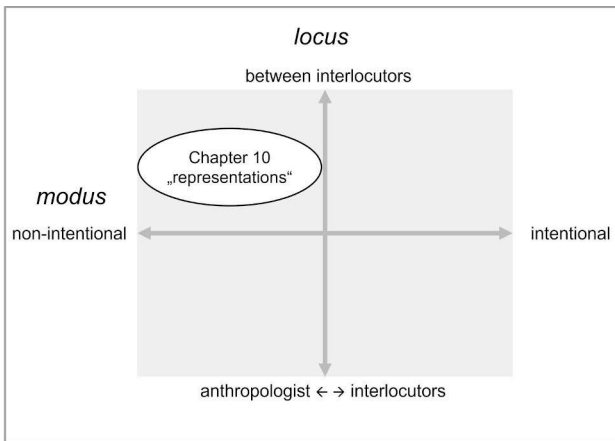


10. Modus Non-Intentional: Project Representations

This chapter seeks to open the “black box” of the client project and illustrate its different representations along the development process. I will show that each representation depicts a non-intentional working misunderstanding between the Advice Company sub-systems (Figure 20). For this, I will go beyond the project planning layer that was the focus of Chapter 9, in which I demonstrated how collaboration between sub-systems on a client project functions on the basis of intentional working misunderstandings around delivery dates.

Figure 20: Chapter 10 position on the L/M quadrant



10.1. Organisational decision-making and “black boxes”

When a client files a project with Advice Company, he or she aims to get advice on a strategic question such as whether to invest resources in a certain business area. As I outlined at the beginning of Part I, decision-making is one of the constitutive operations of an organisational system. The advice provided by Advice Company supports a client’s decision-making process when decision options are connected to a high level of uncertainty. As the “institutionalised purpose of decisions is to achieve certainty, to determine and stabilise the future” (Brunsson 2006: 7), decisions must be taken for a client’s organisation to continue to exist. Information stimuli from a system in the client’s organisational environment are relevant for the client’s internal decision-making process (Luhmann 2006a: 34of.). Once a decision is made, the uncertainty under which the choice was made no longer plays a role for subsequent decisions made by the organisation. The circumstances of the previous decision-making situation – including whether there were alternative attractive choices, whether the options had clear pro or contra arguments or whether opting for one choice over another was merely based on chance and accompanied with doubts – is no longer visible. This reduces complexity, and such reduction is one of the key interests of system emergence, as all decisions are made on the basis of prior decisions; in other words, decisions engender decisions (Luhmann 1997: 830).

When a decision becomes fact, its production circumstances are sealed in a “black box” – a term stemming from cybernetics, where it stands for a complex array of commands or machine processes about which no details need to be known except for the inputs given and the outputs received (Latour 1987: 2). Luhmann refers to the black box to illustrate the predicament of double contingency in cross-system interaction (1995a: 109). Latour employs the idea of black boxes in the sense of Gregory Bateson (1972: 40) and describes the process of “black-boxing” as changing the status of a scientific proposition from its initial, fragile phase – during which it stands under debate and faces controversial challenges – to a broadly accepted concept – a scientific fact or an assumption upon which subsequent research builds on, rather than challenges (Latour 1987: 7).

The projects filed by Advice Company’s clients can be compared to such black boxes. The client knows the input (strategic question and briefing) and is presented with the output in the form of a report and/or presentation. Information about the project development and the steps taken towards the

final recommendation is provided to the client in the form of an official standard project process and quality control documentation. What really happens before the project is finally delivered, however, is kept mostly within the organisational boundaries, subject to rigid information control (i.e. selection) by the boundary work specialists – the client consultants. Latour’s concept of black boxing (in terms of knowledge production) and Luhmann’s understanding of the enclosed uncertainty of a decision-making situation once it has been taken, provide links between the seemingly incompatible positions of Systems Theory and Actor Network Theory (ANT).

10.1.1. Opening the black box

The theoretical basis for unpacking the black box is based on concepts from ANT – namely “circulating references” (Latour 2000: 88) and “translation chains” (Rottenburg 2009 [2002]: xxxii referring to Latour 1987) in knowledge production. Rooted in the realms of science and technology studies, ANT seeks to uncover the conditions of science in the making and emergence of outputs (scientific facts). The key assumption of ANT is that a wider understanding of agency encompasses not only human beings, but also non-human entities (Latour 1996: 369). Whether human or not, an actor in ANT is able to actively or indirectly affect a network. One of the most prominent examples of this is Michel Callon’s study of commercial scallop cultivation, in which he uses the same vocabulary for all actors, irrespective of whether they are fishermen, scientists or scallops – a principle he calls generalised symmetry (1986: 200). These basic assumptions inhibit a direct connection of ANT with Systems Theory: Luhmann does not account for individuals, be they human or non-human, as acting entities of a social system. To Luhmann, communication is what constitutes a social system and reaffirms its boundaries, not a group of individuals or actions (Luhmann 1986: 175). Nevertheless I would argue that it is indeed possible to utilise these two concepts of circulating reference and translation chains from ANT for the system-orientated analysis of client projects in this chapter. In the following, I will explain these concepts and describe how they can be fruitfully used – in conjunction with Systems Theory – to trace a client project through the organisational sub-systems of Advice Company.

10.1.2. Translation chains and organisational systems

The concepts of translation chains and organisational systems can be approached through a case study from Latour, in which he shadows a research project seeking scientific answers about the soil quality at the boundary of the Amazonian rain forest (2000: 36). Latour accompanies the project from the initial extraction of soil samples to the submission of the scientific publication to a journal. The case study illustrates that the initial referent – a piece of land in the Amazonian region – is followed by representations of it in the course of the research process: a modicum of soil in a cardboard box, a code number for its colour and a graph printed on paper in the final publication. All of these representations, however, refer back to this piece of soil – the initial referent. Through processes of amplification and reduction, representation of an initial situation or object (i.e. referent) evolves and is translated into the specific format that is able to be processed by the environment it is meant to interact with.

It is important that all communications refer back to the initial referent which is the proposition of the circulating reference (ibid.: 89). Yet because it is necessary for the information to be understandable to each receiving system, it must be reduced and/or amplified in different ways – or, in Richard Rottenburg's, terms, translated:

Because this individual pieces are not direct substitutes for an external reality but instead bring forth a cascade of further substitutes, one is never dealing with a single referent but rather with a diversity of internal or transversal referents that have been organised into a chain such that they support themselves as they proceed along it. From this perspective a representation is always a cascade of re-re...representations. Because the practice of representation is best understood as a translation, I will call this a translation chain. (Rottenburg 2009 [2002]: xxxii , emphasis in original)

The idea of translation chains shows a parallel with Systems Theory insofar as the different sub-systems in the organisation are acknowledged to select and process information according to their function in the project development process and the organisation's guiding difference. Although Luhmann strongly opposes the notion of the "transmission" of information (Luhmann 1995a: 139), he sees ritualisation as the function of "translat[ing] system-external uncertainties" into internal schemes, and as an organisation system's choice to internally thematise uncertainty using self-created protocols and

other documents for evidence (*ibid.*: 185). As I demonstrated in Chapter 9, such processes of information selection are at play at Advice Company with respect to delivery dates, both for system-environment communication and communication between sub-systems. In order to grasp the processes behind these different representations of a client project, I will adopt the concept of translation chains and apply this to the project development process at Advice Company. A similar analysis of translation chains is documented by Kiepenheuer-Drechsler in an ethnographic study tracing the projects of integration policy-makers in Germany (2013: 247) and by Rottenburg in the example of a fictitious development aid project that draws closely on his experiences of various projects he accompanied in the 1990s (Rottenburg 2009 [2002]).

As I demonstrated in Chapter 8 through the concept of double contingency, collaboration between departments and across organisational boundaries relies on the selection of information and understanding within each sub-system. The argumentation in Chapter 9 centred on intentional information selection based on assumptions of how this information would be processed in the receiving sub-system. In this chapter, the viewpoint will expand to examine the flow of client projects along the organisational value chain, from a project order to its delivery. I will show how the client project becomes a chain of translations and how it circulates through the organisation, with each sub-system creating its own representation of the project. Each of these representations refers back to the initial referent of the project order, yet presents it in a form that the respective sub-system can process. I will further argue that these representations are unintentional working misunderstandings that not only enable, but also structure the collaboration process. I will consider the way in which processes of information selection, utterance and selection of understanding are at play in client projects.

According to Systems Theory, a project cannot be considered an acting entity and neither can the employees of Advice Company be considered as individuals in the analytical focus. Rather, it is these employees' communication that constitutes the organisation's social system. Such communication is shaped by selection processes, which align with the employees' functions within their respective organisational sub-systems. A project cannot move through the organisation independently, and nor can information flow from one sub-system to the other. It is only communication about a client project that stimulates the next sub-system based on a selection of understanding for processing according to the receiving sub-system's framework.

I will trace and connect these impulses of information selection and utterance in one system and their stimulation of another system to Latour/Rotenburg's translation chain model: impulse and stimulus are both references to the same client project, yet are never congruent as they undergo frequent selection processes of reduction and amplification. Alexa Färber incisively asserts in her study of knowledge representation at the Expo that shares of reality are not always congruent to their corresponding representations (2006: 15). I will show, in the next pages, how these different and incongruent references are exactly what constitute working misunderstandings around a client project.

10.1.3. From client centricity to ground reality, and back again

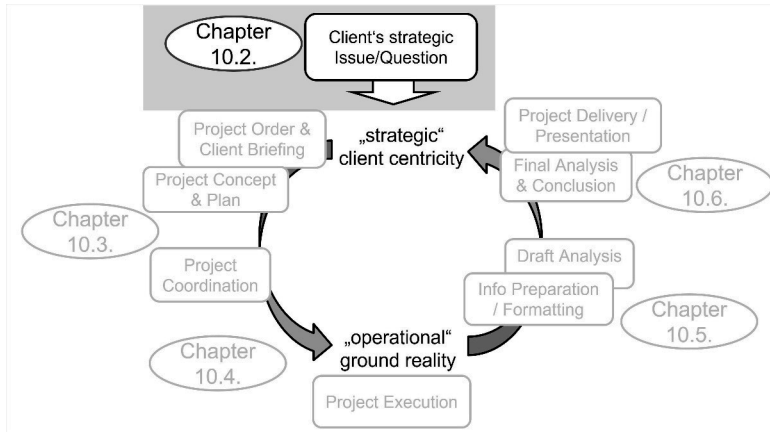
In Chapter 7 (Section 7.3), I illustrated the basic flow of actions associated with a client project, from winning the initial bid to delivering the final report to the client. I connected the project process to the organisation's guiding difference client centricity/ground reality to illustrate how a project's "strategic" tasks are connected to the value client centricity and how its operational tasks are orientated along ground reality. Chapter 9 illustrated how these different values employ intentional working misunderstandings for (mostly) successful interaction during the project planning and status update phases. The remainder of this chapter will show that the entire project development process is textured by the guiding difference client centricity/ground reality and denotes the black box of organisational functioning I seek to open. Taking the client project as the central commodity, I will trace its representations along the individual sub-systems and offices and demonstrate its relevance as a working misunderstanding. The following sub-sections of this chapter address the key steps along the project development process and the analysis commences at the beginning of the process – at the organisational boundary between Advice Company and the client systems in its environment.

10.2. Lead management: Translating uncertainty

Client projects are the main exchange commodity that generates income for Advice Company. In contrast to other basic resources that are drawn from the environment (e.g. skilled graduates), financial income must be immediately and perpetually generated in order for the organisation to maintain its

existence. Advice Company's services are also necessary for maintaining its clients' organisations by supporting their decision-making processes.

Figure 21: Allocation of Section 10.2. in the project process



10.2.1. The forecast meeting

Before a project can begin, a client must agree to give the project order to Advice Company. While the organisations in Advice Company's environment rely on decision-making for their existence and draw on the services of Advice Company to support their decision-making, only a handful of projects are agreed upon upfront as repeat contracts. Hence, Advice Company's income from client projects is predominantly irregular, and there is a degree of uncertainty with respect to the organisation's survival. Unless an organisation has a monopoly on the service it provides, clients will always have the choice of hiring a competing organisation. Even when contracts are initially secured, in the event of financial shortfalls at a client's organisation, they might be subsequently cancelled.

