forward.

On the one hand, this quote illustrates the perceived connection between career achievement and fear in the main office's atmosphere. On the other hand, Devan confirms, through his example of the aggressive phone communication style, the assumption of Systems Theory that individuals within a social system behave according to the framework set by the system: independent of individual traits, team members adopt a group's behavioural patterns, which can be processed in their respective systems. Devan's observation corresponds with Ruchika's self-observation of the way in which her own behaviour varied between the two consulting teams (see Chapter 6, Section 6.1.1). Sameer from the city office also perceived a tension at the main office, but connected this to accountability: „In the main office people are more working for themselves, they own the project; it is theirs – and their head on the table. If they do well, it is their remit, if they mess up, it is their problem. And that's the tension there."

When connecting this perceived "atmosphere of fear" to the intense physical vocabulary used by Gopal – a client consultant who was managing a project that was hanging in the balance – this atmosphere seems tangible. When Gopal described his problematic project, he claimed that he would be "dead meat" if he did not manage it correctly. Then he commented on a crisis meeting that had occurred the day before: "There was a lot of heat yesterday night and we have talked to the other team, but not in a very corporate way. We had to bash them up."

Here, Gopal repeats the idea of a "corporate" office in which interactions occur in a moderate manner. In contrast to moderate handling of events stand moments of crisis, when the success of a client project is at risk and when fear of failure causes friction between teams, resulting in perceptions of a

heated atmosphere. In these instances, behaviour can readily shift towards more aggressive modes of communication, which Gopal compares to physical violence. Sameer attributed the "tension" in the main office's atmosphere to accountability, and this idea corresponds to a situation in which Gopal had to commit to a final project delivery with a client. He stated, while writing the email: "So now will be the moment when I will have to report concrete figures and stick my head out, risking if they are wrong for my head to be chopped off."

The examples illustrate how the main office, as a tempered space, had a distinctive atmosphere that was perceived by all employees, whether or not they were permanent employees at the location. That aspects of the atmosphere might have been actively created brings to mind the words of Raghunandan, a top manager from the main office. Raghunandan stopped me casually one morning at the canteen after I had started to accompany members of a different client consulting team in his department than I had in the weeks prior. He asked me if I could already determine the differences between the teams. Cautiously, I answered that I thought it was too early for me to have insight into the team members' different perceptions, and returned the question to him, asking if he saw any differences. His assessment indicates how the organisation connected fear and success to client centricity:

> They [he gestures towards the desks of the team] are not working towards the client's needs. Sometimes the client requires us to work overnight, sometimes several nights, maybe even for a week. But they [the team members] are not willing to do that, so the client does not want to work with us anymore. They are happy, they do not have that much overtime as the others. But Advice Company does not necessarily want only people who are happy – we want more people who are ambitious like they are in the other team. This is why one person left that team, He/she wanted to achieve more. But soon will be a time when I have to… hehe [laughs drily]… increase the pressure there a bit more [he makes a move with his hand as if to increase the volume on a radio].

The short conversation was cut off by the ringtone of his mobile phone. Raghunandan gave me a brief nod and walked away as he spoke into the device. My gaze followed him along the aisle, while I swallowed hard and made a mental note to be even more considerate of what I said during the fieldwork. The gesture with which he accompanied his final words repeated the employees'

notion of tension, pressure and fear. But he did not perceive this atmosphere; rather, he intended to create it.

The main office was the most client-centric of the three offices, even on the basis of employees' perception of its atmosphere. The office's cumulative texture as a "corporate place" that each employee characterised differently – having an air of seriousness due to employees' achievements and career advancement, defined by contact with clients (i.e. the environment) or showing a high code of conduct through moderate talking (no loud speaking, no "bashing up"), a different dress code ("all formals") and ambitiousness ("people here want to move forward") – marked its atmosphere as distinct, relative to the other offices. The idea of atmosphere is appropriate for an analysis of the organisation's internal differentiation, as all of these notions of the main office's atmosphere correspond to the value client centricity as the leading selection criteria.