According to Luhmann (1995a: 185), an organisation translates this contingency into internal processes and documentation. In Advice Company, this translation is conducted by a top-down allocation of sales targets to management-level consultants and through regular meetings to monitor the status of leads (project opportunities) in order to foresee potential income resource

threats as early as possible. I attended such a meeting with the first client consulting team I accompanied. All seven team members who were present in the office at that time joined the meeting, and two others dialled in via telephone – one from the office in Delhi and one from home. When all computer and phone connections were established, the manager¹ who was leading this client consulting team started teasing Aniket, who had dialled in from home and whose connection was mediated by the black, star-shaped speaker phone in the middle of the table. The manager asked if he was sitting comfortably in his home at the window, with his feet up on the table with a *chai* tea and samosas in front of him. A wave of laughter flooded the room and the meeting began with an announcement of the agenda. This agenda centred on an spreadsheet file, which Bright had opened on his laptop; as his laptop was connected to a projector, all who were present in the room could view the file. Aniket and his colleague in Delhi were also able to see Bright's screen through the meeting software they were logged in to.

Along the spreadsheet's x-axis were months, and the y-axis featured the names of client organisations. For the future months, potential projects were listed – some with a concrete project name, others with a topic area and still others with only a question mark. But all of these leads had an estimated budget associated with them, which was discussed in terms of its likelihood of actualisation. Each row (i.e. project) was addressed and the team member in charge of the client gave a brief description of the project's background. Meeting participants commented on the leads' feasibility of becoming real project orders during the time span indicated. In the course of the meeting, the numbers revealed a potential gap in the revenue target for the next quarter. As a mitigation strategy, the manager asked Bright to send a new project proposal to the potential clients; Neelam was asked to check on the status of the most recent project offers sent to clients; and Sunidhi, one of the new joiners, was asked to contact some of the clients on the list that had a less clear prospect of generating further income.

After the discussion and review of future projects, the next item on the agenda was reviewing the status of ongoing and completed projects. These projects were monitored in the same spreadsheet, but in a different section. The focus of the discussion around ongoing projects was their status on the project development process and potential issues that might obstruct an

1 To protect the identity of the manager and the team, I only describe their functions here.

on-time delivery. The main concern with respect to completed projects was whether the final payment had been received. Meeting participants were assigned to check with the finance department or the client for outstanding payments. This task was very unpopular amongst the consultants and sometimes even led to conflict. At a coffee break, Ruchika recalled a situation in which a client had disrespectfully addressed one of her consulting team colleagues as a “money collector” in an email response, after the young colleague had reminded the client about an outstanding payment. Ruchika said about that incident:

When I saw that mail I was thinking: oh just somebody, either one of our managers write an email to the guy that yes, money collection is also part of her job, but also many other highly valuable tasks. She is the most junior in the team and has been working nightshifts the last two days to get a report document to the client, and she just happened to ask about the invoice in the same email while sending the deliverable through. The report document she sent had been requested very urgently, and our manager had called us every few minutes when it will be finished and he put a lot of pressure on us, we could hardly work. So how does she feel in that moment?! The problem is that you never know if and when the managers will stand up for you, actually there is nobody standing up for you in that particular matter.

Ruchika's quote provides insight into the team's internal hierarchies and frictions, but it predominantly shows the perceived misfit of “valuable” (i.e. client-centric) tasks that the client consultants did not perceive as meaningful boundary work.

When the meeting was over, almost two hours later, the data file containing all of the projects showed a few updated cells with more details about potential new projects. For other potential projects, the status field displayed only a question mark. Months before a client project became a reality, it would exist in a cell on a spreadsheet and would gradually take shape, from a vague question mark to a brief reference of the topic and, finally, to a concrete project name. The question mark might not even indicate a project interest announced by the client; it could merely indicate a potential opportunity that had been identified or assumed by one of the team members about what might be saleable as a project to the client, despite the opacity of client systems for Advice Company.

10.2.2. A structure of uncertainty

The above example illustrates how the perceived uncertainty and serendipity of the project business in Advice Company's environment is translated within the organisational system into the format of a spreadsheet file – the epitome of structured data. Spreadsheets are the main tool used in finance and accounting departments to track an organisation's financial status. Furthermore, such files are generally used to manage and aggregate quantitative facts and data. Considering this connotation of a spreadsheet, the immense disparity between the uncertain prospect of client projects and their precise representation in a spreadsheet becomes salient.

Furthermore, spreadsheets have the technical capability to easily aggregate figures from individual teams and departments to produce a financial business forecast for review at the board level. Such figures reflect Latour's idea of a black box through the translation mechanisms described by Luhmann: uncertainty in Advice Company's environment is met with Advice Company's expectations of potential project orders, which are translated into spreadsheets. These spreadsheets are produced by each team and aggregated into a forecast of future revenue. On this basis, decisions are made by management seniors.

But it is not only the specific media into which the environmental uncertainty is translated, but also the arrangement of data in the file that illustrates the structural change from the amorphous cloud of unsecured project possibilities in the organisation's environment to a format that can be processed internally. The more or less informal phone conversations with clients about upcoming developments in their organisation and important changes in the national economy – as well as client consultants' expectations of getting clients' approval for new projects – find their representation in a matrix of data on a spreadsheet. This is analogous to the mechanism Latour observed in his case study of the "pedocomparator" – a tool used by soil research specialists to pack soil samples into standardised, small carton boxes that are subsequently placed in an assigned compartment in a grid arrangement (2000: 61). Similarly, the potential projects in Advice Company's environment are "packed" into cells on a spreadsheet in a grid set-up that corresponds with the organisational structure.

Furthermore, updating project opportunities from unnamed potentials to actual sources of income retraces the gradual solidification of a lead with amorphous texture to a concrete client contract. This suggests a quasi-evolu-

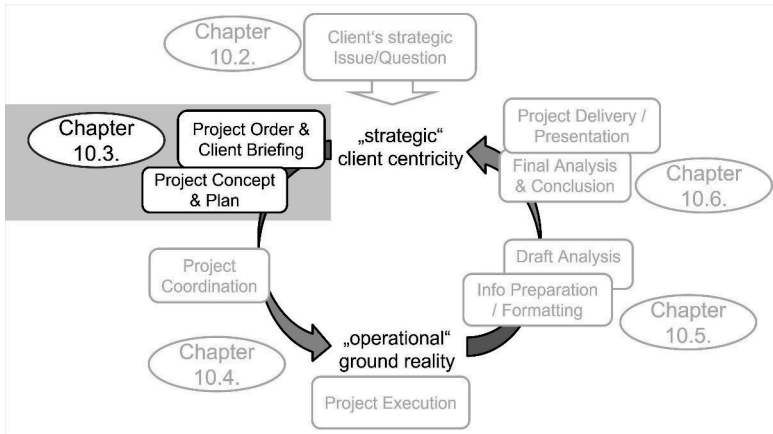
tionary development of project opportunities once they find their representation in a spreadsheet cell. However, such a development does not always occur: As I passed by client consultant Gopal's desk on my way to the coffee machine, he stopped me with a "Morning, got a minute? Things don't go as planned". I asked him how the preparation for an important client meeting (taking place the next day) was progressing. He told me that it had actually been cancelled by the client and pushed back four weeks. He assumed also this new date to be rather volatile and I thought that the change might have actually granted him a few relaxed workdays. So I asked him why he still seemed to be concerned. He explained that the delay would cause a severe budget gap in the second quarter that had not been calculated for and this would cause an issue for his budget forecast. In this case, the project's question mark status did not transform into a real project at the right time, despite assumptions that it would.

In significant contrast to Latour's example from the Amazonian rain forest, a client project finds its representation in the organisation even before it is a concrete project moving along the development process. Here, it is Luhmann who accounts for these translation processes from an organisation's insecure and contingent perception of the environment to concrete information that it can process. This is also an example of Luhmann's structural coupling (Luhmann 1991: 1432): as soon as the project prospect becomes real, it takes on a structure – a space in which it can fit further processing. In this respect, I would argue that Luhmann, despite the incompatibility he claims between the suppositions of Systems Theory and ANT, not only agrees with the translation chain model, but even amplifies its scope to incorporate the stage of uncertainty about the environment of a social system.

10.3. From strategy to project actions

The previous section outlined how the amorphous stage of a project opportunity transforms into solid income for the organisation during the forecasting cycle. Section 10.3 focuses on the project development process from the point that a client files a project with Advice Company.

Figure 22: Section 10.3 in the project process



10.3.1. The project briefing as a communication process

A project is “communicated into being” (Sprenger 2017) through an official briefing. Depending on the client organisation and its relationship with Advice Company, this briefing might take the form of an email with a spreadsheet in a pre-agreed format (comparable to an order form), a face-to-face meeting or a conference call; whichever form it takes, the briefing outlines the requirements of the project in detail and often supports these notes with presentation slides. This step depicts the communication process that marks the beginning of the project. The project-constituting communication process consists of information that is selected by the client and its transmission through verbal utterances and/or documentation.

Clients’ selections of information can differ as widely as their transmission formats. Several clients – mainly the largest ones – have specialised organisational roles assigned to performing the boundary work between the organisation and Advice Company. While the persons in these roles serve as the primary contacts for administrative questions, their primary task is to translate their system-internal need for decision-making into information that can be processed by Advice Company. They are knowledgeable of the services provided by Advice Company and understand the relevant differences in scope, price range, delivery timeframes and types of input needed to constitute a suf-

ficient project briefing for each service. These boundary work specialists, who perform a significant amount of the translation activity between the systems, optimise the information selection and utterance for system compatibility. Here, the systems are – again – structurally coupled. But this is not always the case, as Cathy (client consultant) explained:

This [project briefing] can vary from client and division. Major clients sometimes have a kind of form, mostly a spreadsheet, in which they write very specific details about what they want from us. At that level it is almost like an order. But obviously, this [is] only possible, when you have knowledgeable people at the client side, who transform what is needed into Advice Company's language, you know, like using exactly our terms for the different things. And they also speak of themselves as those interfaces, who organise the successful collaboration work. That's the easiest. Then there are clients, who have a few presentation slides about what they expect, which we can discuss. Sometimes, our contact person is a manager, who then speaks a lot about the bigger strategic intent and other things, which are not really relevant, until we reach their concrete issue. And then you might talk to a client, who has been told by his boss to book a project with us for the go/no-go decision at their end. These people then have no idea what kind of services we offer. And this means you have to work out with them together at the meeting how a project might look like.

In the latter case, the translation process is performed through the selection of understanding of a communication made by Advice Company's client consultants. Their function is to translate the client's need for decision-making into the service offering of Advice Company that best corresponds to the client's need. This step delineates the first node in the translation chain: The client's need for decision-making finds its representation in the project briefing for Advice Company and its subsequent translation into the organisation's service structure, pertaining to project types, deliverables and timeframes. Depending on the type of briefing, the information undergoes selection mechanisms that vary from complete pre-alignment to the terminology and service structure of Advice Company to an unstructured summary of ideas in the client's system "language". At the latter extreme, the translation effort lays predominantly with Advice Company's client consulting teams, who must select an understanding of information. Advice Company's selection of understanding translates the client's need for decision-making into a form that is compat-

ible with the organisational structure – aligned with its teams, process and timeframes – and thus makes the information usable.

10.3.2. Project briefing and working misunderstandings

Despite being boundary work experts, client consulting team members see the potential for misunderstanding in this first translation step, as the following situation shows: I was having a morning coffee chat in the cafeteria with Sakshi, a client consultant, when Ruchika walked past and spontaneously joined us. Ruchika spoke about her current nightshift work on a project for which a client wanted a last-minute decision to support. Ruchika's team had conducted the first phase of the project in three days and would have to run through the entire process at similar speed. With a sideways smile to me she said I should have been on the late evening phone calls with the client, because: "The potentials for misunderstanding and the likelihood for something to go awfully wrong shoots up a lot in such crunched timelines, as we might not get exactly what the client is actually asking for." Delighted about the way in which the conversation was going, I asked what she would do if she felt the misunderstanding might rise. Her answer was to have everything documented, in email. "This", she said with a frown, "doesn't really prevent the misunderstanding, but at least we have a chance to prove how it came about in case it really becomes a real issue."

I asked if she had ever encountered such a "real issue" – a situation in which the misunderstanding had become apparent. Indeed, she recalled such a project, which had taken place several years ago, when it was only during the final delivery presentation to the client when the client said the report was not at all what had been asked for. Ruchika painted the picture of a client that had gone through an internal restructure during the project phase and consequently changed the stakeholders involved. Therefore, she concluded, the information on what had been initially defined as a requirement "got lost between the various handovers". But she described the situation to have been a real disaster, and claimed that such a thing had only happened to her once during her almost 10 years in the business. She said that minor versions of this scenario tended to occur frequently, "especially when things are getting a bit hectic". But from her view, major situations only tended to occur when there were too many stakeholders on the client's side and when one department on the client's side did not understand how their requirements might differ from what another department might need.

Ruchika's explanations of the pitfalls for misunderstanding in the briefing phase illustrate two points: First, she affirms that for the "disaster" she mentioned, the project and its intended scope became a working misunderstanding between the client and Advice Company that was maintained throughout the entire process, despite several interim updates to the client. In this situation, the working misunderstanding reached the "point of unravelling" (Reed 2006) during the final delivery presentation. Second, she holds that minor working misunderstandings frequently occur in situations under time pressure, yet these do not tend to lead to a point of unravelling or a "disaster" as extreme as the example she gave. In her view, working misunderstandings seem rather to be concomitants of high-performance project work. Nevertheless, she was aware of them and consequently documented Advice Company's selections of understandings in her emails to the client. She employed this risk mitigation strategy in order to be equipped for the eventual situation that a working misunderstanding might not work anymore.

Furthermore, she refers to instances of different understandings of the project across the client's various sub-systems; in such instances, Advice Company's representations might not refer to each of these systems' presumptions about the project. From this we can infer that she views the project as a working misunderstanding within the client's organisation: although the various sub-systems in the client's organisation might refer to the same project, they might have substantially differing understandings of what the project is actually about.

10.3.3. Internal briefing and mechanisms of reduction

When I accompanied Karan, a project coordinator, he mentioned just after lunch how happy he was with how the day had been going and that he would likely complete his to do list that afternoon. Only minutes later, in what felt like an ironic comedy scene – a colleague from the client consulting team appeared and announced that he had just received information from a client about a bid win for a project. The project order would be signed by the client soon and the work would need to begin sooner rather than later. Could Karan join the project briefing at 2.30pm, in 20 minutes?

Karan and his manager Duniya joined the client consultant Faisal for the briefing session. As the meeting had been spontaneously arranged, no meeting room was available and we instead gathered around a table in one of the semi-open chat corners. Faisal opened his laptop and showed a few slides of

a presentation that bore the client company's logo and had obviously been taken from the client's original presentation (the slides numbers were not in sequence and the word "cont." appeared twice in a heading, indicating several slides should have been available on the subject, though no related slides were shown). Faisal went through the slides, recalling what the client had said with respect to certain points. After spending about five minutes on three slides about the project background, the next 20 minutes of the meeting centred on the retrospective time planning of the activities that would be needed to reach the delivery date that Faisal had indicated to Karan and Duniya. The briefing ended after 35 minutes and Karan was tasked with confirming the budget figure and timeline by the end of the day.

Back at his desk, Karan wrote the new project's name, "RUBIN"², on a fresh sheet of his note pad and, below it, several lines of actions and a rough estimate of the work efforts associated with each of them. Then he opened several chat windows in parallel and made phone calls to discuss with his colleagues from other departments whether his assumptions might be right. These conversations focused solely on the work tasks. The actual topic and decision-making need of the client did not play a role – they were subsumed under "this new RUBIN project". It was not a surprise that Karan's day did not end at the casually early time he had envisaged after the lunch break. When we met again the next morning he was still chasing his colleagues for pricing confirmation. In addition to writing actions on his note pad, Karan had printed his standard "to do" list for a project, to which he had added the project name RUBIN to the top right corner and the name of the client consultant. The roughly 25 checklist points were grouped into the different project phases he would have to manage from that point onwards until the work tasks were complete and the client consultants produced their final report. He explained the phases and checkpoints to me while opening the official forms in an online tracking tool associated with each phase.

The representation of project RUBIN was, by this point, a printed, standardised to do list individualised with the project name, the responsible client consultant and the deadlines associated with each action. This was an example of the break between form and materiality in Latour's translation chain model (2000: 85) – in this case through the mechanisms of reduction: Faisal selected the information on project RUBIN according to what his client consulting team would require to process it. For utterance, he selected a briefing session

2 Fictional project name

with a presentation as an impulse that would be received by the project coordination team. Likewise, Duniya and Karan selected the understanding of the project briefing according to their sub-system's framework, and the stimulus from the intra-organisational environment resulted in a momentum within their own team. This momentum was translated into the various follow-up communications that Karan began. The representation of project RUBIN as a sequence of action steps on Karan's standard to do list, which constituted an information format that could be processed by his sub-system, can be contrasted to the format of Faisal's briefing.

This situation provides insight into the various nodes in the chain of representations: as the project moved to the next sub-system in the project development process its materiality transformed into a reduced set of actions to be managed. While each action step referred to project RUBIN and the client's need for Advice Company's support in a decision-making process, the actions were information that could be processed by the relevant sub-system of project coordinators, or at least what the client consulting sub-system selected as relevant information for the sub-system.

The following case illustrates the information selection and reduction processes at play from another angle: Project coordinators Mayank and Asif, who sat close to each other, were each attending two different teleconferences when client consultant Aniket appeared at their desk area. He first approached Mayank to talk with him about a new project. After a few sentences, Mayank shrugged his shoulders and pointed with one hand to the telephone, indicating that he was in a call and could not attend to Aniket's request at that moment. Aniket then turned around to Asif, who switched his headset to mute mode but left one side of the speakers against his ear so he could continue to listen to the conversation in the call. With a move of his hand to this ear, he showed that he could not fully devote his attention to his client consulting colleague.

Although Aniket must have been aware that Asif was also attending a teleconference, he started to talk about a project that urgently needed to be pushed forward. Asif frowned and pointed out that this was, in his opinion, not only tight but even unrealistic, and that Aniket would never manage to get all of the required information clarified with the client in order to start the activities needed from all groups. But Aniket insisted that the briefing to the execution teams at the street office should happen the next day and suggested that he could start with just a small sub-segment of the tasks and continue when all was planned out in more detail. He said that he would see the project

with “you” (the project coordinators) from now onwards and that he had only come by at this moment “to make you guys aware”.

Asif lifted his hand, indicating that Aniket should hold his conversation for a second. He pushed the “un-mute” button of his phone and actively participated in the teleconference by announcing his support for the suggestion made in the call. When he muted the microphone once more, Aniket offered to sit with Asif to briefly review the project. Asif said he could do so at 5.00pm, but Aniket pressed his lips together and offered 6.30 to 7.00pm; Asif replied that he would have left the office by this time. Aniket pretended to be surprised, but Asif and Aniket had been working together for almost two years and both were completely aware of each other’s usual working hours. Nonetheless, Aniket asked why he would not be there, and while returning to his desk, uttered that official office hours were until 6.30pm. In the hour following the conversation, both agreed via chat to “sit together” the next morning at 8.30am.

This example illustrates the nature of the break between the client’s strategic need for decision-making and the project’s representation as an executable entity. The information Aniket selected about the project presented it as a set of work activities that the project coordinators had to fit into their sub-system. The boundary between these systems was not only perceived logically by Aniket, but was also depicted territorially within the office, and Aniket actively crossed this territorial boundary in an effort to transmit the information. When Asif indicated with his follow-up communication that he would not be willing to assign the new project in the timeframe suggested, Aniket reminded Asif of the official office hours in the wider organisational system and their obligations in connection with organisational membership.

Aniket’s communications oriented on the value client centricity and leveraged his higher status as a client consultant on the client centricity scale (as did those of Faisal, the client consultant in the previous case). Asif countered Aniket’s demand with the argument that the client and/or Aniket would not be able to provide all of the information he needed for the execution teams so quickly. Asif hence communicated according to the value the ground reality – in this case as a counter-balance to client centricity. Asif challenged Aniket’s client project request, an action clearly opposing client centricity. In this case, the ground reality value appeared as a relativisation of client centricity, or a demarcation of boundaries for the opaque meaning of client centricity.

10.3.4. Project representations as unintentional misunderstandings

Hitesh from the project coordination team perceived the diverging project representations of the client consultants and his team as reflecting a need for “more effective alignment”. He described that the client consultants *took* a “download” from the client and *gave* a “download” to the project coordination teams; this metaphor emphasises the hierarchy of the client centricity scale even more explicitly than “briefing”. In contrast to Asif’s ground reality-orientated response, Hitesh argued in accordance to the client-centric value: in his opinion, there needed to be more time invested in the “download” step, and he wanted his consulting colleagues to “share experience from the client and to get us more involved”. To my surprise, his teammate Asif voiced a similar viewpoint just a few days after the incident with Aniket:

We want to have more involvement on the consulting side; we need to understand what the client wants. I mean, we have to build up trust by being clear what the client wants. See, when I say to the service people here, that I want a tea, I might get a nice, fresh leaf tea or a simple one from the machine [instant powder tea produced by the coffee machines in the office]. It is like the Chinese whisper, you know.

Asif argues here for a more client-centric alignment of the project coordinators. I will come back to this seemingly paradoxical reference to the two opposing values in the next section and at the end of this book. For the time being, I would like to concentrate on the qualitative difference of these cases to the date games described in Chapter 9. The descriptions here suggest the absence of intention in the incongruence of the information presented about a project in the transmission process. Hitesh described the two-step process of “downloads” with the implicit assumption that representations would be more congruent if more time were spent on them. He did not verbalise that an intentional selection of a reduced share of project information arrived at the boundaries of his sub-system, but he clearly perceived his understanding of the project as different to that of the client consultants.

With his reference to Chinese whispers, Asif expressed a similar notion of unintentionally reduced and/or altered information on a client project, yet positioned it in the realms of misunderstanding through his example of the different products associated with “tea”. But in contrast to the tea scenario, in which both interacting parties very quickly realised their differing associations of “tea” as soon as the cup stood in front of them, a client project’s diver-

gent understandings were likely to remain undetected, beyond the subtle notion that only a brief reference to the project would be processed by the project coordinators' sub-system. Project RUBIN and its multiple counterparts found its representation in a reduced share of action steps that formed the basis for a project understanding. This represented a "re-re-representation" in the sense of Rottenburg (2009 [2002]: xxxii) of the client's strategic question as initial referent voiced in the client briefing. Such representations did not substitute the external stimulus of the client; rather, they were a series of connected representations that were employed and understood at various aspects of the translation chain and project development process within the organisation.

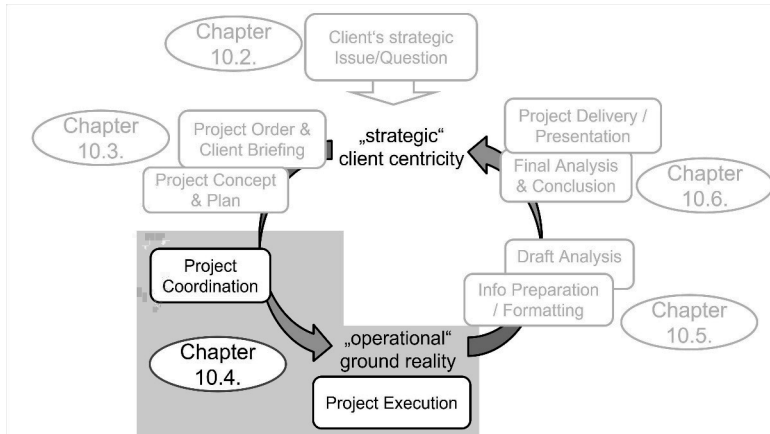
10.4. The client project as a plan and the "ground reality"

The previous section illustrated how the client project becomes a representation of the client's need to make decisions. From the external impulse in the form of the project briefing, the boundary work experts select an understanding that subsequently serves as the basis of further selection within Advice Company. The client project, as the central commodity, can therefore be understood as an unintentional working misunderstanding, as the parallel encoding of the project meaning is variously perceived by the employees as a consequence of the multi-level "download" procedures that are conducted by the individual sub-systems. While the translation chain – to this point – encompasses nodes within the main office, Section 10.4 puts the spotlight on the node between the project coordinators at the main office and the freelancer team leads at the street office. This node is located at the boundary of two hierarchically distinct sub-systems at two office locations on opposite ends of the client centricity scale. As the street office operates on the basis of ground reality as a value, successful interaction is even more challenging than the interaction in previous translation nodes.