The analytical focus on atmosphere as a tempered space allows, however, for more differentiated and contradicting views of Advice Company's main office. The notion of the "corporate" office does not seem to fit the highly interactive work atmosphere, which employees perceived as distracting. Employees even sought to avoid this atmosphere by moving "brainwork" to less "corporate" and client-centric spaces – in both a territorial (home vs. city office) and a temporal (early vs. late hours vs. weekend) sense. Employees' articulations centred on the completion of work tasks, especially with regards to accountability to clients – the environmental system that Advice Company required to sustain itself and the key selection criteria for internal success, prestige and status. This accountability built an atmosphere of fear, which was physically perceptible not only to the employees who permanently worked at the main office, but also by those who visited the tempered space with its well-equipped, open plan design guarded by multi-level entry procedures.

That employees perceived the main office to be located at the top of the organisation's value system powerfully illustrates the idea that, on the one hand, closeness to clients was connected to accountability, prestige and status, which found its bodily correspondence in formal dress and voice control; but on the other hand, this proximity to clients was also connected with fear, tension and pressure, as manifested in the physical characteristics of exhaustive communication density, aggressive shouting and metaphors of execution. Thus, the atmosphere of the main office could be characterised by a predicament: rising high to the bright centre of client centricity came with a significant risk of getting burned.

5.4.2. City office: Fun zone with 100% accuracy commitment

The employees at the city office support the client consulting teams with projects, often by preparing presentation files. But they not only support their colleagues at the main office; in addition, the majority of the teams at the city office support client consulting colleagues across the globe. In a classic scenario of offshoring and business process outsourcing (Upadhya 2016: 44-45), the teams at the city office work for colleagues in the US, Europe, Australia and Asia. I was told that three to four years ago, positions in this office had been offered to "freshers" – college graduates in their early 20s who were exploring their first job after earning their bachelor's degree. Now, Advice Company only employs graduates with at least a master's degree. As a consequence, the newer cohort of support analysts are three to five years older than the previous cohort was, and several have work experience from other organisations. In this respect, the newer employees in the city office are not substantially different from those starting entry-level jobs at the main office, apart from the fact that their degrees have generally been issued by lower-ranking universities. This has a direct bearing on the office's position on the client centricity scale, as Sujata from the HR department stated:

> We do campus recruitment for this [city] office here at similar B[usiness]-schools then to the consultant jobs [at the main office], but with slightly different ranking profile. What they do here is actually a similar work, but it is regarded less qualified because it does not involve direct client interaction. It should not be that way, but in general this is what happens.

While I had first entered the main office with no prior information about it, I was led to have big expectations of the city office. Whenever I mentioned my upcoming research phase there, reactions were remarkably similar to Raveena's: „Oh, you'll be at the city office for the next weeks?? Awesome, you will have soooo much fun there, it's such a young crowd, a real young people's place and a really good atmosphere." With great excitement I looked forward to this research phase in the city office. From the reactions and descriptions I had received, I imagined the atmosphere there to be an appealing blend of a perpetual school trip and a graduation party. The quote from Devan in the previous section compared the main office to the city office, and he reiterated the image of the city office as a young person's place with a "chilled and fun atmosphere". This fit the quotes and remarks from many other employees at both locations. The perceived atmosphere of the city office varied significantly

to that of the main office, despite a similar yet downsized office set-up, less equipment and less sophisticated entry procedures.

At the beginning of the fieldwork phase in the city office I was introduced to Sanjay, the office manager. He pointed out that his expectation of his employees was "100% accuracy in the work they deliver" and that there was a "close to zero tolerance on mistakes". He conveyed this requirement as "a very, very clear message" to new joiners. Indeed, the newly joined colleagues I accompanied or talked to, such as Imran, mentioned this strict, zero tolerance rule, which led him to act with high caution. Imran had developed a routine of double-checking his work before sending it to the colleagues he supported (see Chapter 10, Section 10.6). This cautiousness was also reflected in the requirement that all presentations had to be reviewed at least twice by peers for errors in formatting or numerical mistakes before they could be sent to colleagues abroad or in the main office. Accordingly, quiet rumours about colleagues who had repeatedly produced errors in their work and were asked to leave circulated throughout the office. The 100% accuracy work target as a condition for organisational membership and the everyday work practice of reviews did not seem to fit with the "chilled fun place" atmosphere other employees had reported. Similarly, the data I collected through my hourly communication snapshots and observations of working and collaboration practices did not reveal major differences to the main office. Nonetheless, I realised that I had gradually changed my clothing to jeans and a T-shirt, which I had rarely worn at the main office. In the city office, I came to work in the local *kurti/patiala* combination only when some female office colleagues agreed that we would wear "formals" the next day to "click some pictures together". So the atmosphere was indeed different in this office.