10.4.1. Briefing calls: Perspectives from two office locations

As described in Section 10.3.3, once the project coordinators receive the "download" from the consulting teams and the deadline for the project execution phase, the client project is represented as a list of tasks for the execution teams to complete. These tasks are furthermore detailed in yet another spreadsheet file that bears the name of the project and the different

Figure 23: Allocation of Section 10.4 in the project process



teams across India who will be involved in completing the data collection activities.³ For each team, the assigned work packets in different categories, such as business areas, are listed below. Thus, a client's recommended strategic decision is represented in a spreadsheet that is, again, aligned with Advice Company's organisational structure of office locations and teams. Both the information that is selected by the project coordinators and the format chosen for communication constitute the initial communication with the next sub-system – the execution teams (or, more precisely, the employees who coordinate the work of freelancers). This interaction is organised in the form of another briefing session, which almost always takes the form of a teleconference, as the execution team leads are based at various street offices across India⁴. Depending on the project, less than a handful of different street offices might be involved in smaller projects, while major projects can require a dozen or more locations to contribute to the project with their freelancers' work. The call is typically scheduled a few days beforehand via email, through which the dial-in details and (ideally) the briefing document

3 To protect Advice Company's identity, this analysis makes only generic reference to "(data collection) activities", "actions" and "tasks" (used synonymously).

4 For reasons of anonymity I am not able to disclose the total number of street offices run by Advice Company.

and description of the work tasks are also shared. I attended several briefing calls, at both the main office and the street office, and it is from these calls that I collected the following cases. The first briefing call is described from the perspective of employees at the main office:

When I was sitting with the organising project coordinator in one of the meeting rooms of the air conditioned main office with a coffee in front of me and the speaker phone in the middle of the table, the boundary with the other organisational sub-system became almost materially salient. To organise the briefing call that I was sitting in on, Asif had spent a good 30 minutes in the past two hours ensuring that the participants would actually join. He had contacted each of the five execution team leads individually via mobile and landline phones to remind them of the briefing call at 3.00pm. He had also sent out email invitations two days before and monitored the responses. In two cases, he had convinced colleagues to join despite them claiming to have conflicting events scheduled.

Asif sat at the meeting room table and dialled into the conference. One participant was already there, and Asif started a casual conversation with him. In the following minutes, three of the other four participants joined in, as announced by the characteristic “beep” of the phone software. Asif checked the names of the attendees on his list and sent a text message to the missing participant’s mobile. Then he sent a chat message to Kanika, the client consultant for the project, to tell her that the briefing was starting. He officially opened the call by asking if all of the participants had the briefing documents printed and in front of them. All of them assured him that this was the case. Two of the four participants had dialled into the call from locations outside the street office: one seemed to be at a public café or plaza and another was attending the teleconference whilst travelling in a rickshaw. From time to time we heard the all-present horn sounds or the colleague giving directions to the rickshaw driver. Asif did not comment on this situation, but only asked the colleague after a few minutes to “mute” her phone unless she had any questions to ask. The background sounds were amplified by voices that flashed up from time to time, which I later identified as stemming from another briefing call that was taking place within the office for a different project.

Client consultant Kanika entered silently through the glass sliding door of the meeting room. She took a seat and concentrated on her mobile phone, apparently occupied with another issue she needed to deal with. Asif and Kanika had previously agreed that Asif would conduct the main parts of the briefing and Kanika would join in if needed. Asif went through the briefing file line

by line and asked for feedback on whether his words had been understood, demanding an explicit “Yes, that’s clear” or “No questions on that” from all of the four execution team colleagues. After 15 minutes, the mobile phone connection of the colleague travelling in the rickshaw weakened significantly and we heard the automatic voice of her network provider say that “The conversation partner is temporarily unavailable” for 20 seconds, until the line was finally cut off.

Once Asif could be heard again by all participants, he continued with the briefing. All of the tasks seemed to be very clearly conveyed until he reached the assumed productivity rate of the freelancers for the work packages. Kanika had assumed twice of what the execution team leads felt was realistic, and the discussion became so intense that Kanika decided to actively enter the conversation in order to defend her assumptions. One of the team leads emphasised their current difficulties in finding suitable freelancers and at the same time accused “you head office people” of “play[ing] down the reality”. But Asif sharply terminated the argument by announcing that he would be calling everybody individually after the conference call to discuss their respective views and to “work out something”.

He later told me about the motivation for his intervention: that it would be “easier to convince them of the plan at hand when talking to them one by one”, as “in a conference situation it could be a discussion forever”. With this intervention and mitigation offer from Asif, the briefing finished after 40 minutes. Kanika and Asif remained in the meeting room for another 10 minutes to review the timelines Kanika wanted for the project. After a bit of negotiation in light of the controversial discussion with the execution team leads, they agreed on a deadline a full week later than Kanika’s requested date. Kanika confirmed this with a “Don’t be late!”

As an example of a briefing call from the perspective of Advice Company’s street office, the following situation occurred: When I accompanied Sachin at the street office, he attended a briefing call for a project managed by Sharan, a project coordinator I had accompanied just two weeks prior in the main office. I sat in a row of three people in the bigger office room of the street office and the phone – shared between their desks – was moved as close to Sachin’s work area as the cord allowed. The phone was switched to speaker mode at maximum volume, and so were another two phones at a distance of five and eight metres, respectively, which were both connected to the teleconference line. At first I thought Sachin might have forgotten about this briefing call, as

at 4.00pm he was standing next to his manager's desk, pointing at the laptop screen and lively discussing an email relating to a project issue.

But then he suddenly checked his mobile, walked to his desk and bent over his computer screen to bring up the email about the briefing call. He opened the attachments and sent them to the printer while dialling in to the conference. He fetched the briefing documents from the printer at the end of the desk row, adjusted his chair and looked at the printed pages while completing the dial-in procedure. By 4.10pm, all of the attendees had connected to the conference call.

Sharan, the project coordinator at the main office, conducted the briefing. It was strange for me to hear his familiar voice through the speakers and I automatically pictured him sitting in the meeting room with the glass door. While this scenery unfolded in my mind's eye, I realised that I hadn't imagined my current setting in the street office when attending previous briefings at the main office. Despite the background noise of the office, the other teleconference attendees' environments and a constant cracking on the line, Sachin was attentive and asked plenty of clarifying questions about the briefing documentation.

I found it fascinating that he could remain concentrated for almost an hour, while I struggled to understand Sharan's words amidst the cacophony of sounds. My head seemed close to exploding upon reaching its capacity limits to handle the manifold impressions, sounds and stimuli. The communication felt more direct and "real" in comparison to the communication I had experienced at the other two offices: it seemed as if this location was missing the filter of "corporateness" that the employees had referred to in their comparisons of the three offices' atmospheres. Suddenly, the meaning of "ground reality" seemed to materialise and the distance to the client-centric parts of the organisation seemed to reinforce the contrast of atmospheres at each end of the telephone line.

Later in the call, Sachin was in doubt over whether the assumed handling time for each work package was realistic. He thought that the efforts might take much longer than anticipated by the project design, and that this would have a direct impact on cost. He put the speaker on mute and discussed this with the colleague next to him, who told him with intense gesticulation to point it out right away. But Sachin said to me in a whisper that he would bring it up at the end of the call. Indeed, he raised this question at the very end. Sharan reacted as indifferently as Asif had by saying "Yes, yes, potentially this might be the case in a few categories", and mumbling something incom-

prehensible about the need to catch up on it separately. Then Sharan asked if there were any more questions and ended the call immediately, referencing another meeting he had to prepare for. Later in the afternoon, Sachin told his colleague about Sharan's reaction and the rushed ending of the call. When I had an opportunity to talk with Sachin about this during a cigarette break, he voiced his opinion that Sharan had been completely aware of the issue, but did not want to discuss it over the call. He decided not to send an official email but intended to "maybe catch him via phone [in the] next days..."

On the one hand, these examples illustrate how interactions were practised between the project coordination and execution teams. The selection of information and understanding spanned the main office and the street office. This interaction was characterised by the hierarchical disparity between the more client-centric main office (with the project coordinators) and the most distant locality to it: the street office (with the execution team). The briefing call had been initiated by the project coordinators, who hosted the virtual space in the form of the teleconference into which participants from the street office dialled in with passcodes that had been sent to them beforehand. Asif was also aware that he was dealing with a sub-system that was not structured similarly to the main office. He therefore called participants beforehand to make sure they would join the briefing and did not choose to perform other actions that were more relevant to them – more relevant according to the ground reality's value. The project coordinators also provided the project information and thus the content of what would be discussed. The briefing call was led by the project coordinators and the focus seemed to be on sending information rather than receiving feedback. Both Asif and Sharan ended the call quickly when critical remarks came up. Their roles were hierarchically higher and they had the power to end the call at their discretion. This fits with the understanding of briefing calls as "downloads": information is downloaded from the system that possesses the information, and when the download is complete, the sending system cuts the connection. In the briefing call, feedback was not part of the interaction. The process of "working out *something*" (i.e. negotiation between the client-centric and ground reality oriented sub-systems) was carried out "offline".

The cases described above illustrate "re-re-presentations" of client projects. The information that was selected was not necessarily a set of documents – a plan that was unmarked by date games and interdependent decision-making between the project coordinators and execution team

leads – but rather a matter of conviction and negotiation. This aspect will be further developed in the following section.

10.4.2. Negotiating client project representations

The project coordinators must manage communication about a project with the execution team leads, who are structured orientating on the value ground reality. Being located at the main office, the project coordinators are structurally closer to the client and also in direct physical vicinity to the client-centric client consulting teams. That this communication with the street office must be crafted differently than communication at the main office can be inferred from Preeti's reason for requesting that project coordinators be allocated a joint desk in the office:

[I]t is not good if the project coordinator in charge for the projects sits right next to the consulting person allocated to the same, which makes negotiations difficult. I can hardly say anything! Our role here is as a negotiator between the two sides. You know, before [the team was established] consulting and execution teams hated each other. So when sitting next to them [the client consultants] and talking on the phone [to the execution team leads], they suddenly intervene disturbing my conversation. For example, when I am calming a team lead that we will find a solution for the concerns on time or cost, the consultant might ask me why I am committing to anything on her behalf. But consultants don't understand that I just want to relax the situation and convince the execution team lead to carry on, to go ahead. Consultants only push – I negotiate. Because I know that the work could be done and I have to convince them [execution team leads] of that.

This is an example how the opposing value to client centricity becomes dominant in this context as a corrective value that I would also subsume under the ground reality. The client consultants operate on the basis of client centricity, which project coordinator Preeti deems incompatible with the orientation of the execution team leads' system ("push[ing]" vs. "negotiat[ing]"). This requires the project coordinators to select a different communication style with the execution team leads than that used with the client consultants. Similarly, Asif, during the escalation situation with the execution team leads, chose to continue communication outside of the official briefing call and thus outside the client consultant's awareness. The separation of the two conversation channels had to be maintained for the project to continue along its devel-

opment process. This led to different representations of the project, which were apparently incompatible, yet relevant for the project's functioning. The different representations of the client project can hence be understood as unintentional working misunderstandings that enabled interaction across these sub-systems.

The project – as a bundle of tasks to be completed in a tight timeframe and within a limited budget – was, according to Preeti and Asif, not up for discussion in relation to feasibility; rather, it had to be believed. That these negotiations were based on a working misunderstanding of the client project (as invoked by different representations of it) becomes apparent from Rohan's position on the erroneous estimations given by “these main office people”:

Rohan: When I enter into a discussion you will observe me making complaints, and main office people also making complaints. But they do not understand the ground reality. They should come here to experience this. Not only come for one visit in their AC [air conditioned] car and then leave again. Come for some weeks, come and try to do our work themselves, experience ground reality. Something like internship [here].

FM: Okay, and the other way round? Did you ever see what happens with the work your team does on it?

Rohan: No. I have never seen a presentation for client or some of analysis that happens. It will also be better for me to see what happens. Because maybe a task I think is not so important is actually very important for the client. I would be very interested on that.

Rohan uses “ground reality” here as a spatial metaphor of the hierarchical position of the street office, which occupies the lower end of the client centrality scale, as other examples have shown. He additionally indicates the street office's potential for inverting the organisation's guiding difference, as in this office, it is the ground reality that determines the possibilities, rather than client centrality. He describes the different representations of a client project, which all relate to the same need for decision-making yet are far from the same. With his request for main office colleagues to “experience the ground reality”, he expresses the view that their lack of familiarity with this sub-system inhibits them from understanding its challenges for specific project situations; hence, there is an unintentional working misunderstanding. At the same time, Rohan reflects on his own lack of insight into the client consulting

aspect of a project and, along with this, the potential for misunderstanding his contribution to it, in connection to the client.

These different representations constitute unintentional working misunderstandings due to the opacity of the different sub-systems to each other. When the client consultants refer to the “ground reality” they refer to the black box of project work tasks that are completed by the project execution teams, together with the freelancers. Representations of the clients’ projects are opaque to other systems, leading to different understandings, and Rohan’s own representation is also opaque. The different sub-systems must be opaque for the project to function. While client consultants, project coordinators and execution team leads process different representations of the project within their respective sub-systems, the client-centric structure of the organisation allows these representations to be related and even logically connected due to their orientation towards the client – or an idea of it. This orientation is particularly salient in representations of the “ground reality”, as outlined in the following section.

10.4.3. The boundary specialists: Organising the freelancer’s work

When I accompanied Rohan to one of his briefing meetings to the freelancers, he described to me the steps he had already undertaken for a project. As soon as he had received the official briefing call for the new project he had reviewed a list of potential candidates in his freelancer pool and contacted them via mobile phone. Within hours he had an idea of staff availability and started to plan a briefing meeting with the freelancer teams’ group managers. The freelancers were, as I learned, organised into teams of four or five, each headed up by experienced freelancers who acted as Rohan’s primary contacts. For this project, it took Rohan another three days to secure the availability of all of the project coordinators and prepare all of the material for the work execution process. When it was time for the briefing session, we went into the small meeting room upstairs in the street office – a five square metre windowless compartment with tin walls, equipped with approximately six chairs and a round table, on which Rohan took a seat. Five freelancers sat on the chairs, leaving one unoccupied. The rest of the room was jammed with stacks of documents and a printer. Rohan distributed a printed copy of the project briefing note, which was a cut-down version of the documentation that Rohan had received. They reviewed the document together; Rohan read each item aloud and provided a brief explanation, emphasising some of the specific requirements on

the data to be collected, which were also described in the document. After one hour, the initial introduction was finished and Rohan suggested that the group take a short break before returning for questions. After another 45 minutes, the briefing ended rather abruptly. The participants would return now to their freelancers and provide them with the information about the type of data collection task to be done for this project while Rohan and I returned to the office area downstairs. Rohan's assessment of the project was that it was simple, with fairly standard requirements. He did not expect any problems because the freelancers were familiar with such work tasks and could easily accomplish them.

The project representation had been reduced to a narrow set of data collection tasks that the freelancers were expected to execute. Rohan's assessment of the project as simple and fairly standard suggests that, in his view, the different projects from various clients could be reduced to a set of standard building blocks, which would be combined anew with each project. This view is very difficult to relate back to the strategic decision of the client and again makes apparent that Rohan, as the execution team lead, orientated to the ground reality as a value. For him, a project was easy for freelancers to handle (and thus good for him) if it was simple and similar to previous projects. It is unlikely that a client consultant would have provided a similar project description (see, for example, the "most remarkable projects" described in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1). The two values are hence incompatible. But because the client project could function as a working misunderstanding, collaboration was possible.

10.4.4. Information selection and representation of the "ground reality"

Representations to the environment can be observed in the practice of client visits to the execution teams. As part of the carefully managed information selection for clients about their projects with Advice Company, clients are sometimes invited to accompany one of the execution teams during small part of their workday.

This practice can be compared to a situation in Rottenburg's "parable of development aid" (2009 [2002]), in which recipients of the development aid project reports execute "on site visits" to "confront the paper-based reality with the haptic experience of the development aid projects". These visits are in Rottenburg's case, however, another set of specific and carefully managed representations of the project. Instead of a paper report, a recently painted

maintenance shed for a recently built well is visible, but not a maintenance discipline in the project, itself. As Rottenburg asserts, this “on site visit” does not result in a confrontation with a representation of reality, but a confrontation with further representations: the wide-angled, abstract representation of the development aid project in the form of the project report is related to smaller and less abstract representations – but they remain mere representations of the reality (2009 [2002]: 93).

I accompanied a freelancer team of two ladies when they collected the data relevant for the client project. The situation I witnessed was similar to the one of the development aid project – I was presented a carefully managed representation rather than what Rohan and his freelancer teams would understand as their working reality. The individuals with whom I interacted were carefully selected senior-level college graduates and did this job already for several years, as they told me in a casual chat. The average freelancer, they claimed, would be much younger (in the early 20s) and at the early stage of his or her university education. And, no, they usually would not follow the procedures in that much detail and would not collaborate in that way. They would not work together but individually on the data collection and much faster, as much higher productivity would be required from them. Both of the ladies I accompanied were, however, “real freelancers”, and this would not have been the case had I been a client visiting the street office. In such cases, as I later learned, Rohan himself would have taken over the freelancer’s role. Rohan reasoned that my case was different, as usually people would “only come to check on them”. But as he had heard that I was interested in their “actual work” and (from his other colleagues) that I was “okay”, he felt it was neither useful nor necessary to arrange for a “normal client visit”.

Hence, what I was allowed to see and experience was a specific representation of a project’s “ground reality”, with only partial overlaps with the perceived daily praxis of the freelancers. This representation of a project was different to the representation that clients would have seen. The representation that Rohan had selected for me was marked by mechanisms of amplification: the work procedures I observed were executed in more detail and over a significantly longer timeframe than would usually be attributed to the task. When I returned to the main office the following week I was puzzled to realise that the common representation of the client project at the “ground reality” was that of the client visit, with its numerous selection processes and amplification mechanisms:

Even Sharan, for whose project I had accompanied the freelancers mentioned, registered surprise that I had been out and about with a freelancer team “on my own” – by which he meant without Rohan accompanying me as a representation manager throughout the day. His own experience of such scenarios was limited to client visits, during which he had experienced Rohan as a “great collaborator” who took over the freelancer’s role in front of the client. In this theatre-like performance, when creating the project representation for the client, Sharan was unable to assess the processes of reduction or amplification at play.

I started to ask colleagues in the main office about their experiences of project execution at the street office; indeed, only a few had been actively involved beyond a controlled client visit. Those who had actually interacted with freelancers consisted of a handful of project coordinators who had worked as freelancers during their studies and leveraged this experience into a permanent job with the organisation, and about a dozen colleagues who had entered the organisation via a trainee programme and, through this, had spent a few weeks at the street office location. But the remainder of my interlocutors at the main office only reproduced the stories of the “ground reality” that circulated at coffee breaks, or had been, like Sharan, part of the entourage accompanying a client visit.

These examples illustrate that the ground reality opposed client centrality even with respect to representations. But they also suggest an interdependence of the two values. On the one hand, clients sometimes requested contact with the ground reality; without this insight they perceived the project as incomplete. On the other hand, this contact was manifest as a carefully orchestrated event, with Advice Company’s employees – rather than “actual” freelancers – taking over the role. The client’s exposure to the representation of the project at the ground reality was one that could be processed within the client’s system without causing dissonance, such as by challenging the quality of work task execution or other criteria that would impede the effectiveness of the final project report for the client’s decision-making. This crafted representation of a project during a client visit again suggests (as in Chapter 10, Section 10.4.2) the incompatibility of the two values and the inversion of their relevance according to the context. In these moments, the ground reality was more relevant, even for the client’s system.

This section has elucidated several representations of the client project during the project execution phase within the sub-system that operates according to the ground reality value. The representations relate to each other

and can be understood as a translation chain, in the sense of a circulating reference. Work on a client project proceeds along the project development process and unfolds the translation chain of project representations. Each subsystem attaches a different meaning to a client project and selects a different communication about it. For the client consultants, this might involve a complex array of business-strategic options; for the project execution team leads, it might involve a concrete set of data collection actions in a given timeframe. All of these selections cover different aspects of the initial reference point: the client's request for guidance around a decision. It is not *despite* of these different understandings that the project moves ahead, but *because* of the opaque quality of the non-intentional working misunderstanding, which allows for parallel encoding and therefore enables collaboration across sub-systems and locations.

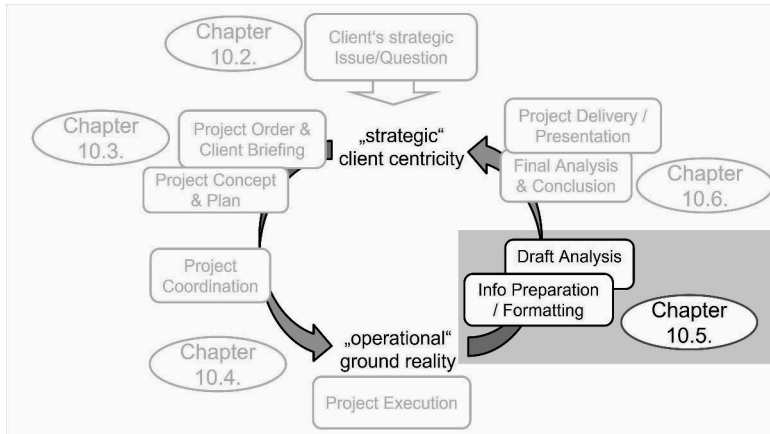
In the following, I will analyse the representations of a client project at the city office and demonstrate that the working misunderstanding, with its potential for parallel encoding, serves as a key element of employees' motivation and successful project delivery.

10.5. From data to presentations: Project view from "behind the wall"

This section focuses on the client project's representation from the perspective of the employees at the city office. In their support roles for client consulting teams across the world, their function is to deliver outputs in the form of pre-formatted presentation files.

Their position in the middle of the client centricity scale corresponds with their own and others' ambiguous views on their contribution to the client project. I will illustrate how the employees in the city office reflect on their work as only marginally intellectually challenging, while positioning their function in relation to the project within the wider realms of strategic decision-making. Despite their legwork role in terms of project contribution, the employees in the city office select an understanding of their contribution that is as closely aligned with the client's decision-making need as possible. However, there is also a perception of disconnectedness and feeling of impediment, which can be summarised in a colleague's description of his position in the work process and his ability to execute as "sitting hand-cuffed behind the wall".

Figure 24: Allocation of Section 10.5 in the project process



The client project as a working misunderstanding is, in this context, of central significance, as it allows employees to interpret their work as client-centric, and this enables a more favourable assessment of their function than the work tasks would otherwise permit.

10.5.1. 100% accurate information conversion

When the freelancer teams complete their work tasks, the data they collected cannot be immediately processed by the client consulting sub-system. Apart from needing technical conversion into databases, which is performed by a team of experts in another city, the data must be converted into presentation slides and documents; such conversion work is performed by employees of the city office. It is of particular importance that the output exactly matches the templates and that the data is copied correctly. What comes across as simple preparation to enable client consultants to perform their strategic analysis is, in reality, an iterative series of tasks spanning several days that is executed under time and performance pressure.

For a series of three days I accompanied Amitabh, a member of the standard team, who was working on a presentation for a client consultant overseas. He had received the project briefing and started working on it only an hour before I joined him on Thursday morning. He claimed to be in a state

of “controlled hectic”, as he needed to deliver a first draft of the presentation (called a “shell”) that evening. A shell is a presentation without data, analytical findings or recommendations, but with all the tables, fonts and images in their final format. This skeleton must be formatted exactly as it will appear to the client, almost like a form that will later be filled out. Once the input from the execution teams is available, the relevant content is transferred into the presentation. Amitabh was busy with this work, aligning table frames to the millimetre, placing graphics in the right corners, checking back with a colleague on the correct measures for the client organisational logo and so on. His nose seemed to almost touch the screen when he checked his work after finishing each slide. At the end of the day – at 8.30pm – he sent the presentation to the client consultant, changed his frameless, light and stylish glasses with cheap, thick and solid travel frames and equipped himself for his 90-minute commute back home.