As my research continued, my conclusion crystallised that the perceived atmosphere at the city office could be understood as the result of work practices that were intersected by memorative narratives of the place in times past. Specifically, this past referred to three to four years prior, which younger colleagues considered the "fun zone". Monique had worked for Advice Company for five years and had recently returned to the city office after working in the main office. She had come back because she liked it better in the city office, even though – in the main office – she had had exposure to other teams and direct interaction with clients. When I mentioned that I was told I would find this office a "fun place", she replied: „Well, it used to be that way, but now people are also more serious, I have noticed since I am back here. Before I left, people would randomly pick up a guitar and play some chords when they

felt like taking a break. Now the recruits are MBAs and postgrads, so they are a bit more serious, but still good. I really like it."

Attul had joined the department more than three years ago as a fresher and was, in his own words, "one of the few college passouts [with bachelor's degrees] remaining here". Similarly to Monique, he had noted a change over the past few years, which he also attributed to the different entry conditions:

> As they [Advice Company] increased the package [the salary], there are now only MBA students here with a different way, different culture. These guys have to work to pay off the debts from their grad schools; we college people were less forced to earn and always had an option to do something different. I have seen this place developing. When I came, it was still a type of trial and error. But it was a great atmosphere here. We used to have so much fun, people were sitting on each other's desks, chit-chatting, going out together for a smoke. But we also did work, there were times when I worked from 10.00am until midnight!

These recollections of the "great and fun atmosphere" related to the past – the early days of the department – and were repeated and retold within the office. In contrast, colleagues working at the main office had a different perspective of the city office. These colleagues connected the city office with their memories of the location as the organisational headquarters at an earlier point in their career, when they presumably had less responsibility, accountability and pressure. Only a handful of my interlocutors from the main office with whom I talked about the city office had actually been there since the headquarters had moved, and even fewer could back up their knowledge about the city office with insight into the current situation. Apart from the HR colleagues, no one was aware that only master's graduates were now being employed in the "young people's fun place".

When recalling their former office, the main office employees highlighted a number of advantages: they perceived it as more cosy and a place in which people used to have lunch together, because the lights would be switched off between 1.00 and 2.00pm and every employee would bring their lunch and eat during that time. In addition, for after-work gatherings, the city office location had much more to offer. The recollections and reverberations of this "fun atmosphere" by the main office employees meant that they still perceived this as the de facto situation.

5.4.3. Street office: The vivid interaction hub

Similar to my response from colleagues about the city office, comments were almost guaranteed when I mentioned my upcoming research phase or a planned visit to the street office. I would receive reactions such as this one from Preeti, a project coordinator: "What do you want there, it is loud and they don't even have a proper washroom." Others gave me an elaborate description of the upstairs office space, with its narrow desks and plastic chairs, without mentioning that this was the freelancers' exchange zone. All this prepared me to expect a campsite rather than an actual office.

Hence, I was surprised to find an air conditioned workspace, albeit one with a low ceiling. While the environmental characteristics of the workspace certainly had an impact, the perception of a specific atmosphere only unfolded after I was exposed to the setting over a longer period of time. The restricted space necessitated narrow, rocky office chairs, which abutted each other on opposite sides of the desk bays. Even with the greatest care, the chairs' backs would touch each other whenever one of the two colleagues would get up or look for documents from the piles that mounted up beneath each desk. Whenever there was a teleconference, landline phones would be set to speaker mode and the characteristic metallically blurred voices would sound through the room. During the afternoon, two or three conference calls would often happen in parallel and voices would blare from several corners of the office. The computer space next to Mudra, who I accompanied on my first day, was shared between several employees. Over the course of the day, four people would use it for a good hour before leaving again. The manager's desks, which were clearly marked by movable dividers, would at any given moment be used by at least one of their team members, who would either pull a chair to a corner of the desk (where they would place their laptops) or sit directly at the desk, leaning over their supervisor's screen.