Amitabh was in the office the next morning at 9.00am and immediately returned to his “shell” presentation, for which the client consultant had already sent him feedback. The feedback consisted of comments in little purple boxes that were embedded into the slides. The client consultant had requested that the slides be split up and grouped differently. Amitabh estimated that this work might take him the whole day. For the entire morning, he aligned images and changed the font sizes. After lunch, he continued with the presentation but became stuck in the process, as he had questions about how the slides in that part of the presentation should be set up, and in which sequence. The client consultant had described his ideas in the purple-boxed comments, but Amitabh was still unclear. Together with his colleague Nimrat he read through the comments, but they could not come to a clear solution. As the different interpretations of the instructions diverged substantially in their implications for his workload and his manager was off so could not help him with the decision, Amitabh decided to refrain from further formatting until his colleague started his workday and could advise him directly. However, as his colleague was overseas and would not begin work until 8.30pm in Amitabh’s time zone, Amitabh intended to leave the office early and take the call from home. Instead, he became caught up with minor formatting tasks and the afternoon flew by. In the end, he stayed in the office on this Friday until 9.00pm in order to clarify what was expected from him.

When we met again on Monday morning, Amitabh told me that he had been sick with a fever and cold over the weekend and still did not feel fully recovered. “But”, as he remarked, “the report has to go today. So no choice, that’s

the situation". His manager had asked the team to meet just after 11.00am to "align workloads". They discussed the deliverables of the day (i.e. who had to send what and who needed help). Amitabh announced that he could not take any additional tasks as he was still occupied with some of the formatting on his project and had not yet had the chance to work on his other tasks. Upon the astonished "Why?!?" from his manager, Amitabh explained that the client consultant had initially sent an example presentation but now wanted the presentation to convey more details, and this involved much more work. Amitabh's manager asked him if he now knew exactly what was expected, so he could get it right when he sent the slides that evening. Amitabh confirmed that he did and returned to working on the presentation.

Up to this point, all of Amitabh's activities had been formatting and editing tasks relating to inserting empty tables with the right background colour and pasting graphics in the correct spot. At lunchtime, he finished the "shell" and was able to proceed to the next step. In this step, he copied numbers from the spreadsheet files he had been provided into the presentation file; these numbers were either absolute values or, depending on the slide context, scores that had been converted into verbal information such as "Risky", "Top", "Middle" and "Low". For the conversion ranges, Amitabh prepared a simple sheet, which he placed next to his keyboard. His eyes flew from the presentation to the spreadsheet and over to the conversion sheet, and I only heard the clicking of buttons on his keyboard when he moved back and forth on the screen, copying and pasting data in a regular sequence. His movements were fast and controlled and he worked without emotional impulse or comment.

From time to time he would pause for a moment, resting his elbows on the desk while closing his eyes and leaning over the keyboard, letting his forehead fall into his open palms. As if to justify his need for short breaks, he explained to me that this step took a lot of concentration in order to avoid typos or transposed digits. Such mistakes had to be avoided at any cost, so that they were not inadvertently reported back to the client in the official feedback. Such a scenario would have an immediate impact on Amitabh's performance rating and affect his promotion opportunities at the end of the year. This was the concrete manifestation of the department's 100% accuracy commitment.

The copy and conversion job was completed at 5.30pm, at which point the presentation was ready to be checked by a colleague from a parallel team, to whom Amitabh sent the file. He walked over to the colleague and explained the structure of the slides and what to watch out for in the review. Amitabh's

next and final action was “analysis” – a step that not only Amitabh, but also most of his colleagues looked forward to in the work process, and the step that was most frequently cancelled to make up time. “Analysis” involved looking at the data in the slides and summarising their conclusion in a concise caption. This was the creative part of the work – the single aspect that was not pre-determined by style guidelines or data conversions. In this step, Amitabh had the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to connect the information he prepared with the client’s decision-making need.

Despite his cold, Amitabh continued to work until 10.30pm on the presentation before finally sending it off to the client consultant. He could have sent the presentation sooner, without the “analysis” sentences, but this work task was of upmost importance to him, despite making up (at most) a mere 10–15% of his entire contribution to the project, in terms of time.

“Analysis” was important for most of the employees in the department, as this activity veered away from their otherwise standardised, narrow pathway of tasks. On the rare occasions that Amitabh or his teammates would get hold of the final version of the project report provided to the client, word-by-word comparisons would be made to determine how many of “their analysis” sentences had been retained. This ratio was a criterion of internal status.

When I interviewed Amitabh two days later and asked him to describe his job, he did not talk about the formatting or number copying that had kept him in the office late over the past days. Instead, he substituted the pronoun “I” with “we” (referring to Advice Company) and positioned his work within the broader realms of business strategy and advice given to clients. He explained that “we” support a client’s strategic decisions by providing valuable advice on business strategy. Although he did not comment or even critically assess his monotonous tasks in relation to client projects, this shift in focus during the interview illustrates that Amitabh preferred to relate the project representation more to the client than it actually was. At the same time, he emphasised his suggested insights into the projects he dealt with; these insights were most likely not explicitly his own, but inferred from the shares of information that were transmitted from the client consultant sub-system.

In this way, the client project represents a working misunderstanding between the client consultants and the city office teams. The sub-systems can collaborate because of their “parallel encoding” (Sahlins 1982) of an understanding of a client’s project. The city office team rely on this mechanism, as there is only limited possibility for them to gain insight into a project beyond the information they receive via the briefing.

10.5.2. Amplification towards “analysis”

Both of these points became even more poignantly apparent following Imran's emotional outburst. Imran was an embedded team member who was working on a presentation for his overseas manager. He had to align dozens of star-shaped points on a graph to indicate the development trend of a client's business. After about an hour, he sighed and his head sank down, stopping an inch before hitting the keyboard. Two seconds later he turned his head to me while remaining in this position, looked up and said: “This is just the most depressing work!” Although his theatrical outburst was so amusing that I couldn't help but answer it with a smile, his voice and expression were serious when he straightened up again:

„You know, it is the most stupid task to do, putting squares on squares for hours. And when you do that all these depressing thoughts come to your mind, because you don't have much to do, such as “Why am I doing this job”... Look!”. He kept moving stars around the presentation slide. “And they do not even want to stay that way!!” He bristled in anger when the stars did not align the way he wanted them to, and shook his head: „No, it really is the most unproductive work – my head is almost paining because of the stars. And I am not even sure if this really is what she [the overseas manager] wants in the end. At first she indicated I should not pay attention to formatting, so I sent her my analysis of the material and now it is only about formatting.“

Imran remained busy formatting the presentation slides for most of the afternoon and the following morning. I realised that I, too, was equally bored and impatient just by sitting next to him. But suddenly, with an accentuated gesture, he reached for the computer mouse and my attention turned back to him. With ostentation he saved his work, energetically rose from his chair and indicated with a move of his head that I should follow him to the canteen. There, he told me over a *chai* that he was finally done with the “stars job”.

When we returned to his desk, he sat down and stretched his upper body and arms as if preparing for a race. Then he leaned forward, rubbed his hands and wiggled his fingers in the air like a piano player. With a broad grin he looked over to me while announcing with raised eyebrows: “And now – analysis!!” Then he explained what he thought the interpretation and argumentation of the client report should be, as well as the recommendation to the client. He dove into the slides for a good hour, formulating table headings and developing alternative colour coding for the graphs.

When he completed his analysis and sent the presentation off to his manager, he told me about a previous project he had worked on that had been “much more creative”, and he showed me the appreciation he had received for it. The client consultant had written in the feedback email that he “helped shaping the final project report to win the clients satisfaction”. That email was positively commented on and acknowledged by both his local team lead and the division head. When I did not seem to display his expected reaction to the division head’s email he pointed out to me who had sent the email, in case I did not know: “You know who that guy is? He is veery senior. [He lowers his voice to a whisper] It’s from that guy in the office in front, the Vice President.”

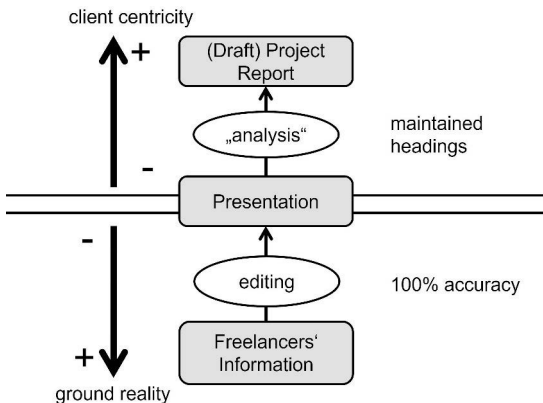
The next day Imran showed me the email response from his manager about his work on the presentation. Although she was still demanding a number of changes that would keep him busy with another round of formatting for at least the rest of the day, he was content with her email, as it showed that she acknowledged the effort he had put into the presentation over the past few days. I asked how he had come to that conclusion, as I did not see any words that explicitly mentioned this in her email. He said that her tone was a bit softer, as it was normally very strict and commanding. He pointed to places in which – in comparison to her other, more neutrally phrased, emails – she had used words that mimicked spoken conversation – “Aaaaah, now I see” and “Hmmm, not so sure about that” – as direct responses to his text. To Imran, this indicated that she was aware of his efforts and the issues he had encountered, as she repeated the explanations he had given in the email that accompanied the draft he had sent her the previous day. But an even clearer indicator was for Imran the fact that she had used the smiley emoticon – :) – twice. All of these indicators, in conjunction with her suggestion at the bottom of the email that they could “have a phone conversation at some point” about the project, indicated to Imran that he had made a breakthrough. Imran proclaimed with a smile: “Now she is at the point where she is ready to talk with me.”

While slightly more explicit than the first, this second case illustrates a similar disparity between the work that was predominantly associated with the project contribution and the imagined focus of this work. Imran clearly expressed his frustration with the formatting tasks that were expected of him and contrasted these to the more highly valued “analysis”, both implicitly – through his energetic attitude as soon as he could proceed to “analysis” – and explicitly – through his reference to the appreciation email. What is noteworthy is that the appreciation email did not distinctly compliment his analysis,

but more broadly supported him in “shaping the report to the client’s satisfaction”. Following the overall client-centric orientation of the organisation, Imran attributed the appreciation to his analysis work – a task that was more closely associated with the client’s decision-making need than was presentation formatting.

The role played by the “analysis”, in contrast to the editing tasks, at the city office is even more accentuated when one considers the office’s position in the middle of the client centricity scale. While the sub-system Imran and his colleagues at the city office belong to is apparently structured on the basis of client centricity as the dominant value, their function is rather to relay between ground reality and client centricity. Formatting presentation slides and copying data from databases and spreadsheets makes the information provided by freelancers – the ground reality – usable within Advice Company. In the most literal sense, the information is internally reproduced through these presentations, and the target is to achieve 100% accuracy in this reproduction. For the editing and copying tasks, the ground reality is therefore the prevailing value – at least according to the department manager’s view of the city office. The “analysis” task, in contrast, is orientated towards client centricity. Without “analysis”, the presentation is merely reproduced information from the ground reality that cannot be processed by the client’s system and therefore requires further transformation. “Analysis” is accordingly a client-centric task that corresponds with the city office employees’ self-description.

Figure 25: Balancing tasks at the city office



Similar to the project coordinators, the city office employees must manage two incompatible values, as the two cases have illustrated (Figure 25). But the employees have developed strategies to keep the two values separate, by communicating the difference between tasks. Imran explicitly marked the end of the editing tasks and even changed his location through a break to highlight the beginning of the “analysis” phase. The number of “analysis” headings that prevail in the final client report is communicated as an indicator of status amongst the employees (while an error-free presentation is not), and Amitabh did not even mention his editing tasks when he was interviewed about his job. Thus, the activities relating to the different values are maintained as separate and the system remains in function.

10.5.3. “Handcuffed behind the wall”

The reading of a client project as a client-centric activity centred on analysis was prevalent amongst the city office employees, and this related to a notion of their position as peripheral. The case study of Imran shows that he worked with the project representation he was provided with, and he had to cope with his distance to the actual client consulting team. With his interpretation of his manager’s email, he attempted to establish an idea of closer interaction – a closer position (of himself) to the client consulting function, invoked by means of communication. It was his hope to overcome the key issue that a client consultant might not brief him on all of the important aspects of a project and what the client really wants, “because she might forget some aspects in the briefing, but if I sit next to her she might remember and say something later”.

This inclination towards the client, together with the willingness to make a successful contribution to the client, was also voiced by Ananya. She told me about a situation that had occurred a few days earlier when a client had raised a question about a report that had been resolved by the client consultant she supported in a major Asian capital city. She had only heard about the client’s question today, several days later, and only by chance in the team call. She was convinced that she would have been able to resolve the issue and to answer any tricky questions the client might have. But, as she reasoned: “I am too far away, I can’t action and when I hear about it, it’s done already. So I can never really prove myself and my real abilities.”

Her colleague Anas told his teammate about a project that had received a major review request from the client and resulted in tremendous cost for Ad-

vice Company because a portion of the project work had to be redone. According to Anas, this had occurred because the client consultant had been unable to clarify the questions that had risen from the report. Anas remarked:

I so much wish I had been there and heard about the questions from that guy. I am sure that I might have been able to tell the client a solution to his question and with this have saved the company a lot of bucks! [He emphasises the second sentence with a punch of his right fist into the open palm of his left hand.]

Niharika explained this notion of disconnect through the example of a project for which she did not receive positive feedback, because she had not been told about a shift in the client's focus. Thus, she had not been able to incorporate the new focus in the presentation. She complained about the unjust evaluation but actually wanted to make a different point when telling the story:

My general point is that the analysts in the US are in constant touch with their top-level managers who know what the client wants and how the report should be done. So the client consultant gets that learning from the manager through experiencing the update process of the report and their conversations and so on. But this information never gets back to me, I never get to hear about it. And with the next project I am supporting I have the feeling all [colleagues] over there have made a shift closer towards what the client is expecting there in the US but I haven't.

Sameer, who primarily supported colleagues in the main office, summarised his view of disconnectedness in this way:

We are all here working for a remote team and it is them [the client consultants in other offices] who actually have the projects and we are all somehow behind the wall. I feel a bit like handcuffed; I cannot give my best, as I would if I was there and on the project right from the beginning. But I don't know the background of the project and so on.

These accounts illustrate the notion of the city office's peripheral position, away from the client-centric functions. The office's (functional) distance to the client-centric consultant teams make it depend on the information that is selected by the client consultant managers. The employees' interpretations of their work are marked by a notion of disconnectedness and an inability to work as closely to the client as they feel they are capable of. As I showed in the previous section, their interpretation of their position is more aligned

with the organisation's dominant value client centricity than their function. The overseas managers' view of this situation will be shown in the following section.

10.5.4. A perspective from in front of the wall

During my research stint in the city office it was Cory from one of the overseas offices – who had combined a holiday with a few days visiting colleagues in the city office – who enabled me to view the project work of the city office teams from the other side of the wall, from a Western, client consulting perspective:

FM: How is your interaction with the team from abroad?

Cory: In the first six months communications were primarily via email and with filling out that spreadsheet with the required work and the needed info on the project. You could almost compare this with an order form: you enter what you need, send it across and the work gets done. If something is completely unclear they [the city office employees] might ask, otherwise they just do their tasks on the report until they send me the first draft. And to this I also send the feedback via email and comments in the slide deck. Only recently I have started to chat more [via the Advice Company internal instant messaging program] and sometimes even make an IM call [instant messenger voice call] at the end of my day to say what I have done today and what I expect them to do during their day, so that it is done when I come back in tomorrow.

FM: Where does your “real life” experience of being here deviate from your expectations?

Cory: Well, I did not really have an image or an idea of individuals here. The interaction for me in the past was very transactional: you fill out the form and you get the work done. It is difficult to understand that there is someone, a real person actually doing that work. And actually, the workload is mostly very high on my end, so I just don't have the time to think about these things. The work gets done, it saves you a few hours' time, but basically you're consequently asked to take up more projects. At my office there is the direct pressure from clients, more work pressure I think. And compared to here it is all much more, like “heads down and working”, you know.

FM: Where would you say are the main areas of collaboration or “working together”?

Cory: Hm, it is in my opinion not really “working together” since they would hardly speak up and always try to fulfil my idea rather than their own. But being here, I am actually surprised how, you know like... similar people are here to myself.

Cory’s perspective allows for a number of inferences to be drawn. First, it is clear that the formatting and data transformation delivered by the city office teams are a black box for him. He does not initially reflect on the fact that an individual colleague completes the tasks he orders via a form. The lived working praxis of Amitabh, Imran and Niharika, with their struggles to give meaning to the endless hours of dreary formatting tasks and their notions of disconnectedness from the client-centric system they see themselves as working for, remain invisible to him. Cory – and most likely the majority of his colleagues – is equally unaware of the city office teams’ internal value system of work (distinguishing “analysis” from editing) and their desire to establish a new layer of relationship beyond that which is structured by the presentation delivery. By comparing the project briefing to an order form and referencing the client pressure he is exposed to, Cory confirms the organisational structure along the client centrality scale. His position is close to the client and the order form procedure is justified by his high workload. In his view, his city office colleagues are indeed “sitting behind the wall” and their work on projects is only necessary for completing draft presentations.

10.5.5. Working misunderstanding for motivation

I have illustrated in this section how the work on client projects in the city office is marked by the challenge of managing the two opposing values ground reality and client centrality. The expressed feelings of insufficiency relate to the fact that only the “analysis” work on a client project at the city office is attributable to the value client centrality. However, the majority of the work in this office is spent reproducing the information that is provided by the freelancers; that is, reproducing the ground reality by formatting and transferring data according to a 100% accuracy commitment. Hence, the organisational performance measure orientates the function to the ground reality

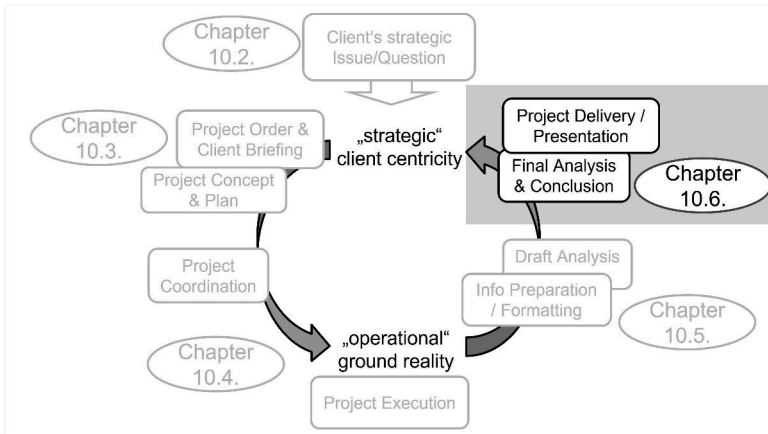
value. But in Advice Company, informal prestige and motivation is gained from tasks associated with client centricity, such as “analysis” work. The employees’ strategy of keeping the incompatible systems separate creates a “re-re-representation” of the client project along a mechanism of amplification: despite devoting only 10–15% of their work effort to “analysis”, the employees view this single aspect of their work as their primary source of motivation. Amitabh did not even mention the other 85% of his work effort when I asked him to describe his job, and Imran attributed the appreciative email of his manager to his analytical skill. This ambiguity in the project representation – allowing room for the employees to ascribe their work contribution to a client-centric category – is the working misunderstanding that maintains the structural set-up. While Cory views the same tasks differently, the parallel encoding of client projects enables the collaboration between the city office employees and the client consultants across the world.

10.6. From presentation files to strategy

In this final section I will focus on the last phase of the client project process, when the project report is finalised for delivery to the client. This step is performed by the client consultants at the main office and delineates the moment at which a saleable commodity is created (Figure 26). This perspective completes the insights into the black box of the “client project”.

At the end of this final step of the project process stands the delivery of the project report. This is the moment when the client’s need for decision-making is confronted with its representation at the end of a long translation chain. The project report is finalised by the client consultants only after the various representations of the client project have served as the basis for collaboration across the organisation’s sub-systems and undergone mechanisms of amplification and reduction. I will show in this section how the last phase of the client project is marked by another set of representations that are dependent on a non-intentional working misunderstanding. To illustrate the contextual meaning of time pressure, the analysis commences with a change of perspective on the client project from a function-centred to a project-centred view. I will continue to examine the processes at play within the client consulting teams around the project analysis. In a concluding section, I will discuss the client consultants’ strategy for maintaining the black box of the project for the client, drawing on opacity as an organisational strategy for self-sustainment.

Figure 26: Allocation of Section 10.6 in the project process



10.6.1. Deadlines from a project perspective

In Chapter 5 (Section 5.4.1) I described the dense sequence of communications and the different topics the client consultant Ruchika had to address on a “busy day”. Cory, the overseas client consultant, was shown to mirror this praxis in his description of the city office employees as “heads down and working” (see Section 10.5.4). This perception corresponds with the buffering strategies of delivery date games played by the client consultants with the clients and project coordinators to ensure the timely delivery of project reports (see Chapter 9).

Hence, I was prepared for a similarly dense and high-action experience when embarking on the quest to follow three client projects through the project development process in the final phase of my fieldwork. The change of focus proved useful for generating a wide array of insights into the emic perspective of the working praxis at Advice Company, which I have already discussed with respect to a working misunderstanding around notions of collaboration between myself and my interlocutors (see Chapter 8). But the most relevant aspect for this section was the insight that the projects I had accompanied were far from resembling the steady and intensive demand for task completion that characterised the client consultants’ daily work praxis. Two of the three projects I accompanied reached the final report phase during

the two-month timeframe that was allocated to this last fieldwork period. I had permission to track a third project, but this project was postponed indefinitely due to severe issues encountered in the middle of the execution phase relating to an ongoing project with the client. The following vignette of the final phase of project GREEN illustrates the project as understood by the client consultants.

Kashish was the client consultant for project GREEN. The project was in its final stage and the deadline for delivery to the client was approaching. On the 2nd of May, Kashish told me that he had received the first draft of the report and would now have to prepare a cut-down preview version to send to the client in a week's time, on the 9th of May, and would need to deliver the full presentation on the 15th. As he told me, he still had plenty of time on that project and many other things to do and deadlines to meet. Hence, he would not work on the project immediately, but might spend a bit of time on it sometime in the next week. I approached Kashish again two days later, on the 5th of May, and he told me that he might work on the project that afternoon. We agreed to meet up for a coffee and a chat after lunch and that I would accompany him for the afternoon. But when I returned to his desk a few hours later, a more urgent task was on top of his list and he did not look at the project GREEN report at all. The situation remained the same the next day (6th May). When I came to Kashish's desk the next morning, on the 7th, he told me that the project would be handed over to Neelam that afternoon, as he had too many other things on his plate to take care of. He would send Neelam an email with details of what had been done thus far and Neelam would take care of the project. While a lot was going on from Kashish's perspective, the progress on project GREEN had been slow – if indeed there had been any – during the previous days.

On the following morning, 8th May, I therefore joined Neelam, who sat a few desks away from Kashish. Neelam told me that he did not have the slightest clue about the project and that he needed to see how he could get it done. Using chat, he asked his manager Aishwarya for a clarification call at 2.00pm. I asked why the project had been transferred to him. He answered that he might have “some free time and Kashish is blocked”. “See, my work plan for the next 12 days, it is okay.” He showed me an email containing a list of 12 deliverables, before taking me through his tasks for the next days:

Now at noon, I have to send this presentation for a different project, but see, it is almost done, I just have to add a few comments. Then at 2.00pm I can

connect on that GREEN project with my manager, at 2.30 I have to leave for a client meeting. Then I will be back here around 5.30 and work on the other presentation which will have to go tonight. Will be a long evening... And then, on Friday noon the preview report for GREEN will have to go and then I have to finalise another presentation which I have to present at the client's office on Monday. This I will send on Friday EOD [end of day] to my manager and the team lead for feedback and incorporate this hopefully on Saturday so that I can relax on Sunday.

After almost a year's fieldwork at Advice Company, I was still astonished to hear Neelam's definition of "some free time", though I tried hard not to show it. Shortly thereafter, as Neelam concentrated fully on finalising the presentation (which was due in a few hours), his teammate Swati walked past on the way to her desk. She looked at me and smiled: "Ah, so you're with Neelam now." I explained to her that I came with the project, which had been handed over from Kashish the previous night. Her smile froze and she leaned towards Neelam, asking: „Which project?“ „This GREEN project.“, he replied. Swati's eyes widened. Then she straightened up, raised her eyebrows and twisted the palm of her right hand up in a typical move indicating a non-verbal "What?" or "Why?". Neelam answered her unarticulated question.

Neelam: Nobody told me about it, just Kashish told me last evening.

Swati: With whom did he talk about that?

Neelam: With Aishwarya.