Although this office area was for the Advice Company employees and not the dedicated zone for the freelancers, the environmental characteristics here differed substantially to that of the other two offices. This difference extended beyond the differences in equipment: loud voices from telephone speakers dominated the acoustic setting and employees only sat at their desks during conference calls or when they had to urgently complete a task on the computer. Otherwise, they stood together in small groups, whose composition changed frequently.

The atmosphere in the office was marked by the constant "rushing in and out" (Mudra) of colleagues during the day – as required by their role. They would come into the office only to check their emails or attend a teleconference, or to talk with the freelancer teams upstairs. Upon returning to the office space, they would transform their updates and feedback into emails and other communication formats that could be processed within the system of Advice Company. For my unaccustomed brain, the average sound intensity and the constant flow of changing communication groups posed a challenge. During the first few days, I got a severe headache after only a few hours, which "improved" gradually to the point that I only became tired and struggled to follow conversations in the afternoon. When I realised that, for Payul, this atmosphere constituted the norm, it became apparent to me how intensely she must have felt the difference in atmosphere to that of the main office.

The atmosphere at the street office mirrored its major function as a hub for managing interactions with the environment, and it was geared up to support this. It allowed for smooth switches between the communication style used in the organisation and a style more suited for interacting with the environment, the freelancers. The "boundary work" with the freelancers had its own requirements, and the employees at the street office evaluated the space primarily from the perspective of its suitability for this function. Payul opined that, in this environment, it was very easy for the freelancers to come in and catch up. She could not imagine them doing this if they had to wear a badge and wait in line at the gate every time: "Here is such a big in and out of people in the course of the day that registration etc. would lead to an issue." When I asked Rohan, who was a main contact person for the freelance teams, if he would want to work at the main office, he instantly replied: "Noooo! This would not work, it is too far out for the freelancers. They would have to spend at least 20 rupees per day on travelling. That is too much."

The clients and client consulting teams were so far away that the employees at the street office characterised themselves as "simple people". This was expressed in opposition to employees at the main office, to which only a few colleagues regularly travelled to attend meetings or to work. Despite the expression of a certain sense of belonging to the street office, the colleagues in this location were well aware of the client-centric orientation of the organisation and their position at the lower end of the value system. Rohan's reflection on his department's position within the organisation connected it to the office location:

Rohan: […] But you can see we are not taken serious.

FM: How?

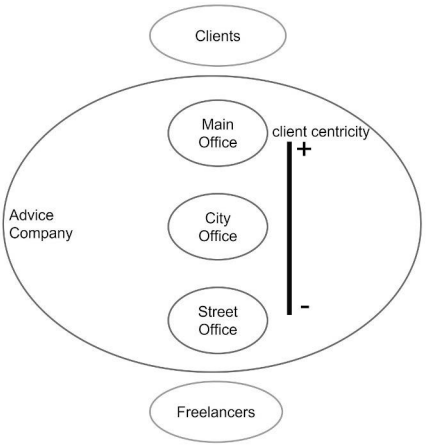
Rohan: Just take a look around! Are we a priority? [He gestures to a cramped desk drowning in piles of paper] We were promised to move since many months now.

5.5. Concluding remarks: Client centricity as a continuum

This chapter began with an analysis of the organisation's internal differentiation along the value client centricity by comparing the access procedures across the three offices. A subsequent comparison of the internal set-up and equipment of each office illustrated an internal differentiation of the three offices on a continuum based on distance to the client. The employees' notions of office atmosphere corresponded to the set-up, but provided a layer of contradicting views.