Swati: And she has spoken with...?

Neelam: Ashish [the head of the team]. [He continues in a lower voice] The inputs from the other teams are said to be okay, but I asked Kashish – not much happened so far.

Swati: So you got the project yesterday. When is delivery date?

Neelam: On the 15th... but preview has to go tomorrow.

Swati: Tomorrow? [Her eyebrows rise up again and she frowns.]

Neelam: Yeah, well, first draft is there, I will connect with Aishwarya post lunch and will get one of the interns to help me on it.

Indicating resignation, Swati raised her gaze to the ceiling and remained in that position for a few seconds. Then she gave me two light pats on the shoulder while she turned towards her desk and walked off without another word.

During lunch at the canteen with the entire team, Neelam rose from the table shortly after 2.00pm, announcing with a frozen grin towards Kashish: “Apologies to all, but I got to get up. I have an important call to make.” Kashish smiled broadly and said: “No idea what you’re talking about...” But everyone at the table knew that Neelam had to leave to call his manager to gain a better understanding of project GREEN, which had been handed to him from Kashish.

After a short phone conversation with his manager about the project, Neelam left for a client meeting and returned around 7.00pm. He immediately started to work on the preview report on GREEN for the next day’s delivery and detected an issue with the argumentation in the recommendation. He called Kashish over and both discussed how the issue could be mitigated. At 9.00pm they reached a solution and Neelam decided to go home to work on another presentation that was due that evening. He would finish the GREEN presentation later. When he came to office the next morning he told me he had worked on the first presentation until 12.30am and got up again at 4.00am to bring the GREEN preview report to a status he deemed sufficient to send to his manager for review. Then he went back to sleep for another three hours before arriving back at the office. This was his routine when he had work to do, he explained to me. That day, he would finalise the preview report on GREEN with his manager’s comments and send it off before attending to the next project deadline of that afternoon.

While Neelam booted his laptop, his manager Aishwarya approached from the other end of the office. She announced that the preview report on GREEN could not be shared with the client that day because the client had not yet paid the minimum deposit of 50% of the project cost. The finance controller had just given her the latest payment status for the team and the payment had not arrived as of that morning. She would raise this with the team lead later, but for today, the report definitely would not go out. This was discussed for a few more minutes, before Neelam re-arranged his time plan. He agreed to meet up with Swati in 15 minutes so they could work on the presentation due that afternoon. The project GREEN deadline had disappeared, and it had

immediately slipped off Neelam's focus. It did not come up again until the middle of the following week, when the payment situation was resolved.

Besides providing an impression of the working praxis of one of the client consulting teams, this case illustrates that a project viewed as a single entity entails different dynamics than the client consultant's praxis in the project context. The client consultant's task list is determined by immediate project deadlines: the more presentation deadlines, the higher the workload, and workload seems to fluctuate at a steady continuum between high and very high (as perceived by the employees). Consequently, I expected the work associated with a client project to be densely packed. But instead, I observed in this last phase of the project a fascinating contrast: as soon as all previous tasks had been completed and finalisation of the report was the only action pending, the work associated with a project would converge towards zero for days or even weeks. This was shown in the example of project GREEN, when deadlines for other projects overlaid Kashish's to do list until project GREEN's approaching delivery date augmented its position on the priority list.

In light of the upcoming delivery date, work activities on the project surged from zero one day to Neelam's nightshift the following day. While the project presentation remained literally untouched for days, it was progressed within 24 hours to a level at which it was almost ready to send to the client. An ironic twist occurred when the deadline evaporated due to the client's outstanding payment: at this point, Neelam's attention instantly redirected towards the next deadline and progress on project GREEN fell to zero again.

This effect became salient only from the viewpoint of a single project. Earlier in the fieldwork process, when I accompanied client consulting colleagues throughout their workdays, only their struggle to meet the sequence of deadlines for different projects marked the character of this final project phase. Now my observations suggested that the overall duration of this final project phase was predominantly determined by delivery dates and not the actual work required to make final recommendations. These mechanisms of reduction occurred at the last node in the project translation chain. Paradoxically, this meant that the most relevant activity for transforming client projects into saleable commodities was frequently performed under tremendous time pressure by the client consultants, even though a sufficient margin of time was built into each project. Furthermore, project analysis and recommendations, which comprised the most prestigious tasks in the organisation, took only a marginal amount of time, both in relation to the entire work involved in a client project across the organisation and in relation to the total

activities performed by a client consultant. Another noteworthy aspect of the example of project GREEN is that Kashish passed the work on to Neelam, who was not thrilled to receive it. While Neelam did not admit this directly, it became apparent in his short conversation with Swati and his brief verbal teasing of Kashish at lunch. The finalisation of the project report was, in this case, yet another unpopular task on the list that the team manager had distributed to another team member.

Giving advice to clients – explaining an approach to a successful strategy – is the image of the client consultant job at Advice Company and the work that other employees mention as their career target. But this work appears in everyday praxis as a well nurtured working misunderstanding and a well-sealed black box for clients. The fact that the actual time spent on clients' advice is minor in comparison to the overall duration of a client project allows for an interesting parallel to be drawn with the working practice of the city office employees. As I showed in Section 10.5, the city office employees use the mechanisms of amplification to frame an understanding of their job according to the client-centric task of “analysis” work, in contrast to the editing tasks that actually comprise the majority of their work. The next section will show how the client consulting teams also use processes of amplification – both in their finalisation of project reports and their perceptions of their work tasks – similar to the city office employees.

10.6.2. Analysis as a process

Despite the time pressure under which project presentations are often finalised, the process is marked by a rigid sequence of review steps along the hierarchical structure of the client consulting teams. Before a project report is actually provided to a client, it must follow a sequence of review and input. Client consultant Raveena explained to me that she usually provided a first draft to her manager, who would give her feedback that she would incorporate before sending the presentation to the next level – the team manager Ashish. Ashish's feedback would also be incorporated into the final version before it was shared with the client. For big (i.e. high budget) projects or important clients, sometimes even the division head would be consulted for feedback, and this entailed a different level of complexity. Together with the deadline effect described above, last-minute nightshifts seemed inevitable.

The function of this process can be seen as another mechanism of amplification at this last node in the translation chain. The involvement of senior-

level employees in the final information selection for the client communication underlines the importance of this activity and affirms the organisation's structure along the client centricity scale. The presentation review chain reveals the nature of the client project as a non-intentional working misunderstanding, as illustrated in Raveena's assertion that thought processes – and especially recommendations – differ from person to person. For this reason, presentations undergo multiple reviews and iterations until the moment they are delivered to the client, sometimes even in the car on the way to a presentation at a client's office.

Sunidhi, a junior client consultant, described the most difficult situation for her as when the division head, who was four hierarchy levels above her, spontaneously gave her feedback on a report she was working on. I had observed this situation multiple times: the division head had the habit of appearing at a desk and asking what a colleague was working on. Then he would look at the client question or project briefing for a few seconds and explain in three to five minutes (often also drawing on a note pad or piece of paper) how the argumentation should run. He would refer in these moments back to successful project presentations with similar cases. Then he would continue to the next person or his mobile would ring, and the interaction would be concluded. Sunidhi admitted hesitantly in our conversation that she never knew what to do with this feedback. She felt too intimidated to reach out to him⁵ to ask him to clarify, so instead she tried her best to guess his meaning.

10.6.3. Playing on the black box

All of these procedures and practices remained invisible to the client when he or she finally received the recommendation for the pending decision in the client's organisation. The need to keep the project a black box with only the recommendation output revealed is relevant insofar as Advice Company's recommendation serves to support clients' decision-making processes. For this purpose, ambiguities around different viewpoints on a project and the various mechanisms at play in the translation chain must remain invisible. At the same time, the consulting teams can utilise this situation, as the following example illustrates:

5 This would mostly be a hopeless request anyway, since the senior manager might instantly be attending a meeting or a phone call and be busy for the rest of the day.

Over lunch Raveena recalled an incident that had occurred two months prior, when a client had asked for clarification on a project they had just delivered. Although Raveena and Bright discussed the problem for hours, as of 10.30pm they had not reached a satisfying answer to give to the client. In the early morning, they continued to discuss the problem and finally involved the division head. As they had to provide an answer at noon, all three devised an email with a number of points addressing the question and an answer they deemed would be well received. The final claim in the email was that “the data and information available supports that”, and the email was sent. The group waited in tension for the rest of the day to receive the client’s reaction. It never came. Apparently, the client was content with the answer and did not wish to dive for deeper insight into the black box.

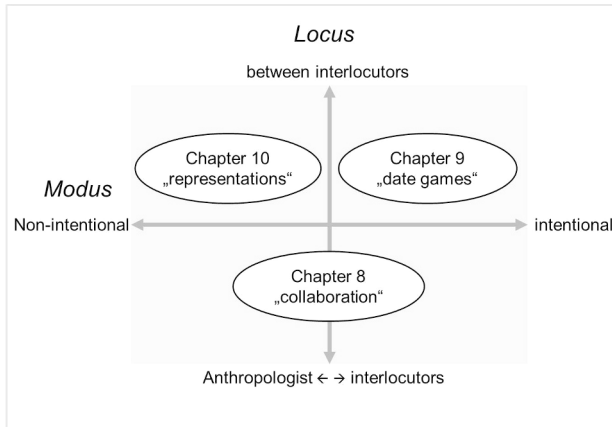
As Raveena was retelling the story, I could infer that it had been a remarkable incident for her and that the integrity of the black box was important, both for her and for her two colleagues. Second, I concluded that mere reference to the black box of analysis by the client consulting team was sufficient for the client to accept the explanation.

10.7. Concluding remarks on working misunderstandings

Part II has focused on working misunderstandings and their productive quality for facilitating social interaction. Based on a literature review, I have shown that the concept of working misunderstandings has been applied across various disciplines over the last five decades and that the diverging applications of this concept in ethnographic research can be positioned on a quadrant model consisting of two analytical dimensions: differentiation of the involved parties (*locus*) and level of intentionality (*modus*). Relating to the L/M quadrant typology, the chapters of Part II have analysed working misunderstandings in the context of client projects at Advice Company according to each of the four categories in the model (Figure 27).

The working misunderstanding around notions of “collaboration” between myself and my interlocutors uncovered differing ideas of collaboration practices and approaches to information selection (see Chapter 8), illustrating that working misunderstandings in that *locus* category bear opportunities, rather than threats, for ethnographic insight. These notions of collaboration formed the background for Chapter 9, which sought to understand the complexities behind “date games” as intentional working misunderstandings beyond

Figure 27: Part II categories of working misunderstandings



seemingly rational interdependent decision-making. While the date games are structured on the basis of the organisation's prevailing value client centrism, the intentional working misunderstandings during the execution phase (relating to "status updates") suggest an inversion of the values' relevance in this context towards ground reality – at least until client-centric escalation strategies sever communication. This intentional *modus* of working misunderstandings provides a different and counterintuitive perspective on the relevance of the value ground reality for organisational functioning. The limits of intentionality within this category of working misunderstandings are, however, not sharply defined. The question of how we can draw a line with respect to practices of deception or "misrepresentation" (Strauss 1993: 182) is one that invites a wider focus on working misunderstandings as a research field. However, the systematic classification of working misunderstandings along the two dimensions of the typology quadrant allows us to solidify such questions.

The non-intentional *modus* of working misunderstandings was the focus of Chapter 10, in which I traced the different representations of a client project. Resonating with Latour's concept of the circulating reference (Latour 2000), these representations were shown to be shaped by amplification and reduction at each node in the translation chain along the project development process. A client project comprises a working misunderstanding, as

it allows for interacting sub-systems to “attach” their representations of the project without impeding the communication required for organisational functioning. The analysis of a client project as a non-intentional working misunderstanding enabled further insight into the black box of organisational functioning. I illustrated how the opposing values client centricity and ground reality are incompatible and that working misunderstandings keep them operationally closed whilst enabling interactional openness. The cases also showed that the relevance of the two values is reversed at several points in the project process. This assertion supports earlier inferences suggesting that both values are required for a successful client project and the existence of Advice Company as an organisation.

I have shown in this Part II of this book how the L/M quadrant structure can be applied as an analytical tool for ethnographic insight on the complex topic of working misunderstandings. Hence, I propose this model as a starting point to foster a streamlined discussion leading to coherent new terminology and/or a new analytical direction for working misunderstandings.