Based on this analysis, I have shown how the three offices emerge as subsystems within the organisation along the central value client centricity (Figure 6). But instead of providing a mere dichotomist distinction I have argued that the offices are located on a continuum of client-centric differentiation. The main office clearly occupies the highest position on the client centricity scale, as the office with the closest contact with clients. The street office represents the opposite extreme with respect to both physical space and atmosphere, as well as to structure, as this location manages contact with the freelancer teams. The city office breaks the dichotomy, falling between the other locations on the continuum. Louis Dumont refers to this as hierarchical opposition which rests on the assumption that entities within a whole (i.e. a social system) are arranged in a hierarchical relationship. Dumont holds that hierarchical arrangements occur more or less autonomously. He recognises the hierarchical classification not as isolated, but related to the overall system in which entities are arranged: The fact that subsystems (i.e. offices, departments, teams) belong to a whole is simultaneously the cause and the consequence of their placement in a hierarchy. This "assumes that values in relations are never balanced or equivalent […] but hierarchical when conceived through and defined in relation to the whole" (Kapferer 2011).

Figure 6: Client centricity scale

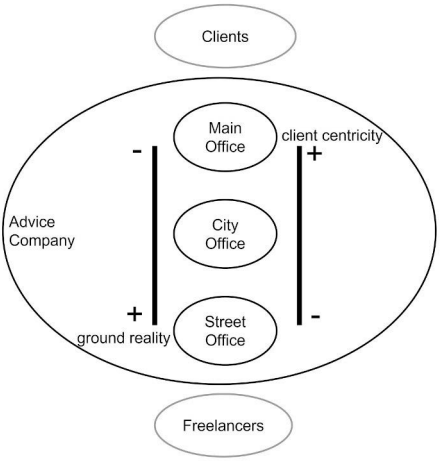


The city centre location occupies the middle ground between the two ends of the continuum for several reasons. First, it previously hosted the most client-centric functions of the organisation and the relics of that past are still visible. A two-stage access procedure is in place, yet not as stringent as that of the main office. The equipment is comparable to that of the main office, but the set-up mirrors traditional organisational structures with desk space representing the organisational hierarchy. Second, the employees, themselves, are in a middle position on the client centricity scale. They have largely entered the organisation from a third-level university, and some only have an undergraduate degree. For this reason, they do not sit at the main office amongst the teams that service and consult clients. They feel "behind the wall" (Section 10.5), supporting global colleagues on client projects in a downstream position, where "client centricity" means 100% accuracy. But they are in striking distance of achieving a more client-centric function. In contrast to the street office employees, the employees in this office could potentially move from their position "behind the wall" into the client consulting teams, either in the main office or in one of Advice Company's many other offices across the world.

However, the analysis of the atmosphere across the three offices, as perceived by the employees, has shown that, in addition to the distinctions be-

tween offices on the basis of client centricity, there are also contradictions in the one-directional alignment of the organisation to the client. At the main office, notions of fear, together with the strategy of employees to avoid the atmosphere of high communication density and to travel to less client-centric locations (such as the city office) to perform "real work", indicate an antithetic value according to which selections are made. This value is also reflected in the words of Monique, from the city office, who returned to the office after a stint at the main office. The street office, with its loud and not "corporate" atmosphere, was not only seen to directly oppose client centricity, but was also perceived to be structured according to a different value, in which interaction with freelancers was most important and information was selected accordingly. When client projects go wrong at the main office and pressure rises, the communication style becomes less "corporate" – similar to that of the street office. This indicates that client centricity is apparently counterbalanced by an opposing value. This opposing guiding difference is orientated by a different system in the Advice Company environment – the freelancers – and the employees referred to it as the "ground reality". The street office was deemed closest to this ground reality, and the main office furthest from it (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Guiding difference client centricity/ground reality



The organisation's guiding difference consists hence of the two opposing and mutually exclusive terms client centricity/ground reality. This relates to Dumont's second proposition that the established hierarchical set-up is neither stationary nor static. Even more, the hierarchical arrangement can be inversed for a limited time and in specific situations:

> The reversal is built-in: the moment the second function is defined, it entails the reversal for the situations belonging to it. That is to say, hierarchy is bidimensional, it bears not only on the entities considered but also on the corresponding situations, and this bidimensionality entails the reversal. (Dumont, 1980 [1966]: 225)